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Referendum campaign dynamics : news media, campaign effects and direct democracy

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CONCLUSION

Overall summary

Do political campaigns matter? This dissertation provides evidence to suggest that news coverage of a campaign can have *conditional* effects, depending on individual predispositions, on *specific attitudes and behaviour*. Furthermore, it sheds light on some of the *underlying mechanisms* behind such effects.

We have studied campaign effects and the role of the news media within the context of the Dutch 2005 EU Constitution referendum. The use of referendums as a means to enact or prevent legislation by letting the people decide has substantially increased around the world. With regard to advanced EU integration, future key political decisions are contingent upon referendums. Yet, research advancing our understanding of the role of the referendum campaign in shaping attitudes and behaviours is still emerging. Against this backdrop, this dissertation aims to make a contribution both to the communication science literature on campaign and media effects as well as to political science research concerned with referendum voting behaviour and theories of direct democracy.

In Chapter 1, we started our investigation by turning to one of the most central questions, namely, *who* supports referendums as a means of direct democracy? We showed that those who felt more politically disaffected especially embraced the referendum opportunity as an alternative means of political expression. Furthermore, we showed that the way a referendum proposal is covered in the news affected what people thought of referendums. Tabloid style campaign news made referendum opponents more critical and affectively predisposed against the proposal which resulted in higher support for public referendums as an instrument to have a say and prevent an unwanted outcome. Our findings support the notion that referendums are seen as effective tools to have a more direct impact on political decision-making by citizens and have the potential to engage the disengaged.

In Chapter 2, we were concerned with vote choice and suggested a new way of looking at voting behaviour in EU referendums. Our findings suggest that attitudes towards the EU are the factor *through which* other determinants of the vote exert their influence. Furthermore, we showed how the referendum campaign had an impact on the vote. During the campaign the referendum topic was highly visible in the news with a positive tone towards the Constitution. In this context, higher levels of exposure to referendum news increased the likelihood of voters to switch over to the 'Yes' side. Given the presence of strong pre-existing attitudes towards Europe in this referendum, we found campaign effects on vote choice not to be large. Nevertheless, the campaign mattered for the vote and contributes to our overall understanding of referendum voting behaviour.

In Chapter 3, we introduced a new concept for the analysis of electoral mobilization in referendum campaigns: the ‘reversed mobilization effect’. Voters who opposed the referendum proposal and were exposed to positive news framing were mobilized to turn out and vote against the proposal. Our findings showed corroborating evidence suggesting that being confronted with news promoting a positive outcome was *perceived* as a risk by referendum opponents and motivated opponents to turn out and vote in order to avoid an unwanted scenario. This form of reversed mobilization stresses the need to take pre-existing attitudes into account in order to understand more of the psychology behind campaign and framing effects.

In Chapter 4, we formally assessed the underlying mechanisms behind the reversed mobilization dynamic as well as conditioning factors. Our findings showed that opponents of a referendum proposal did indeed perceive positive news as negative from their own point of view and felt more at risk with regard to the assumed consequences of the proposal, which in turn increased their likelihood of turning out to vote. Thus, risk perception *mediates* the effect of positive news framing on turnout intention among referendum opponents. Furthermore, we showed how this mediated dynamic is *moderated* by political efficacy. Reversed mobilization in a referendum campaign is more likely to occur among individuals with higher levels of efficacy. Referendum opponents who feel efficacious are more likely to arrive at a perception of risk in response to positive news framing and to become mobilized in order to avoid an unwanted scenario. These findings are in line with existing research in psychology and health communication and make a contribution to both the communication science literature on media framing effects as well as to political research on electoral mobilization.

Limitations

We discussed the particular limitations of each of our empirical investigations in the respective chapters. However, we are also faced with a number of more general limitations. Most importantly, we investigate campaign effects and the role of the news media only in *one* particular referendum. Naturally, it is difficult to generalize any findings above and beyond the respective context from which they are derived. This was one reason why we thoroughly described the specific context characteristics of the Dutch 2005 EU Constitution referendum in the Introduction to this dissertation. These particularities have to be taken into account when interpreting our findings and considering to what extent they might apply to other contexts.

As we pointed out, in different national contexts, i.e. in which referendums are more commonly used than in the Netherlands, the motives behind support for direct democratic means might look different (see Chapter 1). The Dutch 2005 referendum on the EU Constitution was the first national referendum in the Netherlands and it was especially embraced by those with higher levels of political disaffection who used the opportunity to veto a political decision backed by the political elite. However, in contexts in which referendums are not seen as a special

occasion and are applied more often, those with higher cognitive resources might remain more committed to the practice. Furthermore, with regard to the role of the campaign in *changing* individual support for referendums, the fact that this was the first national referendum in the Netherlands might have made it more likely for the campaign to affect attitudes with regard to referendums as a means of direct democracy. In contexts in which the use of referendums is more established and people hold more pronounced attitudes towards the instrument, the campaign might have less of an impact on what people think of referendums.

Furthermore, in the case of the Dutch 2005 EU Constitution referendum, the importance of existing attitudes towards ‘Europe’ defined the boundaries within which possible campaign effects on vote choice could occur (see Chapter 2). In referendum contexts in which involvement is high, such as in our example, citizens’ voting decisions are more strongly orientated towards issue-related considerations, setting a limit for the campaign to change attitudes and to affect the vote. Thus, we expect referendum campaigns to have more of an effect on vote choice in contexts in which public involvement is lower than in our context and less of an effect in contexts in which involvement is higher. Although previous research has pointed to the volatility of opinions with regard to the EU (Saris, 1997) we do not see our findings in opposition to earlier studies. Rather, key events and developments such as the introduction of the Euro or EU enlargement have made the EU more visible as a topic over time and can be expected to have led to more pronounced attitudes and opinions regarding the EU (see also the discussion in the Introduction).

Whereas pre-existing attitudes towards ‘Europe’ are likely to have limited campaign effects with regard to vote choice in the Dutch 2005 referendum, they are equally likely to have fostered campaign effects with regard to mobilization. A ‘reversed mobilization’ dynamic as we describe it is more likely to occur in contexts in which attitudes towards the referendum issue matter more to voters (see Chapters 3 and 4). This was the case in the Dutch 2005 referendum on the EU Constitution: However, in other referendum contexts in which involvement and interest in the issue are lower and people do not hold strong attitudes the prevalence of a reversed mobilization dynamic is reduced.

The above considerations are not to say that the campaign effects we report in this dissertation are *only* mere products of the particular conditions present in this context. Each of the effects we documented and each of the mechanisms we uncovered we expect to be a general possibility in other campaign contexts as well. However, the extent to which the campaign dynamics we described are likely to occur depends on the context characteristics of the respective referendum under study.

We acknowledge two more general limitations of our investigation. First, our exclusive focus on the role of the *news media* in referendum campaigns disregards other potential effects of the campaign. Of course, not all campaign effects are indirect or mediated. Campaigns can also have a much more direct impact on voters, for example through public involvement in particular campaign events or interpersonal communication about the issue at stake. For example,

during the Dutch referendum campaign in 2005 many public events, such as discussion forums, were organized and well attended. Furthermore, *within* the array of possible media induced campaign effects we limited ourselves to looking at three particular aspects in this dissertation: support for referendums, vote choice and electoral mobilization. Of course, there are a number of other noteworthy arenas such as campaign effects on knowledge levels and learning about public affairs or campaign effects on the quality of opinions, to only name a few. Given the multiplicity of possible campaign effects, no investigation will ever be completely exhaustive or could avoid the necessary trade-off between the number of domains looked at and the depth of analysis. In this dissertation we have limited our focus on three distinct aspects that we consider to be of special relevance and particular interest in the current debate on the use of referendums and the role of the campaign in modern democracies.

Finally, the selection of news outlets for our analysis of media induced campaign effects focused on newspapers and television only. Citizens report these to be their most important sources of political information and most previous research on media and campaign effects relies on either newspaper or television coverage. Furthermore, the size of our media sample as well as the number of outlets selected for our analysis is large compared to other studies. However, the exclusion of other information channels, such as internet sources, leave out an important domain in which late modern election campaigns take place (see Foot & Schneider, 2002). Political actors invest more and more efforts in online campaigning (e.g., Gibson & Römmele, 2001; Gibson et al., 2003), news blogs and online discussion forums obtain increasing relevance for voters (see e.g., Coleman, 2001) and internet access is close to reaching a point of saturation in many countries. These factors call for an expansion of the traditional focus on newspaper and television news in studies of media and campaign effects (Xenos & Foot, 2005).

Overall conclusion

How political campaigns matter

‘Campaigns matter’ is one of the firmest held beliefs of politicians and journalists alike. However, in light of early studies of political campaigns (e.g., Berelson et al., 1954; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948), scientific research was hesitant for a long time to adopt this claim (see e.g., Ansolabehere, 2006) and instead assumed campaigns to have only minimal effects. This view mainly goes back to a definition of campaign effects merely in terms of persuasion and switching between two political parties or candidates. However, there is more to campaigns than just persuasion. A broader focus including the investigation of more specific and indirect effects and a deeper understanding of the way in which information matters in affecting voting behaviour led to a renewed interest in studying campaign effects. A growing number of studies, employing more refined research designs capable of tapping campaign effects with greater accuracy, have documented specific campaign effects with regard to different aspects such as mobilization,

attitude change, candidate evaluations, importance attached to issues or considerations, knowledge acquisition or political learning (see e.g., Brady et al., 2006). Still, the extent to which campaigns might matter or not depends on many factors, such as the strength of existing attitudes, the intensity of the campaign, and the given context characteristics of a particular election. In light of these considerations, we agree with Holbrook (1996) who stated that “perhaps the best characterization of campaign effects is that they are neither large nor minimal in an absolute sense, but sometimes large enough to be politically important” (1996: 188).

This dissertation is especially concerned with the effects of news media coverage of a referendum campaign on specific attitudes and voting behaviour. It is situated amidst other studies that view campaign effects as *conditional* in nature, depending on individual predispositions and existing attitudes, and is especially interested in the *underlying mechanisms* behind media induced campaign effects.

How the news media matter

The media have been blamed for all kinds of malfunctions in contemporary societies and their role during election campaigns has been under special scrutiny by politicians and scientists alike. Media have been accused of turning voters off (e.g., Ansolabehere, et al., 1994; Jamieson, 1992), fostering public cynicism and distrust (e.g., Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), shifting public opinion by slanted reports (e.g., Druckman & Parkin, 2005) and replacing serious political information with irrelevant fluff and entertainment (e.g., Robinson, 1976; Kerbel, 1995; Sparks, 1998). It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to arrive at bold conclusions with regard to the above criticisms; however, our findings do not blend in with such pessimistic views.

Referendum campaigns are marked by a high degree of volatility and in such contexts the media play a key role as the most important source of information (e.g., de Vreese & Semetko, 2004; Bennett & Entman, 2001; Dalton, 2002; Jenssen et al., 1998). This is why previous studies have called for more systematic accounts to model the effects of news media coverage in referendum campaigns on the vote (e.g., de Vreese, 2004). Indeed, the findings we report in each of the four empirical chapters of this dissertation indicate that campaign news coverage mattered and affected specific attitudes and behaviours of voters. However, in line with previous research on political campaigns, we stress that most campaign effects are *conditional* (see also Schmitt-Beck & Farrell, 2002). Our results suggest that existing attitudes and predispositions play an important role in *how* information from the news media is understood and utilized by voters in an election campaign. Thus, existing attitudes and predispositions play an important role in *moderating* media induced campaign effects.

Campaign effects should generally be understood as being as much dependent on the message as on the voter. Thus, effects are the result of a complex interaction between existing attitudes and new information (e.g., Zaller, 1992). Previous research has shown that citizens can resist the persuasive appeal of campaign messages based on existing beliefs (Bizer & Petty, 2005)

and arrive at considerations not in line with the direction of message appeals (Meffert et al., 2006). Resistance to campaign messages, and behavioural outcomes that are the result of the resistance to counter-attitudinal information, certainly are an interesting avenue for future campaign research (see also Chaffee et al., 2001).

In our example, the positive tone of campaign news coverage in the Dutch 2005 referendum campaign had only limited effects on shifting voters over to the 'Yes' side (Chapter 2). More strikingly, rather than persuading opponents of the referendum proposal, positive news framing resulted in negative *affective* responses towards the proposal (Chapter 1) and even mobilized opponents to turn out and vote against the proposal out of increased risk perception (Chapters 3 and 4). These counter-intuitive effects are indicative of a considerable degree of motivated information processing and independent reasoning on the side of voters in response to campaign messages and based on existing attitudes towards the issue at stake (see also Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Meffert et al., 2006). In turn, such audience activity seems to effectively limit unseemly media influence and prevent citizens from merely falling victim to elite manipulation. Rather, the confrontation with counter-attitudinal information from the news media might have contributed to voters arriving at stronger and more founded opinions.

It should be noted, however, that such motivated information processing is of course contingent on the level of involvement in a campaign. If public involvement and interest are low, it can be expected that campaign messages are less carefully processed and less critically evaluated in light of existing attitudes. However, with this consideration in mind our findings suggest that people use and make sense of information derived from the media during a campaign in personal yet systematic and thus predictable ways. This calls for more of an audience perspective in future campaign research (see also Baden & de Vreese, 2008), taking pre-existing attitudes and existing beliefs into account when assessing the nature and direction of campaign and media effects (Zaller, 1992; see also Domke et al., 1998; Scheufele, 2000).

How media content matters

The findings of this study suggest that *content* matters for the effects of campaign news coverage. Previous research has shown that the style of reporting (Aarts & Semetko, 2003; Grabe et al., 2000; Newton, 1999), the tone (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004; Druckman & Parkin, 2005) and the framing of news (Maier & Rittberger, 2008; Schuck & de Vreese, 2006; de Vreese, 2002) can affect interpretations as well as evaluations regarding the issue at stake on the side of the audience. This dissertation shows not only *that* but also *how* these particular content features have the potential to affect different attitudes and behaviours in a campaign. More specifically, we showed how the style of reporting influenced what people thought of referendums as a means of direct democracy (Chapter 1) by having an effect on issue evaluations and sparking certain affective responses among parts of the electorate (see the discussion below on the role of emotions in affecting attitudes and political behaviour). Furthermore, the tone and the framing of campaign news coverage was shown to affect how voters thought of the issue at stake and how

they arrived at a decision regarding their own vote choice (Chapter 2) or their participation in the referendum (Chapters 3 and 4).

In this dissertation, we focus on the style of reporting (Chapter 1), the tone (Chapter 2) and the framing (Chapters 3 and 4) of campaign news coverage and found all of them to matter with regard to different attitudes and behavioural outcomes. However, until now investigations that incorporate actual content features into measures of news exposure in survey designs tapping campaign effects are still far from common. Future research must aim to identify other content features of news media coverage with the potential to affect subsequent attitudes or behaviour on the side of voters (see discussion in Chapter 2).

For example, in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, we reported that in those outlets that had the strongest effects on letting voters switch over to the ‘Yes’ side, the tone was more positive than in other outlets and coverage was also more ‘European’ in focus. Further, the potential consequences of a common Constitution were presented more positively compared to other outlets and several aspects of the Constitution were evaluated most positively (e.g., the role of the EU parliament, European civil rights, and the reform of the EU commission). More theoretical as well as empirical work needs to be done in order to identify and test the respective impact of more specific content features of news coverage with the potential to affect attitudes and how individuals arrive at a decision regarding their own voting behaviour.

The underlying mediation dynamics behind campaign effects

The above considerations have an important implication, namely the need to invest more efforts to analyze the underlying mechanisms and processes behind campaign and media effects. Tao and Bucy (2007) proposed a *mediation* model to study the impact of media stimuli via a mediator (defined in terms of psychological states such as perceptions, evaluations or emotions elicited by media stimuli) on a dependent variable in order to get a more realistic and complete account of media influence and to reach higher explanatory power in predicting media effects. Preacher and Hayes (2008), as well as Bizer and Petty (2005), stress the need to formally assess mediation dynamics in order to study underlying processes and mechanisms behind media and/or framing effects.

This is one area in which this dissertation aims at making a contribution to existing accounts of studying campaign and media effects. Rather than just assessing the presence or absence of media induced effects we have paid special attention to the identification and formal testing of the mechanisms that account for such effects. These efforts have also proven to be useful with regard to advancing theorizing since they allow us, with greater precision and accuracy, to say more about the nature of effects and under what conditions they operate.

This dissertation is the first to explore *how* the news media have the potential to affect individual support for referendums as a means of direct democracy (see Chapter 1). As we showed, both positive as well as negative tabloid style news reporting have the potential to

increase referendum support based on different mechanisms and via different routes, affecting both issue evaluations as well as affective responses which in turn affected referendum support.

Furthermore, previous research has for example called for more attention to the underlying mechanisms behind the mobilization of voters in response to campaign messages (see e.g., Martin, 2004, 2008; Sigelman & Kugler, 2003). In this dissertation, we identified a ‘reversed mobilization effect’ in referendum campaigns, showing how positive news framing can mobilize referendum opponents through increased risk perception (see Chapters 3 and 4). In line with recent methodological research (see Preacher & Hayes, 2007) we have shown how this mediated dynamic is further dependent on existing levels of political efficacy (see Chapter 4). Formally assessing such *moderated mediation* dynamics offers a promising path to future campaign and media effects research, explaining the underlying processes and mechanisms as well as specifying the conditions under which effects occur (Frone, 1999).

The role of ‘emotions’ in studying campaign effects

Another promising path for future research on political campaigns is to explore the role of *emotions*, elicited in response to certain (campaign) messages, in the formation of political attitudes and subsequent behaviour (see e.g., Brader, 2006; Marcus et al., 2000; Marcus & MacKuen, 1993; Martin, 2004, 2008). In the Dutch 2005 EU Constitution referendum, a majority of ‘Yes’ voters stated to have supported the proposal primarily on ‘rational’ grounds whereas a majority of ‘No’ voters stated to have voted on a mixture of ‘rational’ *and* ‘emotional’ considerations (Harmsen, 2005). Although only a crude measure, these findings stress the need to investigate the capability of news media content to elicit emotions from the audience that in turn can influence subsequent political behaviour. The findings we report in this dissertation support this notion and suggest that emotions do play an important role in political reasoning and the formation of political attitudes and behaviour (see also Neuman et al., 2007).

In the Dutch 2005 referendum on the EU constitutional treaty, other studies reported that many who voted against the proposal felt ‘threatened’ by a loss of national culture (Lubbers, 2008), a European ‘superstate’ (Harmsen, 2005) or further enlargement (Aarts & van der Kolk, 2006) and previous research has stressed the role of threat perception in determining support for the EU (e.g., McLaren, 2002). Fear of immigration has been shown to affect voting behaviour in EU referendums (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005) and in this dissertation we demonstrate that fear of globalization does as well (see Chapter 2).

In other research domains, such as psychology or health communication, the role of emotions and affective responses to mediated messages is well established and has reached an advanced level of differentiation between the impact of different kinds of discrete emotions (Nabi, 1999; Lerner & Keltner, 2001). On the contrary, in times of growing political apathy and falling turnout rates in many western democracies, politics and political news seemed to be too far removed from peoples’ everyday lives to really elicit strong emotional responses that in turn could turn out to be consequential for subsequent attitudes or behaviour. However, in line with a

growing body of recent literature on the role of emotions in affecting political behaviour (Brader, 2006; Druckman & McDermott, 2008; Gross & D'Ambrosio, 2004; Gross, 2008; Huddy et al., 2007; Neuman et al., 2007), this dissertation suggests that emotions do matter and deserve more attention in future campaign research.

Politics and political news are by no means always too far removed from everyday lives of citizens. To provide an example, being afraid of job loss or more immigration due to continued EU integration can be of very immediate concern to people. However, in a campaign context, perceived issue salience undoubtedly needs to be high in order for emotions to become a relevant factor in explaining the formation of political attitudes and behaviour in response to campaign messages. The findings of this dissertation indicate that in a context that is perceived as salient by voters, campaign news coverage can spark emotional or affective responses which are contingent on existing opinions and in turn have the potential to affect subsequent attitudes and behaviour (see Chapters 1 and 4).

Framing research in political communication as well as studies on political campaign effects still largely neglect the *mediating* role of emotions in affecting information processing and behavioural outcomes in response to messages (see Druckman & McDermott, 2008). The present study shows how campaign news has the potential to spark counter-intuitive responses, i.e. positive news framing increasing referendum support among individuals opposing the proposal (Chapter 1) or mobilizing opponents to turn out to vote (Chapters 3 and 4). By studying the emotional and affective responses to campaign news and testing their mediating role in affecting subsequent behavioural outcomes, we were able to make sense of otherwise counter-intuitive and contradictory findings.

The role of 'perceptions' in studying campaign effects

As Popkin notes: "The campaign that exists in the voter's mind – 'the campaign as perceived' – is different from the campaign as it is carried on in the real world" (1991: 38). Voters in an election have different motivations and, accordingly, process the same information in campaigns differently (Meffert et al., 2006). Although declared to be out of fashion, there still is a good dose of old 'stimulus-response' thinking that persists in a lot of research on campaign effects and, in our conviction, accounts for much of the often contradictory findings in previous campaign research (see also Sigelman & Kugler, 2003). Especially with regard to the often assumed demobilizing role of negative campaigning, the idea is that political candidates or the media inject a certain amount of negativity into a campaign and citizens react accordingly (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995). Over recent years there have been almost as many studies claiming that negativity in campaigns demobilizes voters as studies claiming the exact opposite (see Lau et al., 2007).

However, classifications of campaign information or even whole campaigns as being either 'positive' or 'negative' by social scientists might show little resemblance with ordinary citizens' *perceptions* (see also Martin, 2008; Sigelman & Kugler, 2003). That is why Tao and

Bucy (2007) suggested building in perceptions of message content directly into research designs and operationalizing the psychological responses to message content as mediating factors. Importantly, we stress that although there likely is a lack of consensus among voters in their perceptions of the same campaign or campaign messages, such differences do not fluctuate haphazardly but rather systematically, depending on existing attitudes towards the issue at stake. This allows for a formal investigation of the role that ‘perception’ plays in determining the nature and direction of campaign effects. As we show in this dissertation, taking voters’ perceptions of campaign messages into consideration proves to be highly useful in understanding the psychology and underlying processes behind campaign effects. Existing opinions towards the issue at stake played an important role in determining voters’ perceptions of campaign messages and eliciting certain affective and emotional responses, such as feeling angry (see Chapter 1) or being at risk (see Chapters 3 and 4), which in turn explained subsequent attitudes and behaviour.

Methodological considerations for studying campaign effects

In this dissertation, we have employed a multi-methodological research design, including two-wave panel surveys, media content analysis and laboratory experiments, in order to appropriately assess not only *if* campaigns have an effect on individual attitudes and behaviours but also *how* such effects operate. Studying campaign effects is a challenging and demanding task. It implies the use of dynamic research designs, which are capable of tapping changes in opinions or attitudes over time and on the individual level.

Based on the current findings, we strongly advocate combining different research methods, including detailed media content analysis and panel surveys into an overall design. Such a design will ultimately be more powerful and more accurate in its potential to assess campaign effects. Panel survey designs enable us to tap changes in attitudes and behavioural intentions over time on the individual level (Lillard, 1989; Markus, 1979) and the combination with media content analysis allowed us to relate observed changes to the actual characteristics of campaign news coverage (see also e.g., Kleinnijenhuis & Fan, 1999; de Vreese & Semetko, 2004). In this way, we were able to show how the tone and the framing of news affected both vote choice (see Chapter 2) as well as voter participation (see Chapter 3).

Furthermore, we validated and further specified the findings derived from our survey analysis in the controlled setting of laboratory experiments, making use of the virtues of randomization and control and allowing for the attribution of causality in the relationship between our variables of interest (Cook & Campbell, 1979; Jackson, 1992). By applying additional experiments, we were able to corroborate our findings regarding the mobilizing effect of positive news framing on referendum opponents (see Chapter 3). We also specified the mechanisms behind the observed effect of tabloid news on referendum support (see Chapter 1) as well as behind the effect of positive news framing on mobilizing referendum opponents (see Chapter 4). With the *combination* of these different research methods in our overall research

design we were able to assess the dynamics of campaigns and the nature and underlying mechanisms of specific campaign effects more adequately and extensively.

Another promising approach to tap campaign effects with greater precision is to combine panel survey designs with rolling cross-sectional designs (Johnston et al., 1992; Johnston et al., 2004). Panel designs can capture individual change at two or more points in time. However, costs are high and the lower the number of panel waves the more difficult it is to relate detected changes to particular events or developments during the campaign. For example, the timing of the field dates has to be decided before the campaign, which implies that important turning points and events that cannot be anticipated *a priori* might be missed, meaning their influence cannot be adequately assessed (see Kenski, 2006).

The rolling cross-sectional design implies the controlled release of daily samples, the 'rolling cross-section' (Brady et al., 2006; Johnston & Brady, 2002). This makes it a more fine-grained approach to study campaign dynamics as compared to panel surveys (Kenski, 2006). Rolling cross-sectional designs show more sensitivity to short-term effects and more flexibility in detecting campaign effects in response to unexpected events or particular developments (e.g., in news media coverage). However, as such designs cannot by themselves capture change on the individual level, they are best combined with panel designs (Brady et al., 2006). In this way, the strength of panel designs, in describing the campaigns' cumulative change on the individual level, can be combined with the obvious advantage of rolling-cross sectional designs, which allows for tapping campaign effects in a much more dynamic and precise fashion (Brady & Johnston, 2006). Such a combination of panel and rolling cross-sectional designs is a powerful approach and allows for a more nuanced look at campaign effects. Thus, this approach is recommended for future studies of campaign effects.

Who is afraid of direct democracy?

Advanced EU integration has become the focus of numerous national referendums, and future EU political decisions are contingent upon referendums. Referendums are believed to increase the legitimacy of political institutions and are seen as an instrument to create a greater sense of political efficacy (Bowler & Donovan, 2002) and to engage citizens (Fishkin, 1995; Mendelsohn & Parkin, 2001). Stimulating citizen participation in political decision-making is seen as an effective way to tackle contemporary problems such as increasing levels of political apathy (Budge, 1996). Some argue that the periodic use of referendums could prevent the rise of anti-democratic movements (Resnick, 1997) and would serve well as a permanent instrument of civic education (Barber, 1984). Others warn that the use of referendums could open doors to populism (Dalton et al., 2001) and foster political intolerance (Sartori, 1987) because of the polarization of political discourse.

Are all referendums thus prone to populism, discrimination and elite influence? And, in light of failing referendums that obstruct the future development of the EU, what to think of direct democracy in this context? As we have stated in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, our outlook

on the result of the Dutch 2005 EU Constitution referendum as well as on the future role of referendums in the EU is largely positive. One might object that our findings show how the campaign sparked certain negative emotions, such as anger and risk perception (see Chapters 1,3 and 4). These, one might continue to object, had an unseemly impact on the vote given the ideal scenario of a campaign serving as a forum for free public deliberation and rational discourse. However, from a normative viewpoint we do not regard it as negative that the campaign has sparked emotions and that these in turn had an effect on voting behaviour. As Tomkins states: “Out of the marriage of reason with emotions there issues clarity with passion. Reason without emotion would be impotent, emotion without reason would be blind” (1962: 112). Our findings suggest that voters have indeed not rejected the Constitution out of blind emotion but that emotions have played a role only in relation to existing attitudes and beliefs and in response to counter-attitudinal campaign messages. Thus, we see good reason to assume that the campaign has in fact contributed to voters arriving at stronger and more informed decisions. Further, we do not regard the role of emotions in determining political attitudes and behaviour as being largely equivalent to irrationality. Reassuringly, our findings suggest that for example risk perception played a role in the mobilization of opponents only for individuals who felt efficacious at the same time (see Chapter 4). With regard to the effect of positive tabloid news on opponents feeling angrier towards the referendum proposal, we also do not regard such effects as negative in a more normative way (see Chapter 1) (see also Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994). Already Aristotle thought of anger as an emotion with some practical value (Aristotle, 350 B.C./1931; see also Kemp & Strongman, 1995; Turner, 2007). He saw anger as useful in preventing perceived injustices and contended that the opposite of anger would be a kind of insensibility. Also other research has shown how anger can lead to more careful information processing (Nabi, 1999) and thus stronger convictions. Thus, in this perspective both anger as well as risk perception are emotions that can in fact have valuable functions in the formation of political attitudes and behaviour. They should not be seen as undermining the idea of campaigns contributing to public deliberation.

With regard to the role of the referendum campaign, our own findings (see Chapters 3 and 4) as well as other studies (Baden & de Vreese, 2008) suggest that citizens have made sense of the referendum issue in complex ways and in light of existing attitudes and opinions. Even though the public official information campaign was regarded as poor, European topics have never been discussed more extensively in the Dutch public than in this campaign (Aarts & van der Kolk, 2006; Schuck & de Vreese, 2008). However, on a more critical note one has to state that the dynamics of a referendum campaign of course also depend on the strategic position of the political parties. These strategies are contingent on the party system at a given point in time and the timing of a referendum within the national election cycle. Referendums can contribute to public deliberation the better the more pro- and contra sides are willing to come up with strong arguments and engage into public debate and do not hide behind strategic considerations.

What about the future role of direct democracy in the EU? We concluded earlier on in this dissertation that it is good news for the EU that it has attracted such a high level of interest and participation among voters during the Dutch 2005 EU Constitution referendum (see Chapter 2). In general, we see our findings in line with other studies that have stressed that the clear-cut classification of all EU referendums as being merely ‘second-order’ elections, in which citizens vote mainly based on domestic considerations rather than on the issue at stake, is becoming less persuasive (Garry et al., 2005; Glencross & Trechsel, 2007; Hobolt, 2005). Public involvement and interest in the Dutch 2005 referendum on the EU constitutional treaty, the intensity of public debate and media coverage as well as turnout all have been high. However, with regard to the current state of the EU this also adds to the seriousness of the problem: whereas it often has been seen as a problem that people would feel indifferent about the EU, with regard to the proposed EU Constitution they proved to actively hold a negative attitude. This has implications for the future of the EU integration project as well as, more theoretically, for the nature of EU elections and referendums. Thus, what should be the future role of EU referendums?

When the referendum on the EU Constitution was first called for in the Netherlands, the initiators anticipated a positive result and thought it would enhance the legitimacy of this European project (see Introduction). Now, after the referendum has failed, one is reminded of the famous cry of the Sorcerer’s Apprentice in Goethe’s poem, who first tried to obtain magic powers and then wishes them away after he is unable to control them: “The spirits that I called for, I now can not get rid of!” Indeed, the referendum might be such a spirit that will stay around from now on and be called for by citizens at future occasions. For example, the fact that Ireland decided to hold a referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon sparked discussions about the (il)legitimacy of not holding referendums in other countries as well. In fact, exposing citizens to direct democratic means might result in an increased demand on the side of citizens for the repeated implementation of such means. As we have shown in this dissertation, news reporting about the signing of the Lisbon Treaty increased support for holding another referendum among opponents. This support stemmed mainly from defensive motives aimed at preventing the treaty from taking effect (see Chapter 1). The fact that opponents in our experiment reacted angrily to news which framed the Treaty in positive terms might also reflect a sentiment of injustice among the public that something that had previously been rejected by popular vote now was decided upon by public officials. This could be read as supporting the claim that referendums function rather well as an instrument to create a greater sense of political efficacy (Bowler & Donovan, 2002) and to get people engaged (Fishkin, 1995; Mendelsohn & Parkin, 2001).

If the EU does not only *want* to be seen as a legitimate political and democratic institution but in fact understands itself this way, then it would be wrong to conclude from an official perspective and in light of recent results that referendums are too great of a risk to take and should be avoided in the future so not to obstruct future political progress. On the contrary, the EU and national governments should be encouraged to keep on ‘daring’ more direct

democracy, even in light of recent negative referendum outcomes for EU development. Much of the alienation between citizens and the EU that now emerged to the surface is a result of such defensive thinking in the first place. It is, for example, frustrating for citizens to hear that often the first consideration among public officials after a negative referendum outcome is to simply repeat the referendum and hope that citizens will vote differently next time. We contend that it would be a step into the wrong direction to abstain from using referendums as a means of direct democracy in the future, despite negative outcomes and resulting short-term inconvenience. On the contrary, the EU might benefit in the long run from staying committed to the practice and might in fact be already now succeeding in achieving greater democratic legitimacy and reducing skepticism more than previously thought. The EU simply cannot wish *not* to engage more with citizens since the long-term negative consequences of such an approach would be too large.

Rather than avoiding the use of referendums in the future, the EU should engage in tackling the reasons why citizens rejected recent proposals. This would be a real effort to overcome the democratic deficit the EU so often has been blamed for (Meyer, 1999; Scharpf, 1997; Schmitter, 2000). In the end, one could conclude that even though recent referendums have formally failed they still have been a success in a more normative way: as an exercise in democracy. Even a failed referendum might fulfil the promise of direct democracy rather well, namely to close the gap between the Union and its citizens, getting them more engaged and ultimately increasing the political legitimacy of the EU. On this note, the failed referendum on the EU Constitution in the Netherlands in 2005 could well be seen as a success and as having served its purpose.

In flux: The future of referendum campaigns

Previous research has stressed the importance of the information environment during election campaigns (e.g., de Vreese & Semetko, 2004; Hobolt, 2005). However, the role of the news media is often just acknowledged (e.g., Borg & Esaiasson, 1998; Denver, 2002; Farrell & Schmitt-Beck, 2002; Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2004; Siune & Svensson, 1993). This dissertation provides a systematic account integrating the actual content of campaign news coverage into an analysis of campaign effects as previous research has called for (e.g., de Vreese, 2004). Referendum campaigns are considered unusually influential since the electoral context differs significantly from national elections and is characterized by a higher degree of electoral volatility (LeDuc, 2002; Magleby, 1989). For example, voters are often unfamiliar with the concrete issue at stake (Franklin, 2002) and elite cues are usually more ambiguous in referendums (Pierce et al., 1983). This attaches greater importance to the campaign and to the news media as the main source of information. For this reason, it is important to understand more about the dynamics of referendum campaigns.

However, our findings suggest that at least with regard to vote choice, media induced campaign effects in EU referendums are less likely to occur as public involvement increases and issue considerations and beliefs become more important to voters. This does not mean that referendum campaigns as such become less influential since the electoral context is still marked

by a higher degree of volatility than in national elections. However, if public involvement in the topic of EU integration remains high, the focus can shift from looking at campaign effects on vote choice to other domains in which the campaign can affect citizens, such as the mobilization of voters. Referendum campaigns might even become more important in the future. We can expect that more effort will be invested in campaigns as public involvement increases and past campaign experiences will lead to more professional campaign organization and more advanced campaign strategies. This implies that the nature of campaigns is changing over time. In turn, this also has consequences for research concerned with campaigns and campaign effects. Future studies will have to anticipate and respond to the changes with regard to how campaigns are conducted. This might call for the application of different methods and the integration of new theoretical concepts into research designs that help to make sense of when and how campaigns can matter.

This dissertation has provided what we regard as potentially promising paths for future research on the effects of political campaigns. It has introduced new ways of looking at campaign effects in referendums and it has come up with initial explanations for the mechanisms and conditions behind specific media induced campaign effects.

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