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

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ENGLISH SUMMARY

Despite the increasing use of referendums to decide on key policy issues and the high popularity of referendums among the public, little is known about the role of the campaign and the news media in affecting political attitudes and/or voting behaviour. Often, the importance of the information environment during a referendum campaign is merely acknowledged but more elaborate links between media content and public opinion or voting behaviour are missing. This dissertation sets out to fill some of the gaps in the existing literature on referendum campaign effects.

Referendum campaigns are considered unusually influential since voters are often unfamiliar with the concrete issue at stake and elite cues are usually more ambiguous in referendums. This attaches greater importance to the campaign and to the news media as the main source of information. 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 voting behaviour and direct democracy.

Advanced European (EU) integration has been the focus of numerous national referendums in the past and future EU political decisions are contingent upon referendums. In this dissertation, we investigate campaign effects in the context of the Dutch EU Constitution referendum. In June 2005, the Dutch electorate rejected the EU constitutional treaty in what was the first national referendum in the Netherlands in recent history. The vast majority of the Dutch political elite, the governing coalition parties as well as the major opposition party and all major news media endorsed the proposal. However, 62% of citizens voted “Nee” (No), which effectively marked the end of the ratification process.

This dissertation takes the contents, uses and effects of information in referendum campaigns as a focal point. We investigate the role of the news media in affecting different attitudes and behaviours over the course of the campaign. More in particular, we focus on three different spheres in which the campaign matters: first, by analyzing how campaign news coverage can influence public support for referendums as a means of direct democracy; second, by investigating the potential of the campaign to affect vote choice in a referendum; and third, by assessing how news coverage can mobilize certain parts of the electorate to turn out and vote in a referendum. In order to do so, the overall research design of this dissertation combines a media content analysis of campaign news coverage, two-wave panel surveys and laboratory experiments.

In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, we turn to one of the most central questions, namely, *who* supports referendums as a means of direct democracy? Our findings show that those who felt more politically disaffected especially embraced the referendum opportunity as an alternative means of political expression. Furthermore, we show 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.

In Chapter 2, we focus on vote choice and suggest 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 introduce 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 suggest that being confronted with news promoting a positive outcome was *perceived* as negative by referendum opponents and motivated them to turn out and vote in order to avoid an unwanted scenario.

In Chapter 4, we formally assess the underlying mechanisms behind the reversed mobilization dynamic. Our findings show that opponents of a referendum proposal indeed perceived positive news as negative from their own point of view and felt more at risk with regard to the assumed consequences of the proposal. This, 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.

Overall, 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. It has introduced new ways of looking at campaign effects in referendums and has come up with initial explanations for the underlying mechanisms behind specific media induced campaign effects.