

Measuring Campaign Effects in Initiatives and Referendums

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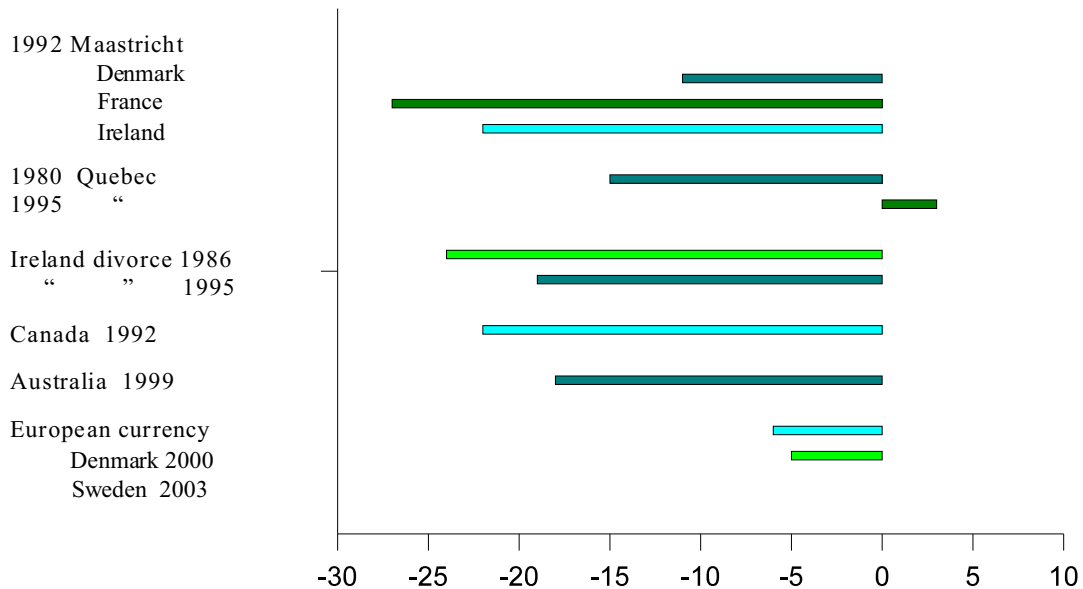
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It is widely accepted by students of elections that “campaigns matter”, but as Schmitt-Beck and Farrell (2002) observe, “it depends...”. Context is all important. In a referendum or initiative contest, campaigns are frequently *more* important than in ordinary partisan or candidate elections. Over the course of many such campaigns, public opinion has been seen to shift dramatically, even in some instances where the distribution of opinion on the issue of the referendum was well known and seemingly well established. In several of the referendum cases to be examined in this paper, polls taken early in the campaign period would have suggested quite different results from those which actually occurred. The dynamics of a referendum campaign can be harder to anticipate than those of an election, and the participation of the electorate varies more widely. The political and economic circumstances in which the vote takes place, the images that voters hold of the groups and individuals involved, and their reactions to the specific discourse of the campaign, can be as important to the voting decision as opinions on the actual ballot question. While longer term factors such as partisanship or ideology can also be of considerable importance to the voting decision, the short-term impact of campaign strategies and tactics are often critical factors in determining the outcome, especially in those instances where the issue(s) of the referendum or initiative are new to the voter. In this paper, I will consider some of the contextual variables of referendum campaigns, and will draw on evidence from a number of cases where campaign effects can be shown to have been particularly high.

In an earlier paper (LeDuc, 2002a), I conducted an analysis of the magnitude of opinion change in a number of referendum campaigns by comparing their outcomes with a result which would have been predicted by a public opinion poll taken one or two months before voting day.¹ In this way, a rough aggregate measure of the magnitude of campaign effects can be obtained.² That exercise demonstrated that, in 23 referendum cases for which suitable poll data were available, the average movement over the course of the campaign was 17 percentage points, a figure substantially higher than that obtained by comparing opinion or vote intention change over an election campaign period for the same set of countries. In most of these instances, the direction of the movement was negative – i.e. public support for a ballot proposal deteriorated over the course of the campaign. Thus, a referendum might be initiated by a party or government based on a particular set of polling assumptions, and then discover that its strategic advantage suddenly vanishes in a short, intensive campaign.

FIGURE 1. Net opinion change in eleven referendum campaigns



A similar pattern is found in the subset of cases shown in figure 1, which will be considered in greater detail in this paper. Although the number of cases is small, they nevertheless represent a considerable range of variation in countries, issues, and political context. In most of these instances, the magnitude of the shift in public opinion occurring over the course of the campaign period is more than enough to determine whether a referendum on a particular issue succeeds or fails. The type of referendum campaign which is likely to display the greatest campaign volatility is one in which there is little partisan, issue, or ideological basis from which voters might tend to form an opinion. Voters cannot generally be expected to have well formed opinions on an issue that has *not* previously been a subject of any broad public debate. Some referendums fitting such a profile are those that involve multiple issues, complex international treaties, or large packages of constitutional provisions. The 1992 Canadian constitutional referendum and some Australian referendums display this pattern, with elite driven projects being decisively rejected once the voters had learned enough about them (LeDuc 2003; LeDuc & Pammett 1995; Johnston et al 1996; Galligan 1990, 2001). The 1992 referendums on the Maastricht treaty, particularly in France, displayed many of the same characteristics. In such circumstances, the degree of change in opinion over the course of even a short campaign is potentially large, because there is little in the way of stable social or political attitudes, or partisan cues, which might anchor opinions on the issue.

Referendums on issues which have been debated extensively in political arenas *other* than that of the referendum campaign, or in which there were strong linkages to the positions taken by political parties, generally displayed less campaign volatility.. Here, opinion is much firmer and less subject to rapid change or sudden reversal. The voting decision is easier for

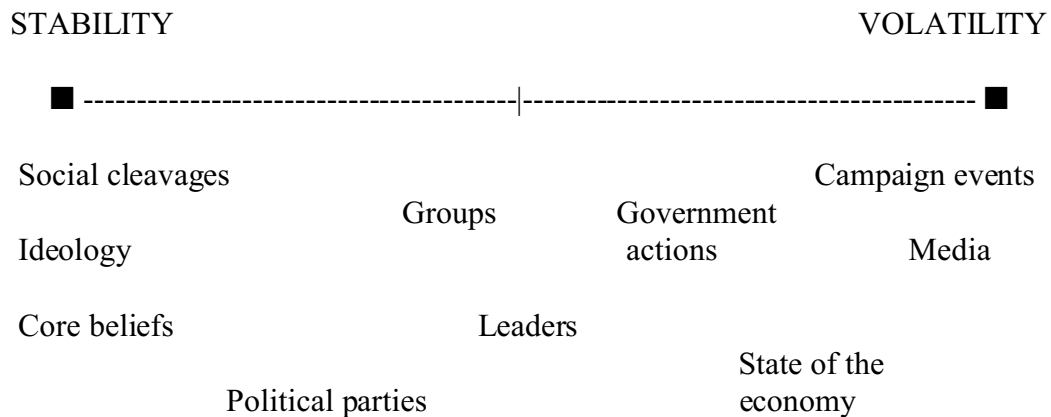
many voters, and tends to be made earlier in the campaign. There are often strong cues based on partisanship or ideology, and campaign arguments are advanced by familiar party leaders. In such a campaign, much of the attention is directed toward wavering or “undecided” voters, in the knowledge that a swing of only a few percentage points might make the crucial difference in the outcome. The 1995 Quebec sovereignty referendum is a good example of this type of referendum campaign. Because this issue was by that time a familiar one to Quebec voters, and because the parties were highly mobilized on the core issue, the degree of movement in public opinion caused by the campaign was much less. A similar pattern may have occurred in the case of the recent referendums on the European currency in Denmark and Sweden, because the “European issue” has been so widely debated in recent years, and electorates in both countries remain divided on the larger question of European integration.

The nature of the issue appearing on the ballot, and the political context in which the referendum takes place, nevertheless explains only part of this variation in the level of campaign effects in different types of referendum cases. In some instances, a entirely unexpected campaign dynamic can develop when a referendum on a reasonably well known issue begins to take on a new and unanticipated direction over the course of the campaign. Sometimes, this occurs when opposition groups are successful in “changing the subject” of a referendum, or in raising doubts about the motives of those who proposed it. Darcy & Laver (1990) documented this type of campaign in their study of the 1986 Irish divorce referendum, describing the dynamic in that instance as one of “opinion reversal”. A similar dynamic may have occurred in the case of the 1999 Australian referendum on the monarchy, in which the campaign rhetoric persuaded many voters to view the choice as one between an elected and appointed presidency rather than between retaining or abolishing the constitutional role of the British monarch in Australia (Uhr 2000; Higley & McAllister 2002).

The theoretical issues

Zaller’s (1992) model of opinion formation is particularly well suited to the study of public opinion and voting behavior in referendums. As he argues, any process of opinion formation proceeds from an interaction of *information* and *predisposition*. The extent to which basic values and beliefs are linked to a referendum issue in public debate provides a key starting point for any theoretical understanding of referendum voting. Bützer and Marquis (2002) applied such a model to the wide range of issues which regularly confront voters in Swiss referendums. A similar dynamic might be expected in some of the cases considered here. For some voters, opinions on Quebec sovereignty or on European integration might indeed reflect strongly held beliefs about the nation or a fundamental sense of political identity. For others however, attitudes might be less the product of beliefs developed over a period of time than a more transient opinion based on the persuasive arguments of an advertising campaign, apprehensions about the state of the economy, or judgments about the relative credibility of those delivering the campaign message. When strongly held predispositions are merely reinforced by the rhetoric of a campaign, referendums begin to take on some of the characteristics of elections, in which factors such as party identification or ideological orientation typically play a crucial role (Tonsgaard, 1992). But when parties are internally divided, ideological alignments are unclear, or an issue is a new and unfamiliar one, voters might be expected to draw more of their information from the campaign discourse. Under these circumstances, the outcome of the contest becomes more uncertain.

FIGURE 2. Elements leading toward stability or volatility in referendum voting



Factors such as party identification, the linkage of the referendum issue to particular groups, or its identification with established political actors, give us operational examples of Zaller’s “predispositions”. Figure 2 provides a conceptual map, on which a number of the relevant variables are arranged to fit the context of referendum voting as it might vary from issue to issue or case to case. I will argue here that the closer a particular referendum comes to involving elements at the left hand side of the diagram, the more its outcome is likely to be driven by predispositions and the more limited (or reinforcing) the effects of the campaign. As one moves towards the right hand side of the diagram, the potential for movement over the course of the campaign increases and the outcome becomes progressively more uncertain. In those instances where the issue(s) of the referendum are entirely new to the voter, the learning process of the campaign thus becomes highly critical to the determination of the outcome. Bowler & Donovan (1998, 2002) note that voters draw upon a variety of different sources in forming opinions about the sometimes complex and confusing initiatives which appear on many U.S. state ballots. Among the most frequently mentioned sources of such information are campaign pamphlets, television advertising, and direct mailings from various campaign organizations. Voters in such situations take “cues” from these and other sources, and can often find “short-cuts” that enable them to cut through large amounts of sometimes conflicting information (Bowler & Donovan, 1998; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998).

Thus, a referendum which involves a cleavage or ideological issue, and/or in which political parties take well known and predictably opposite positions, ought to hold the least potential for opinion change. One which involves a new or previously undiscussed issue, or in which parties line up in a non-traditional manner, is more likely to promote some of the short-term variables towards the right side of figure 2. But this is only a beginning point for estimating the potential for opinion change on a referendum issue. Often, an important part of the dynamic of a referendum campaign involves changing and redefining the subject matter of the referendum through the campaign discourse. Hence, the 1986 Irish divorce referendum might have seen less movement over the course of the campaign had it been fought solely along religious or partisan lines. But the rather dramatic shift which took place in voter

sentiment during that campaign was attributable in part to the success of certain campaign actors in persuading voters to view the matter as something *other* than a traditional cleavage issue (Darcy and Laver, 1990). Similarly, many Australian voters became persuaded over the course of the 1999 referendum campaign to view the choice in terms of an elected or appointed presidency rather than one of maintaining or abolishing the monarchy. While attitudes toward the latter question might also conceivably have changed over the course of a campaign, they almost certainly would have been more stable in the aggregate than those involving the “newer” and less widely discussed issue of an elected Australian presidency.

Time of vote decision

One indicator that is suggestive of the role played by the campaign is the amount of time that voters require in order to reach a decision about how to vote in a referendum. As noted earlier, we would expect that in those instances where the issues of the referendum are entirely new to the voter, the learning process of the campaign will be more critical for deciding how to vote and therefore also more important in determining the outcome. In those cases where voters clearly need the campaign in order to form an opinion on the issue(s) of the referendum, we might expect more actual voting decisions to be made late in the campaign, after a sufficient amount of information about the issue has become available. When voters are able to make up their minds on the basis of clear partisan or ideological cues,

TABLE 1. Reported time of vote decision in ten referendums (%)

		<u>Long before</u>	<u>At call</u>	<u>During campaign</u>	<u>Final week</u>
Quebec ¹	1995	70	5	14	11
Finland ²	1994	62		16	22
France ³	1992	60		20	20
Norway ²	1994	59		24	17
Sweden ²	1994	58		17	25
Quebec ⁴	1980	49	19	27	5
Australia ⁵	1999	42	19	20	19
Scotland ⁶	1997	40	21	16	24
Wales ⁶	1997	32	20	16	33
Canada ⁷	1992	---	38	33	29

1. 1995 Carleton ISSP Study

2. Comparative Nordic Referendums Study

3. SOFRES/ Le Figaro (Franklin, van der Eijk & Marsh 1995)

4. 1980 Canadian National Election Study: Quebec referendum wave

5. 1999 Australian Constitutional Referendum Study

6. 1997 CREST surveys

7. 1992 Carleton Referendum Study

or where there is a high degree of prior familiarity with the referendum issue(s), we might expect voting decisions to be made earlier. The timing of the vote decision therefore may be a useful indicator of the role of the campaign in affecting the outcome of a referendum.

Survey data on reported time of vote decision for ten referendum cases are displayed in table 1. These cases cover a range of different contexts in terms of the amount of prior knowledge that a voter might be expected to have regarding the issue being voted upon in the referendum. The 1992 Canadian constitutional referendum provides a fairly extreme example, because that referendum could not have been anticipated in advance and voters could not have been expected to have a high degree of prior knowledge of the content of a complex constitutional agreement which had been negotiated by elite actors in closed door sessions. Not surprisingly therefore, nearly two-thirds of those voting in that referendum made their decisions over the duration of the campaign, a substantial number of these as late as the final week. By contrast, voters in the second (1995) Quebec sovereignty referendum were able to come to a voting decision much more quickly, in part because the subject matter of the referendum was well known, but also because the campaign provided strongly reinforcing partisan cues for many voters. While the campaign was still important to the outcome, in part because of the closeness of the result, fewer voters needed the additional information provided by the campaign in order to reach a decision. Three-quarters of the Quebec electorate had already made up their minds how to vote at the time that the referendum was called.³

The 1994 European Union membership referendums in the Nordic countries, provide examples which fall clearly between these two extremes. While a majority of the voters surveyed in all three Nordic countries reported having made their decision how to vote “long before” the campaign had begun, substantial numbers also decided how they would vote at some point during the campaign period. In Sweden, 25% reported that they made their decision in the final week. The fact that political parties that are normally opponents in election campaigns were campaigning together in support of EU membership in these referendums may have served to present voters with new information, in which it could be expected that more time might be required for this to be factored into their decisions. In Sweden, divisions among the governing Social Democrats spilled over into the campaign, with the government actively supporting the YES side but others campaigning against it under the umbrella group “Social Democrats Against the EU”. Listhaug, Holmberg and Sänkiaho (1998) found that partisanship played an important role in voting in the 1994 EU referendums in all of the three Nordic countries, but they also discovered that the strength of this relationship varied substantially both between the countries and between parties. In Sweden, the correlation between feelings toward the Social Democratic party and feelings about the EU was in fact moderately negative, in spite of the party’s official endorsement of EU membership.⁴ The governing party was able to win back some of its supporters to the YES side over the course of the campaign, perhaps making the difference between victory and defeat for the proposal.⁵ But the circumstances of the 1994 EU referendums in the three Nordic countries present a quite different picture than the Quebec case, in which parties with well known and strongly held positions on the sovereignty issue were putting forward highly familiar arguments right from the very beginning of the campaign.

Participation and voter turnout

Turnout tends to fluctuate more widely in referendums than it does in national elections. In Switzerland, where referendums are commonplace events, turnout is generally well below 50%, and can sometimes be much lower (Kobach, 1993). It can however rise to considerably higher levels when a particular issue engages wide voter interest or when a more intense campaign is waged by interested groups.⁶ Butler and Ranney (1994) found that turnout over a large number of referendum cases in various nations averaged fifteen percentage points lower than that found in general elections in the same countries. In U. S. state referendums, turnout is often low, and can be subject to even more extreme fluctuations, depending on the issue and the political and institutional context of the vote. Cronin (1989) found a comparable rate of “drop-off” -- i.e. the difference between voting the candidate and propositions sections of the ballot -- in American state referendums. However turnout in referendums is not *always* lower than that found in elections. The turnout in some of the more important European referendums has often been higher than that found in the most nearly comparable elections in the same countries (table 2). Turnout in the Quebec sovereignty referendums was also higher, and voter participation in the 1995 referendum registered an astonishing 94%, a full twelve percentage points above that of the provincial election held a year earlier. Other important referendums in which turnout registered *higher* than that of a comparable election (table 2) are the 1992 Canadian constitutional referendum (+5), the 1994 Norwegian EU membership referendum (+13) and the Danish and Swedish referendums on the Euro (+1, +3).

The electorate found in a referendum is not always the same one that participates in elections. However, the same factors that predict participation in an election also tend to correlate with referendum voting (Jenssen et al, 1998). Saint-Germain & Grenier (1994) found a strong resemblance between patterns of vote for the Parti Québécois in the 1989 Quebec provincial election, the vote for the Bloc Québécois in the 1993 federal election, and the NO vote in the 1992 constitutional referendum -- with turnout in all three instances fluctuating within a fairly narrow range. Variation with issue can be seen in some of the U.S. state level examples. On the day of the 2000 U.S. presidential election, more than 200 propositions appeared on the ballot in 41 states (LeDuc, 2003; Initiative and Referendum Institute). While participation in the presidential vote itself varied from a high of 66% in Wisconsin to a low of 41% in Hawaii, the rate of drop off in voting on ballot propositions fluctuated widely, even within single states (table 3). This can be seen most readily in those states such as Oregon or Colorado, which had a large number of propositions on various subjects on the 2000 ballot. Some issues attracted voter participation at rates nearly comparable to that of the presidential vote. Others lagged far behind. Bowler & Donovan (1998) likewise found considerable variation in participation on state propositions in California, comparing 190 votes over a 14 year period. Accounting for this variation were some factors specific to the proposition itself (type of measure, ballot position), some external to it (presidential election, state primary, etc.), and others relating to characteristics of the campaign, such as the amount of money spent by opposing camps or the extent of media exposure.

TABLE 2. Selected turnout comparisons — referendums and general elections

		<u>%</u>	<u>+/-</u>
Australia	1998 federal election	95	
"	1999 republic	95	0
Canada	1992 constitutional referendum	75	+5
"	1993 federal election	70	
Denmark	1992 Maastricht treaty	83	0
"	1993 Edinburgh agreement	86	+3
"	1994 general election	83	
"	2000 European currency	88	+1
"	2001 general election	87	
Finland	1994 EU membership	71	-1
"	1995 parliamentary election	72	
France	1992 Maastricht treaty	70	+1
"	1993 national assembly election	69	
Ireland	1995 divorce amendment	62	-5
"	1997 parliamentary election	67	
Norway	1993 general election	76	
"	1994 EU membership	89	+13
Quebec	1980 sovereignty-association	86	+3
"	1981 provincial election	83	
"	1994 provincial election	82	
"	1995 sovereignty referendum	94	+12
Sweden	1994 EU membership	83	-4
"	1994 general election	87	
"	2002 general election	80	
"	2003 European currency	83	+3

The wider variations in turnout found in referendums partly explain their greater potential for volatility. They also suggest that turnout itself is at least partially a campaign effect. Where parties fail to mobilize their supporters on behalf of an issue, or where non-party groups succeed in mobilizing *theirs*, the outcome of a referendum can be more directly subject to a differential turnout effect. Since the turnout in some referendums can actually be *higher* than that found in elections, even though on average it is *lower*, the potential for turnout effects in a referendum is greater than that found in a comparable pair of elections.

TABLE 3. Voting Participation on Ballot Propositions
in Five U.S. States, November 2000

		----- Turnout (%) ¹ -----		
		VAP	PRES	Drop-off
Colorado	Obsolete Language in State Constitution	48	57	-9
"	Redistricting Timetable	46		-11
"	Property Tax Relief for Seniors	50		-7
"	Expanding State Lottery	53		-4
"	Allowing Appointment of County Surveyors	47		-10
"	Education Funding	51		-6
"	Gun Control	56		-1
"	Medical Marijuana	56		-1
"	Increase in Education Spending	55		-2
"	Abortion Waiting Period	55		-2
"	Tax Reduction	55		-2
"	Environmental Growth Limitations	40		-17
South Dakota	Investment of State Funds	56	58	-2
"	Property Taxes on Commercial Fishing	56		-2
"	Initiatives and Local Governments	55		-3
"	Prohibits a State Inheritance Tax	58		0
"	Change Gambling Maximum Bet	58		0
"	Prohibits Video Lottery	58		0
New Mexico	Senior Citizen Facility Improvement Bonds	37	47	-10
"	Public Education Bonds	37		-10
"	Making Bernalilo County an Urban County	34		-13
"	Equipment Bonds	36		-11
"	Eliminating Term Limits on County Officials	37		-10
South Carolina	Reduction of Property Taxes	43	46	-3
"	Vehicle Taxes	42		-4
"	Establishing Lottery	46		0
Iowa	Call for Constitutional Convention	37	61	-24

1. VAP denotes percentage of voting age population voting on the item; PRES denotes percentage of voting age population marking the presidential ballot; "Drop-off" is the difference between the two. (LeDuc, 2003).

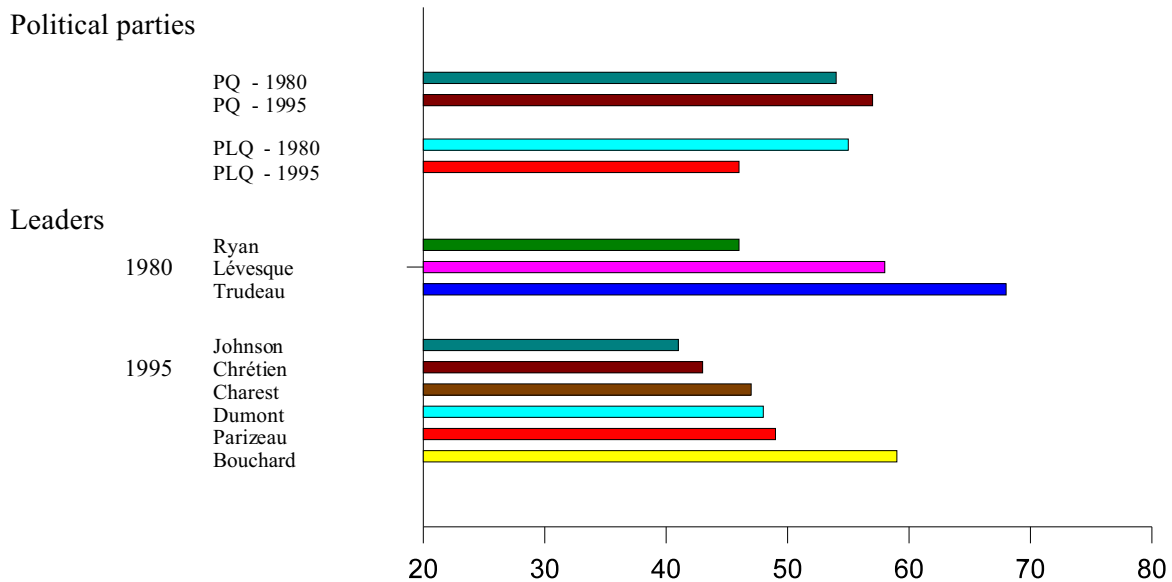
Contextual variables

Some referendums are highly partisan contests, even without the appearance of party labels or candidate names on the ballot. Where the positions of parties on an issue are well known, or where the referendum debate follows clearly understood ideological lines, voting behaviour will tend to conform to familiar and relatively predictable patterns. In such situations, the voting choice may be driven by partisan or ideological cues, or by familiarity with one or more of the issues in a long standing political debate. But the 1994 Nordic referendums on European Union membership, or the 1992 Canadian constitutional referendum, found political parties who regularly oppose each other in elections campaigning together on the same side of an issue, thus providing mixed cues to their electorates. In some other instances, parties which might normally provide their supporters with reliable voting cues are themselves internally divided. In the 1992 French referendum on the Maastrich Treaty, or the 1994 Swedish EU membership referendum, prominent figures from the same political parties were found actively campaigning on opposite sides of the issue. In these cases, partisan cues were thus muted, or even non-existent, creating cross-pressures and uncertainties for many voters.

A very different partisan context is found in the Quebec sovereignty referendums, particularly that of 1995, where the ballot question was rooted in long standing divisions reflected in the polarized structure of the Quebec party system. The two Quebec sovereignty referendums provide a particularly good test of the differing potential of campaigns to shift public opinion on a referendum issue. The two referendums displayed a different dynamic, even though the issue was essentially the same in both instances. This is because the context in which they occurred was different, given the fifteen years of debate over Quebec sovereignty which had taken place in the interim between the two votes. In the first (1980) referendum, the sovereignty issue in Quebec was still a new political phenomenon, and the campaign represented an important part of the learning process for many voters. The Quebec government's strategy of promoting "sovereignty" together with an continuing economic association with Canada was widely thought at the time to be a winning formula.⁷ Polls commissioned by the Quebec government at the time suggested that this strategy was capable of attracting the support of well over fifty percent of the electorate. Yet the referendum proposal ultimately went down to a rather decisive defeat, in part because the federalist side was able to effectively shift the terms of the debate over the course of the 1980 campaign, arguing instead for "renewed federalism" as an alternative vision. The message of "renewed federalism" was delivered by a respected and credible federal prime minister, Pierre Trudeau — still at that time highly popular in Quebec. While "renewed federalism" was not on the ballot, the NO campaign ultimately persuaded many voters to view the choice in these terms, rather than as the status quo vs. sovereignty-association.

The relative newness of these issues at that time and the nature of the campaign discourse itself meant that the decision was not a clear cut or easy one for many Quebec voters. By 1995 however, the positions of both the federal and provincial political parties and their leaders were very different. The federal prime minister, Jean Chrétien, was highly unpopular among Quebec francophones and widely mistrusted. But more importantly, the political context in which the vote took place in 1995 was very different than that of 1980.

Figure 3. Thermometer Scale Ratings of Parties and Leaders in Quebec, 1980 and 1995¹



1. 1980 Canadian National Election Study, Quebec Referendum wave;
1995 Carleton ISSP Study

Positions on the sovereignty issue by that time were well known and well entrenched. A Quebec electorate frustrated with the failed constitutional initiatives of the past fifteen years (including the 1992 constitutional referendum) was much more prepared to listen to the arguments put forward by the YES side during the course of the 1995 campaign. There were simply fewer voters in 1995 who had not already made up their minds on an issue that had by that time become *the* defining cleavage of Quebec politics. The potential for movement over the course of that campaign, important though it proved to be, was far less in 1995 than had been the case in 1980. Further, the YES side in 1995 benefitted from the campaign role played by Lucien Bouchard, then leader of the Bloc Québécois in the federal parliament, whose personal popularity in Quebec far exceeded that of the federal prime minister (Pammett & LeDuc, 2001).⁸ As is seen in figure 3, both the relative positions of the political parties and their leaders were substantially different in 1995 than they had been in 1980. Bouchard, who effectively led the YES campaign, was the most popular politician in Quebec while the Liberal party, representing the federalist alternative, had become highly unpopular, along with its leaders at both the federal and provincial levels.

A similar contrast might be drawn between the context of the referendums held on the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and those on the European currency more recently. Over the past decade, Euroskepticism has grown stronger among many European electorates, with the result that many voters will hold stronger and more fully formed predispositions on *any* issue involving the European Union than would have been the case a decade earlier. Prior to

Maastricht, it was more feasible to focus a campaign on specific characteristics of an agreement, or to exploit the benefits of a “passive consensus” on Europe. Ten years later, any such campaign is more likely to be about the European project more generally, regardless of the specific issue involved in the referendum. Thus, attempts by YES campaigners in Denmark to focus the campaign more narrowly on technical issues involving the currency were bound to fail. As in Quebec, the issue has become part of a larger debate, which has been going on for some time and is well entrenched in public attitudes regarding Europe more generally. While the YES side in the 2000 Danish referendum attempted to argue that the issue before the electorate was essentially an *economic* one, the NO side repeatedly stressed the more *political* aspects of Denmark’s role in Europe (Qvortrup 2001; LeDuc 2003).

Referendum campaigns can also become entangled with a other political issues, above and beyond the actual question presented on the referendum ballot. Examining the 1992 Danish and French referendums on Maastricht, Franklin *et al.* (1994, 1995) concluded that shifting attitudes towards domestic political actors, or the relative popularity or unpopularity of the government of the day, can sometimes provide a more plausible explanation of shifts in voter sentiment than feelings about the referendum issue itself. In this sense, referendums may take on some of the characteristics of “second order” elections. Heath & Taylor (1999) note that the YES side benefitted from the timing of the Welsh and Scottish devolution referendums, which took place only four months after Labour won a landslide election victory in 1997. Seemingly unrelated matters such as prevailing economic conditions may also play a role in the outcome. The previous (1979) referendums on devolution in Scotland and Wales failed, in part, because they were undertaken under much more adverse political and economic circumstances by a government nearing the end of its mandate. Some types of issues may be less susceptible to such short-term influences than others. For some voters, opinions on Quebec sovereignty or on European integration may reflect their fundamental beliefs about the nation or a sense of political identity. For others, such attitudes may be less the product of deeply held beliefs than a simple electoral decision based on the persuasive arguments of an advertising campaign, apprehensions about the state of the economy, or judgments about the relative credibility of those delivering the message.

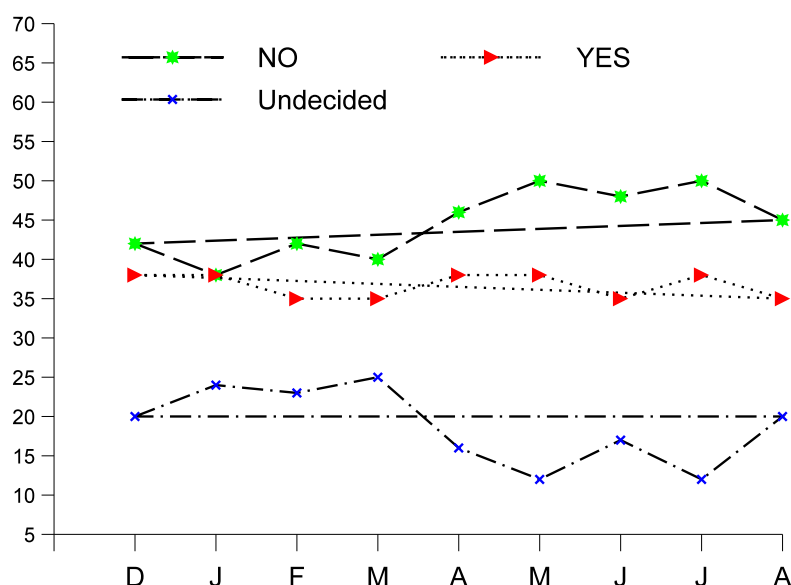
Sweden’s referendum on the Euro, September 2003

The referendum held a few months ago on the issue of whether Sweden should enter the Euro-zone provides an illustration, and to some degree a test, of some of the arguments about the dynamics of referendum campaigns presented in this paper. Except for the dramatic and unanticipated events which occurred in the final week of the campaign, the Swedish referendum exhibits some similarity to that which took place in Denmark on the same issue three years earlier. In both countries, the “European issue” has become established as a major political cleavage, and the manner in which the Euro is discussed in domestic politics reflects the ambivalence that many Swedes and Danes have come to feel about their relationship with the European Union. Denmark has voted five times on European issues since joining the European Community in 1972, and its rejection of the Maastricht Treaty in the 1992 referendum was an event that reverberated throughout Europe. It also firmly established Euroskepticism as a force to be reckoned with in Danish domestic politics (Svennson, 2002). In Sweden, the narrow vote in favour of joining the EU in 1994 (52% YES) revealed deep divisions over the issue, both within the governing Social Democratic Party, and in the

country more generally. Sweden's decision to remain outside the Euro-zone reflected the government's cautious handling of the issue in the wake of the 1994 vote. In both Denmark and Sweden however, it was realized that a vote on the Euro would have to take place in a matter of time. In both cases, it would be the governing party that would determine the timing, and to a certain extent the context, in which such a vote would occur. Of course, "context" as discussed here can be determined only in a limited way by the political leaders who set the terms of the referendum. While they can determine the date of the vote, the wording of the question, and to some degree the connection of the issue to other elements of public policy, they cannot change the history of the issue, or manipulate the predispositions of much of the electorate on the larger question of European integration. Nor can they control many of the forces of the campaign, once it is under way. In other words, the dynamic of a short intensive campaign on an emotionally charged issue can only partly be anticipated in advance. This characteristic of referendum campaigns has been illustrated in many of the other cases discussed here. Even in some instances such as the Irish referendums on divorce and abortion, where opinions might be thought to be more firmly anchored in religious or moral beliefs, the dynamic of the campaign proved to be difficult to anticipate, and the actual movement of public opinion and vote intention over its duration were much larger than would have been expected by those who set the events in motion.

Of course, Swedish politicians must have had the Danish example firmly in mind when they proceeded to call the referendum on the Euro. Denmark had voted NO by a margin of 53% to 47% in 2000, following a raucous campaign which had seen a YES lead of ten or more percentage points evaporate over a six month period. In Denmark, the signs that the proposal to join the Euro-zone might pass had been initially positive, in spite of determined opposition from parties and groups which had long opposed a larger Danish commitment to the EU. The proposal was widely supported by business, labour, the media, and all of the mainstream political parties. But this breadth of support mattered little once the formal campaign was under way. Given the tenor of the campaign and the rapid shift of momentum away from the YES, few were surprised at the result. In Sweden, there was even less reason for supporters of the Euro to be optimistic about the prospects for its passage. Polls in Sweden had long shown the NO side to be well ahead. Over the course of what might be called the "long campaign", the spread favouring the NO side actually appeared to widen (figure 4). But the percentage of "undecided" respondents found in the polls was invariably high, sometimes as much as a fifth or a quarter of the potential electorate. In spite of the seeming odds against them, supporters of the Euro appeared optimistic that these wavering voters could be won over by a strong campaign. The decision to place the foreign minister, Anna Lindh, at the forefront of the YES campaign was a strategic one, allowing the government's position to be articulated by its most popular political figure and shifting attention away from the prime minister and other policy matters. It had also been hoped that Lindh's role in the campaign might help to close the "gender gap" in public opinion, as polls in Sweden had consistently shown a greater percentage of women favouring the NO side". Her tragic murder four days before polling day threw the campaign into disarray, and prompted much speculation about the possibility of a "sympathy vote", which might tip the balance to the YES. Indeed, the last polls taken before the vote appeared to show a narrowing of the spread between the two sides. Although Lindh's assassination effectively suspended campaigning in the final days, it is likely that the result was determined by other elements earlier in the campaign. As had been the case in the Danish referendum three years earlier,

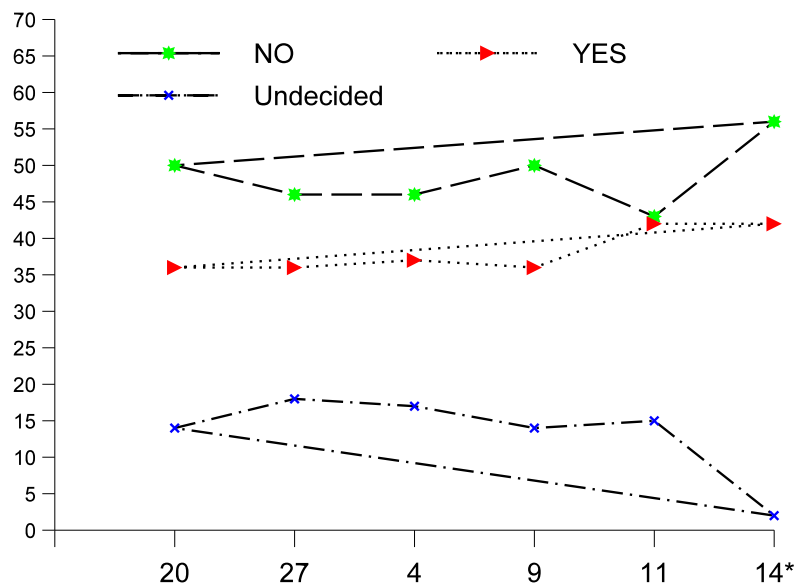
FIGURE 4. Public Opinion Polls in the 2003 Euro Referendum in Sweden
December 2002 - August 2003



the government found it difficult to make the case for the Euro on narrow economic grounds without opening up the larger political questions of European integration. The background debate taking place on a proposed European constitution made this segregation of issues all the more difficult. The fact that the Swedish economy was strong, while that of Germany was in recession, further undermined many of the arguments that were advanced about potential risks to the economy in rejecting the Euro. Also, as had been the case in the 1994 referendum on EU membership in Sweden, splits within the cabinet itself opened up with some frequency over the course of the campaign, causing further damage to the YES side.

The Swedish referendum, in spite of the unique and tragic events associated with it, conforms to all of the theoretical arguments advanced here regarding the dynamics of referendum campaigns. There can be little doubt that levels of predisposition on the issue were high, given the history of the “European issue” in Sweden and the other Nordic countries. But this does not mean that the campaign was irrelevant. Such predispositions invariably interact with information provided by the campaign and its actors. In this case, the credibility of the government’s message appears to have been an important element, as it was also in the Danish referendum on the same issue. Perceptions of the state of the economy also played a role, but in Sweden it was a *strong* economy that had the effect of undermining the government’s strategy rather than enhancing it. A dramatic campaign event had at least the potential to produce extensive disruption, although in the end it appeared not to do so. And, as had been the case in 1994, divisions within the governing party also played a role, undermining the link between opinion and partisanship for at least some voters.

FIGURE 5. Public Opinion Polls in the 2003 Euro Referendum in Sweden
August 20 - September 14



*Actual result

One important difference between the Danish referendum on the Euro in 2000 and the Swedish referendum of 2003 is that, in Denmark, the right wing political parties, principally the Danish Peoples Party, and the organized movement of Euroskeptics (the June Movement) which had campaigned effectively against Maastricht, provided much of the leadership of the NO campaign. In Sweden, opposition to the Euro was centered mainly on the left of the political spectrum, and some of it was found within the governing Social Democratic Party itself. Thus, the themes and issues of the NO campaign were different in the two countries. In Denmark, the NO campaign often invoked patriotic or nationalistic themes, and stressed the potential loss of Danish sovereignty in a more integrated Europe. In Sweden, the themes of the NO campaign centered around the structure of the Swedish welfare state, and the threats to that structure which might be posed by powerful European institutions with weaker commitments in the area of social policy. In both cases, the arguments advanced had little to do with the Euro per se. But they indicate the difficulty that a governing party faces in attempting to structure such a campaign narrowly. Also, they demonstrate the innate advantage often held by the NO side in referendum campaigns, and perhaps explain in part why the short-term trend in public opinion in such campaigns is so often towards the negative side.⁹ NO campaigners do not necessarily have to make a coherent or persuasive case against a proposal. It is often sufficient to raise doubts about it in the minds of voters, question the motives of the proposers, or attempt to link it to other less popular issues or personalities. Risk aversion can be a powerful basis on which to appeal to some voters in and of itself, and the NO side of a referendum campaign usually (not always) holds a monopoly on this emotion. The shift in public sentiment which frequently takes place in a short campaign need

not be permanent. Often, public opinion on a widely debated issue can be seen to shift back again, once the turbulence of the referendum campaign is out of the way. This raises serious questions about the quality of public “deliberation” which takes place in referendum campaigns, and perhaps also about the ability of direct democratic devices themselves to fully resolve certain types of issues. However, in the Swedish case, given the history of the European issue, the level of predisposition, and the relatively small movement of the polls over the course of the long campaign, it seems unlikely that the YES side would have prevailed in any event.

Almost certainly, the outcome of the Swedish referendum has made the prospect for a vote in Britain much more remote, at least for the foreseeable future. With the Danish and Swedish examples firmly in mind, many will believe that a referendum on the Euro in Britain simply cannot be won. But this is not the lesson that should be learned from the studies of referendum campaigns, on this or other issues. Rather it is that the campaigns *do* matter, but that they are not the only factors affecting the behaviour of voters. The level of predisposition which exists in the formation of opinion, and the political and economic context in which the vote takes place, matter at least as much.

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NOTES

1. The actual length of the period that might be considered “the campaign” varies substantially from case to case. In some instances, a period of four or five months is more accurate, and the poll to be compared with the actual outcome is chosen accordingly.
2. Of course, this does not capture trends which may run simultaneously in opposite directions, and thus offset each other. However, as is seen in figure 1, the overall magnitude of campaign effects in a number of referendum cases is nevertheless substantial.
3. The categories found in the surveys do not always coincide perfectly with the labels employed in table 10.1. In the CREST surveys in Scotland and Wales, for example, the categories were: *before the general election* (i.e. May 1, 1997); *between the general election and the referendum*; *in the month before*; *in the week before*. The category *when the referendum was called* was not used in the SOFRES or the Nordic countries surveys, but the other categories utilized in those instances were similar to those shown in the table.
4. A special party congress held in June 1994 voted 232-103 to support EU membership (Jahn, Pesonen, Slaatta and Åberg, 1998).
5. The vote in Sweden on EU membership in the 1994 referendum was 52% YES, 47% NO. The remaining 1% of the ballots were recorded as blank.
6. For example, turnout in the 1992 referendum on Swiss membership in the European Economic Area was 78%. The average turnout for all Swiss referendums since 1960 (43%) is about eleven percent lower than that for all federal parliamentary elections over the same period (Kobach, 1993; Franklin, 1996).
7. The text of the 1980 Quebec referendum question was as follows: “*The Government of Quebec has made public its proposal to negotiate a new agreement with the rest of Canada, based on the equality of nations. This agreement would enable Quebec to acquire the exclusive power to make its laws, levy its taxes, and establish relations abroad -- in other words, sovereignty -- and at the same time, to maintain with Canada an economic association including a common currency. No change in political status resulting from these negotiations will be effected without approval by the people through another referendum. On these terms, do you agree to give the Government of Quebec the mandate to negotiate the proposed agreement between Quebec and Canada?*”
8. Bouchard subsequently became Premier of Quebec when Jacques Parizeau resigned following the loss of the referendum.
9. There are certainly exceptions to this pattern. In all four of the 1994 EU membership referendums (Austria, Finland, Norway, Sweden), the YES side made at least modest gains over the course of the campaign (LeDuc, 2002a; Jenssen et al, 1998).