

Primed by the Euro: The Impact of a Referendum Campaign on Public Opinion and Evaluations of Government and Political Leaders

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The premise of political priming is that public evaluations of political leaders are made on the basis of issues that are on the top of citizens' minds. This study investigated the impact of a national referendum campaign about a European integration issue on the evaluation of the incumbent government, the prime minister, and the opposition leaders. Drawing on a content analysis of news media and a two-wave panel survey, the results showed that as the topic of the referendum (the introduction of the euro) became more visible in the media during the campaign the importance of the euro issue for formulating general evaluations of political leaders increased. The incumbent government that was seen to handle the referendum poorly was penalized by the referendum. Exposure to news media outlets that covered the referendum extensively and offered negative evaluations of political leaders boosted the decline in the overall performance rating of political leaders by politically less involved respondents. These results stress the necessity of considering the campaign and the specific content of the media to understand fluctuations in public opinion during a referendum campaign. The study concludes with a discussion of the implications of a referendum campaign for political leaders.

Introduction

Priming theory posits that public evaluations of political leaders are made on the basis of how leaders perform on issues that are on the top of citizens' minds when they are formulating their evaluation. The process of priming is well known from research in cognitive psychology (Fiske & Taylor 1991): new information renders something – an issue or a trait – applicable for use in subsequent evaluations. In politics, 'priming' refers to the 'ability of new information to alter the standards by which the public evaluates political leaders' (Krosnick & Kinder 1990). The evaluation of political leaders may in turn influence electoral preferences and thereby affect election outcomes.

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The information provided by the media, in particular the news media, is a key source of information and cues for citizens. News media highlight issues that enable citizens, when making judgments and evaluations, to ‘satisfize’ rather than ‘optimize’. That is to say, citizens rely on information that is most easily brought to mind (Krosnick et al. 1996). This information is largely dependent on media content.

Iyengar and Kinder’s (1987) experimental studies effectively introduced priming in the realm of political communications. They concluded that news media, in particular television, by calling attention to some matters while simultaneously ignoring others, influenced the standards by which the US president is judged. In the same vein, one study showed that when the US news media was covering the 1991 Gulf War, US President Bush Sr’s performance was evaluated on his warfare abilities. Less than a year later, the news was focused on the state of the American economy and Bush was evaluated on his economic performance (Jasperson et al. 1998).

The majority of extant priming research stems from studies of key historical events: the Iran Contra affair (Krosnick & Kinder 1990), the 1991 Gulf War (Iyengar & Simon 1993; Krosnick & Brannon 1993), and the later bombings of Iraq (Edwards & Swenson 1997). There is some evidence of the priming phenomenon in the context of general elections in Canada (Mendelsohn 1996; Gidengil et al. 2002). However, the process of priming has not yet been investigated in the context of a referendum campaign. Referendums (binding and non-binding) are called by governments and local political authorities to gain support for specific policy issues. Referendums may be called for constitutional/judicial reasons or to resolve political disagreement (Butler & Ranney 1994). In referendums, governments rely on voters to endorse policies put to the test in a plebiscite. This is a particular and important context for advancing our understanding of priming. Given that priming theory suggests that political leaders are evaluated on the basis of readily accessible information, a referendum campaign potentially has significant political implications. In a referendum, a key issue is defined in advance. The question is how much significance is given to that issue and whether it affects the overall assessment of political leaders. In other words, do political leaders gain or lose from a referendum campaign? The first goal of this study is to investigate priming in the context of a national referendum.

The study investigates priming in the context of the national referendum in Denmark in September 2000 on the introduction of the euro.¹ Most of the political elites, including most parties in Parliament, representing over 80 percent of the electorate, as well as the incumbent Social-Democratic-led government and all the major newspapers were on the YES side. There were two visible anti-euro parties, however, and they benefited from the fact that

public opinion was almost equally divided on this issue from the time the campaign officially began in March 2000. On 28 September 2000, after a very close race with a high turnout (87.5 percent), a majority (53 percent) voted NO. Denmark thus remains outside the euro zone.

Of Presidents and Prime Ministers

Most evidence of priming comes from the United States in the form of fluctuations in presidential evaluations. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) propose priming to be a general phenomenon, but it is in fact an empirical question whether this assumption is correct. Studies of voting behaviour and turnout, for example, have suggested that different political systems (e.g. two-party vs. multi-party) and political culture affect political behaviour and communication (e.g. van der Eijk & Franklin 1996; Semetko 1996). Most European countries have a multi-party system. This implies a fundamentally different field of political competition. Although the prime minister is an important political actor, the importance is negligible in comparison with the significance of the presidency in the US. Therefore, the question is whether prime ministers and other political leaders in a heterogeneous political field can be 'primed' in a fashion similar to what studies in the North American context have suggested.

Existing research tells us nothing about priming effects that might emerge under the conditions of the multi-party parliamentary systems in European democracies, where coalition governments are the norm. Even though attention in the news is focused heavily on the prime minister in these European multi-party systems, it is also often spread across a number of other party leaders and political actors. The current study explores priming effects in a multi-party context for several political actors.

The Importance of the Campaign

Priming theory posits that citizens express evaluations based on newly acquired and readily accessible information. Citizens, in other words, are primed to use information about *specific* issues in *general* evaluations. The vast majority of citizens get their information about politics via the media (Bennett & Entman 2001). Television and newspapers are consistently identified by Europeans as their most important sources of information (Eurobarometer 51–58). In Canada, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark, respondents named television as the most important source of information during previous referendum campaigns (Jenssen et al. 1998; Clarke et al. 2000). Therefore, the news media are potentially very important

for providing cues about the information used by citizens in subsequent evaluations.

In previous studies of referendums, only limited attention has been devoted to the role of the campaign. The campaign is discussed either in terms of a bivariate relationship, such as between media exposure and vote intention (Borg & Esaiasson 1998), or in general, descriptive terms (Siune & Svensson 1993). In these studies, campaign and information variables have not been fully integrated into a model of campaign effects.

This may seem surprising given, on the one hand, that many referendum campaigns are characterized by a high degree of volatility (LeDuc 2002) and, on the other hand, that the media have been found to be independent actors that set their own agenda and put their own spin and definition on the referendum issue (Siune & Svensson 1993; Jensen et al. 1998). Although some evidence is available on the importance of the media during a referendum campaign, none of the referendum studies in Europe or Canada has distinguished the differential effects that may emerge from exposure to specific contents in different media outlets.

To study media coverage of a referendum campaign is therefore important. Does the topic of the referendum appear on the news agenda so that citizens can make use of their associations with the referendum issue to formulate general evaluations? Pan and Kosicki (1997) found that the stronger that themes were in predicting the overall assessment of the US president, the stronger they turned out to have been in the media. This suggests a 'hydraulic' character of media priming in which certain issues dominate and minimize the importance of other issues. To study priming in the context of a referendum it is therefore important to assess the *visibility* of the referendum topic on the news agenda.

However, news media do not merely bring certain issues to the public attention. They also offer *evaluations* of issues and persons. These may in turn affect evaluations of political leaders. McCombs et al. (2002), for example, showed that evaluations of political leaders in the news affect public perceptions of these leaders, and Herr (2002) showed that candidate evaluations in the news may even affect vote choice. Given that we know that news, generally speaking, is either neutral or negative (Kepplinger 1998; 2002), we may hypothesize that strongly negative news about an issue that is also highly visible in the news would bolster negative evaluations of political leaders. Conversely, exposure to neutral or less negative news should mute negative evaluations of political leaders. Previous priming research has not been able to assess the evaluation of leaders in the news in order to take this into account in understanding the public evaluation of political leaders. This study not only addresses the visibility of a topic in the news, but also assesses the tone of evaluations of political leaders in order to better understand the dynamic of public evaluations of political leaders as a function of exposure to specific news content.

The Moderating Role of Political Involvement

The levels of political expertise among the public may influence the ways in which people take up and make use of information (Converse 1962; 1964; Luskin 1987). Extant priming research offers mixed evidence about the contingent nature of priming. The inconsistency with respect to the potentially moderating role of political sophistication, knowledge, expertise, and interest (terms that previous research has used interchangeably) can be organized in terms of two dominant perspectives. Krosnick and Kinder (1990) found politically knowledgeable persons to be *less* susceptible to priming. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) found no systematic differences between political 'experts' and 'novices' in the magnitude of priming. Krosnick and Brannon (1993) found that political expertise facilitates priming effects; this argument was elaborated by Miller and Krosnick (2000), who found the strongest priming effects among politically knowledgeable participants.

Like the mixed evidence on the moderating effect of political sophistication and knowledge, the existing literature is inconsistent with respect to whether political involvement enhances or limits the priming process. The dominant perspective suggests that greater priming effects are associated with lower levels of interest (e.g. Krosnick & Brannon 1993). This observation finds resonance in the work of Lodge et al. (1989) and studies that suggest that priming manipulations may have the greatest impact when they occur without people paying much attention to them (Lombardi et al. 1987). Citizens who are inattentive to politics are less likely to have evaluations of political leaders readily available. Consequently, such citizens are more likely to draw on recently acquired information to formulate evaluations and they are more likely to consider only few, recently accentuated, domains when expressing an evaluation. Such information is provided by news media.

In referendum studies, political involvement and political interest have been discussed in the context of turnout and electoral mobilization. Previous studies have suggested that those more interested in the topic of the referendum are more likely to support the proposal (Siune et al. 1994). Interest and knowledge, although acknowledged by most of the referendum studies as leading one to be more likely to vote and more likely to pay attention and learn over the course of the campaign, often have not been integrated into the models of referendum voting, with rare exceptions (Johnston et al. 1996; Jenssen et al. 1998; Buch & Hansen 2002). However, these studies look at turnout and vote choice as the dependent variable and say little about the evaluation of political leaders. The current study investigates priming with political involvement as the moderating variable so as to address the potentially differential effects between citizens who are highly or little involved.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

This study investigates priming in the context of a referendum campaign in a multi-party political context with evaluations of the government and key political leaders as the dependent variables. The study investigates the importance of specific issues for the overall evaluation and additionally assesses the role of news media in providing evaluative comments that may impact assessments of the incumbent government and political leaders. Finally, the moderating role of political involvement for enhancing or diminishing campaign effects is investigated.

A referendum campaign is likely to generate media attention that, particularly in close races (LeDuc 2002), will grow exponentially as election day approaches. The first hypothesis therefore proposes that the topic of the referendum will increase on the news agenda during the campaign.

Hypothesis 1. During a close-race referendum campaign, the topic of the referendum will increase in importance on the news agenda.

Dependent on the importance of the topic of the referendum, general priming theory posits that the evaluation of how this specific issue is handled will affect the overall assessment of political leaders. This study extends previous research to the context of a referendum in a multi-party system where the incumbent prime minister and government are potentially primed by the issue of the referendum.

Hypothesis 2. The general public assessment of the government and prime minister is contingent on how they are perceived to handle the topic of the referendum.

Finally, this study addresses the specific contribution of the campaign to the overall evaluation of political leaders. More specifically, it is hypothesized that the overall evaluation of political leaders is contingent upon the visibility of the referendum issue in the media and the evaluative tone towards political leaders in the media in connection with the referendum issue. Based on existing research, it is cautiously hypothesized that exposure to news coverage evaluating political leaders negatively will lead to negative public evaluations and that this effect is likely to be largest among the least politically involved (Krosnick & Brannon 1993).

Hypothesis 3. Exposure to negative news reporting about the topic of the referendum affects the general assessment of political leaders, in particular by less politically involved citizens.

Data and Method

To investigate the priming process during a referendum campaign (the Danish 2000 euro referendum), two data sources were used. First, a content analysis of the news coverage during the referendum campaign, investigating

the visibility of the referendum in the news as well as the visibility and evaluation of key political actors in the news. Second, a two-wave panel survey, including a pre- and post-election wave, with a representative sample of the Danish electorate. The surveys were fielded in the final days of August 2000, one month before the referendum, and again immediately after the referendum (29 September to 5 October). The response rate was 77 percent in wave I and 79 percent in wave II, with a net sample of 962 respondents participating in both waves.²

Content Analysis

To get an idea of the visibility of the euro referendum in the media, a content analysis of television news from the outset of the campaign (March 2000) to the end of the campaign (September 2000) was carried out. A total of 4,953 news stories were coded from the two most widely watched evening news programmes (*DR TV-Avisen* [9 p.m.] and *TV2 Nyhederne* [7 p.m.]). A more detailed content analysis including five dailies (*Politiken*, *JyllandsPosten*, *Berlingske Tidende*, *BT*, and *EkstraBladet*) and the two most widely watched evening news programmes (*TV-Avisen* and *TV2 Nyhederne*) was carried out in the month before the referendum (28 August to 27 September). The sample of news outlets covers the most important sources of political information and includes broadsheet and tabloid newspapers as well as public service and private broadcast news programmes.

The content analysis was completed by three native Danish speakers (MA students at the University of Amsterdam). Coders were trained and supervised frequently and the inter-coder reliability test conducted on a randomly selected sample of 23 news stories showed 95 percent inter-coder agreement for the measures relevant to this study. We use indicators of the *visibility of the euro referendum* in the news³ and the *evaluative tone of the news*. The latter was derived from a measure of the evaluation of political actors in each news story. A news story may portray an actor either neutrally (no evaluations), favourably, mixed, or unfavourably. For each actor the visibility and average tone were assessed by summing the number of negative evaluations minus the number of positive evaluations divided by the total number of evaluations.

Panel Survey

The *dependent variables* were general evaluation of the government, the prime minister, and key political actors at the end of the campaign. The overall government performance was measured on a five-point scale.⁴ The evaluation of key political actors was measured using ten-point sympathy scales for each of the political actors.⁵

The predictor variables included issue-specific government evaluations, ideology, and exposure to news about the referendum. The *issue-specific evaluations* of topics such as the euro, unemployment, health care, and food safety were measured on five-point scales. *Ideology* was tapped by a scaled measure of left–right placement.⁶ *Exposure to the campaign* was measured by four variables of news media exposure. Each variable indicates, on a scale from 0–7 days per week, the exposure to specific media outlets: public television news, commercial network news, YES press, and NO press. By utilizing the content analysis the study is able to link the news exposure measures with precise information about the news content to which each respondent was actually exposed. Political involvement was measured by a four-point item tapping political interest. This variable was recoded into a categorical variable of ‘low political involvement’ and ‘high political involvement’.

As control variables, we included a series of *social and demographic characteristics*: gender (female), age (in years), and education (number of years in school). The model also includes the lagged term for the evaluation of the government and the political actors in wave I (see Markus [1979] for discussion of the use of lagged specifications in panel data). This makes it possible to control for initial evaluations and to examine *change* over the course of the campaign. The specific wording of all items can be found in the Appendix.

The *change* in evaluation of the incumbent government and key political leaders during the campaign is investigated at both the aggregate and the individual level. The aggregate-level change is assessed by comparing the overall evaluations in waves I and II. To investigate change at the individual level, ordinary least square (OLS) regression models were specified.

Results

Aggregate-Level Changes in Public Evaluations

Table 1 shows that the overall government performance decreased significantly during the campaign (from $m = 3.3$ to $m = 3.0$). The largest aggregate-level change in the evaluation of government performance on a specific issue was in the evaluation of how the government handled the euro referendum. This decreased significantly (from $m = 2.8$ to $m = 2.1$). The performance rating on all other issues remained stable or increased slightly, such as in the cases of health care and crime.

Table 2 shows that the evaluation of the political leaders changed significantly during the campaign. The evaluation of political leaders endorsing a YES to the euro in the campaign fell, ranging from a 0.5 drop for the Prime

Table 1. Change in Overall and Issue-Specific Government Performance Rating during the Campaign

	Wave I	Wave II	Change during the campaign
Overall government performance rating ($n = 912$)	3.3 _a	3.0 _b	-0.3
<i>Issue-specific government rating</i>			
Euro ($n = 878$)	2.8 _a	2.1 _b	-0.7
Immigration ($n = 908$)	2.3 _a	2.4 _b	+0.1
Health care ($n = 915$)	2.4 _a	2.7 _b	+0.3
Environment ($n = 894$)	3.5 _a	3.6 _b	+0.1
Social issues ($n = 908$)	2.8 _a	2.9 _a	+0.1
Food safety ($n = 882$)	3.2 _a	3.2 _a	-
Crime ($n = 908$)	2.2 _a	2.5 _b	+0.3
Elderly ($n = 882$)	2.4 _a	2.5 _b	+0.1
Unemployment ($n = 884$)	3.2 _a	3.2 _a	-

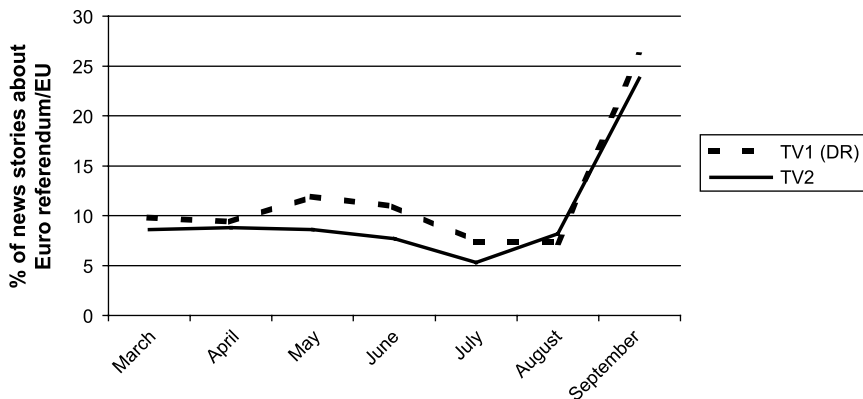
Note: Performance is evaluated on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (very bad) to 5 (very good). Row values with different subscripts differ significantly from each other at $p < 0.01$. Aggregate data weighted on social-demographic characteristics.

Table 2. Change in Evaluation of Political Leaders during the Campaign

YES (Y) or NO (N)	Government (G) or opposition (O)	Title	Name	Wave I	Wave II	Change during the campaign
Y	G	Prime Minister	Poul Nyrup Rasmussen	5.2 _a	4.7 _b	-0.5
Y	G	Finance Minister	Marianne Jelved	4.8 _a	4.6 _b	-0.2
Y	O	Leader, Liberals	Anders Fogh Rasmussen	6.2 _a	6.4 _b	+0.2
Y	O	Leader, Conservatives	Bendtson	6.1 _a	6.0 _a	-0.1
N	O	Leader, Socialists	Holger K. Nielsen	5.8 _a	5.5 _b	-0.3
N	O	Leader, People's Party	Pia Kjaersgaard	3.8 _a	4.0 _b	+0.2
N	O	Leader Christian Party	Jann Sjursen	5.5 _a	5.5 _a	-
N	NA	Leader, June Movement	Drude Dahlerup	4.6 _a	4.7 _b	+0.1
N	NA	Leader, People's Movement	Ole Krarup	4.3 _a	4.4 _b	+0.1

Note: Performance is evaluated on a ten-point scale ranging from 1 (very unsympathetic) to 10 (very sympathetic). Row values with different subscripts differ significantly from each other at $p < 0.05$. NA (not applicable): the 'June Movement' and 'People's Movement' are not represented in the national Parliament and campaign only on European issues. Aggregate data weighted on social-demographic characteristics.

Figure 1. Visibility of Referendum Campaign in Television News, March–September 2000.



Note: Percentage of news stories about referendum on *TV1 DR* 9 o'clock news and *TV2* 7 o'clock news. A total of $n = 4,953$ stories are analysed (*TV1*, $n = 2,578$; *TV2*, $n = 2,375$).

Minister (Poul Nyrup Rasmussen) and a 0.2 drop for the Finance Minister (Marianne Jelved) to a 0.1 drop for the leader of the Conservative Party (Bendt Bendtsen). The evaluation of the Liberal Party leader (Anders Fogh Rasmussen) was the exception to this pattern: his rating increased by 0.2 during the campaign. The evaluation of leaders endorsing a NO increased slightly during the campaign (ranging from a 0.1 increase for the leaders of the popular movements against European Union [EU] integration to a 0.2 increase for the leader of the Danish People's Party, Pia Kjaersgaard). The exception to this pattern was the evaluation of the leader of the Socialist People's Party (Holger K. Nielsen), whose sympathy rating dropped during the campaign.

Visibility and Tone of the Euro Issue in the Media during the Campaign

Turning to the content of the news media coverage of the referendum campaign, Figure 1 shows that the campaign accounted for about 7–10 percent of the main evening news during the first five months of the campaign, from March to August 2000. The visibility of the referendum campaign increased dramatically in the final month of the campaign and constituted about 25 percent of all news in September 2000.

The analysis of the visibility and evaluation of the most important political candidates and actors in the news during the final month of the campaign showed that all actors received either neutral or negative coverage (Table 3). On a scale ranging from -1 to $+1$, most actors received a balanced mixture

Table 3. Visibility and Evaluation of Key Actors in the Campaign

		TV1 (<i>n</i> = 76)		TV2 (<i>n</i> = 79)		Newspapers (<i>n</i> = 79)	
		Number of mentions	Mean evaluation	Number of mentions	Mean evaluation	Number of mentions	Mean evaluation
<i>YES actors</i>							
Government						7	-0.43
Prime Minister	Poul Nyrup Rasmussen	17	-0.18	19	-0.26	27	-0.44
Other members of the Social Democrats		27	-0.11	15	-0.20	21	-0.29
Finance Minister	Marianne Jelved	3	0.00	8	-0.25	13	-0.23
Leader of the Liberal Party	Anders F. Rasmussen	6	0.00	4	0.00	7	0.00
Other members of the Liberal Party		5	0.00	1	0.00	6	0.00
Leader of the Conservatives	Bendt Bendtsen	3	0.00	1	0.00	4	0.00
Other members of the Conservatives		1	0.00	5	0.00	7	0.00
<i>NO actors</i>							
Leader of the Socialist Party	Holger K. Nielsen	10	-0.10	17	-0.18	18	-0.16
Other members of the Socialists People's Party		0	-	5	-0.20	7	-0.14
Leader of the People's Party	Pia Kjaersgaard	6	0.00	8	-0.13	4	-0.25
Other members of the People's Party		5	-0.20	7	0.00	7	-0.14

Note: Mean evaluation of the actors is based on a scale ranging from -1.00 (consistently negative), through 0 (neutral), to +1.00 (consistently positive). An actor in a news story is defined as a person/institution in the story which is mentioned at least twice (newspapers) or mentioned and seen at least once (television). *n* = number of stories.

of positive and negative evaluations (resulting in a mean around zero) or a slightly negative overall evaluation (ranging from -0.10 to -0.30). The government as an entity, the two key actors representing the government – Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen and Finance Minister Marianne Jelved – and other members of their political parties all received negative coverage in every media outlet. The most negative coverage of these actors appeared in the press and on TV2 news, while the least unfavourable (albeit still negative) evaluations appeared on TV1.

Other members of the YES bloc, such as Anders Fogh Rasmussen (Liberal) and Bendt Bendtsen (Conservative), were less visible in the news and received, on average, neutral coverage in all outlets. Members of the NO camp were less visible than government actors. NO camp actors received modestly negative news coverage, but this was significantly less negative than the coverage of the YES camp actors. For example, on TV2 Prime Minister Nyrup Rasmussen received a mean evaluation of $m = -0.26$ and Pia Kjaersgaard, leader of the Danish People's Party and the most visible NO camp campaigner, received a mean evaluation of $m = -0.13$.

Effects of the Referendum Campaign and News Media Coverage on the Evaluation of Government and Political Leaders

Turning to the individual level, Table 4 shows that the change in overall government performance rating was largely driven by the negative change in the evaluation of the handling of the euro issue. This finding is significant when controlling for the government performance rating earlier in the campaign and thereby including other predispositions driving government performance rating.⁷ For the low-involvement group, exposure to news on TV1 was a significant positive predictor for overall government performance. Table 3 shows that the government, including the Prime Minister and other members of the Social Democrats and its coalition partner, received either neutral coverage or negative evaluations on TV1. However, these evaluations were consistently less negative than the evaluations the same actors received on the news on TV2.

Turning to the change in evaluation of the Prime Minister (YES camp), the Finance Minister (YES camp), the YES camp actor Anders Fogh Rasmussen (Opposition), and the central NO camp actor, Pia Kjaersgaard, the results showed that the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister experienced the most dramatic drop in evaluation during the period of the referendum campaign. Table 5 shows that the evaluation of the handling of the euro, with the exception of the lagged term for evaluation of the actors at time 1, was the strongest negative predictor of the evaluation of the political leaders. This pattern is consistent for both highly and little politically involved respondents.

Table 4. Change in Government Evaluation

	Government evaluation Low political involvement		Government evaluation High political involvement	
	Standardized beta	Standard error	Standardized beta	Standard error
<i>Issue-specific evaluations</i>				
Evaluation, euro	-0.25***	0.04	-0.17***	0.04
Evaluation, immigration	-0.11	0.04	-0.11*	0.05
Evaluation, health	-0.01	0.05	-0.01	0.05
Evaluation, social issues	-0.03	0.06	-0.13*	0.06
Evaluation, environment	-0.02	0.06	-0.03	0.06
Evaluation, food safety	-0.01	0.06	-0.13*	0.06
Evaluation, crime	-0.01	0.05	-0.08	0.06
Evaluation, unemployment	-0.09*	0.05	-0.05	0.05
<i>Campaign variables</i>				
Exposure, TV1	0.09*	0.02	0.06	0.02
Exposure, TV2	-0.00	0.02	-0.03	0.02
Exposure, YES press	-0.04	0.00	0.02	0.00
Exposure, NO press	-0.01	0.00	0.02	0.00
<i>Control variables</i>				
	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Left ideology	0.03	0.09	0.02	0.09
Right ideology	-0.05	0.09	-0.12**	0.09
Government evaluation (time 1)	0.37***	0.05	0.44***	0.05
R^2		0.61		0.64
n		429		326

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Note: Control variables gender, age, and education are omitted from the table for presentational reasons. All variables were non-significant. R^2 , explained variance. n.s., not significant.

The effects of exposure to different news media during the campaign were stronger on the low-involvement group, which supports Hypothesis 3. For the low-involvement group, the evaluation of the Prime Minister was positively affected by exposure to the YES press. The evaluation of the Finance Minister was negatively affected by exposure to TV2 and positively affected by exposure to the YES press. The evaluation of the NO camp leader Pia Kjaersgaard was positively affected by exposure to TV2 and the NO press whereas exposure to the YES press contributed negatively to the evaluation. The evaluation of the leader of the Liberal Party was negatively affected by exposure to TV1.

Discussion

This study investigated the dynamics of a referendum campaign and the ramifications for public evaluation of political leaders. The priming hypothesis

Table 5. Change in Evaluation of Political Actors (by People with High and Low Political Involvement)

	Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen		Finance Minister Marianne Jelved		Opposition leader Pia Kjaersgaard		Opposition leader Anders Fogh Rasmussen	
	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High
<i>Issue-specific evaluations</i>								
Evaluation, euro	-0.21*** (0.11)	-0.14** (0.11)	-0.14*** (0.11)	-0.12** (0.11)				
Evaluation, immigration			-0.14*** (0.11)					
Evaluation, health								
Evaluation, social issues								
Evaluation, environment								
Evaluation, food safety								
Evaluation, crime								
Evaluation, unemployment			-0.14** (0.12)					
<i>Campaign variables</i>								
Exposure, TV1							-0.08* (0.04)	
Exposure, TV2			-0.10** (0.05)		0.08* (0.05)			
Exposure, YES press	0.06* (0.01)		0.08* (0.00)	0.13** (0.01)	-0.09* (0.01)			
Exposure, NO press					0.13** (0.01)			-0.08* (0.01)
<i>Control variables</i>								
Evaluation, actor (time 1)	n.s. 0.48*** (0.04)	n.s. 0.52*** (0.04)	n.s. 0.54*** (0.04)	n.s. 0.54*** (0.05)	n.s. 0.51*** (0.04)	n.s. 0.59*** (0.05)	n.s. 0.56*** (0.04)	n.s. 0.67*** (0.04)
R^2	0.54	0.55	0.52	0.56	0.43	0.44	0.39	0.55
n	430	323	430	324	430	321	428	322

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Note: For presentational reasons only coefficients above $p < 0.05$ are reported. None of the control variables (gender, age, education, and ideology) is significant; thus they are omitted from the table for presentational reasons. Entries in parentheses are standard errors.

– stating that public evaluations of political leaders are made on the basis of issues that are on the top of citizens’ minds – was tested in the context of a national referendum on an issue of European integration. The study extended previous research to a European, multi-party context and investigated the impact of a referendum on public evaluations of the incumbent government, the Prime Minister, and leading opposition leaders. Previous research had demonstrated the priming process in the North American political context with evaluations of the US President as the key variable under study (e.g. Krosnick & Kinder 1990). The current study confirms the basic hypothesis of political priming theory by showing that the overall evaluation of political leaders was strongly dependent upon an issue that was highly salient, readily available, and on the top of citizens’ minds.

Drawing on a content analysis of news media, the study showed that the topic of the referendum (the introduction of the euro) became more visible in the media during the campaign. Utilizing panel data, it was found that as the importance of the euro issue increased in the media its importance for citizens when formulating general evaluations of political leaders increased as well. The incumbent government was viewed by the public as handling the referendum issue poorly. Subsequently, the government, including its most prominent figures and key campaigners – the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister – was evaluated on the basis of their performance on the referendum issue. These findings dovetail with extant priming research and confirm an assumption in previous studies, namely that the phenomenon applies to political leaders more generally. In addition the findings suggest that not only contentious issues such as the Gulf War(s) but also the subjects of national referendums can drive general evaluations of political leaders.

Previous research has not been able to assess the effects of *evaluations* of issues and individuals in the news media. Other research has shown that evaluations of political leaders affect public perceptions of these leaders (e.g. McCombs et al. 2002). In this study we found support for our hypothesis that strongly negative news about an issue that was also highly visible in the news bolstered negative evaluations of political leaders. Based on existing research (Krosnick & Brannon 1993), we hypothesized that politically less involved citizens exposed to news evaluating political leaders negatively would fuel negative public evaluations. The results supported this and showed the strongest media effects during the campaign to be among the least politically involved.

Taken together, the results stress the necessity of, on the one hand, testing what is assumed to be a generally applicable process in settings other than the US political context and, on the other hand, considering the campaign and the specific content of the media to understand fluctuations in public opinion during a referendum campaign. The importance of the campaign in referendums is stressed in general terms (e.g. LeDuc 2002) or at the

descriptive level (e.g. Siune & Svensson 1993). However, this study points to the importance of systematically analysing media content and formally modelling the exposure to different media outlets in order to advance our understanding of a referendum campaign.

Why do the dynamics of a campaign with reference to the evaluation of (incumbent) political leaders matter? Previous studies of voting behaviour in national referendums suggest that a popular government can win the vote whereas an unpopular government is more likely to lose.⁸ The current study suggests that a (moderately) popular government can easily take a fall during a referendum campaign. This may be bad news for the incumbents beyond looking unfavourable in public opinion: the overall performance rating may even affect the outcome of the referendum. Indeed, as suggested by studies of previous referendums (Franklin et al. 1994; 1995), the (un)popularity of the government (and the decrease in performance rating during the campaign) was a significant predictor of voting NO in the Danish 2000 euro referendum (de Vreese & Semetko in press).⁹ In addition, to understand this referendum outcome the particular Danish situation with respect to the EU must be considered. Over the past three decades changing governments of different ideological composition have been challenged to face a considerable lack of trust in the EU sphere among the Danish electorate (for a descriptive account, see Buch and Hansen [2002]). The vote on the euro, one of the current Danish reservations about EU cooperation, must be viewed in the light of this historical scepticism.

In a broader perspective, this study highlights the importance of national referendums for domestic politics. As referendums become increasingly popular in use (see Butler & Ranney 1994), in particular in the case of European integration (Hug & Sciarni 2000), understanding public opinion dynamics will take centre-stage. In a referendum Sweden turned down the third phase of the European Monetary Union (including the euro). Britain is still to hold a national referendum on the introduction of the single currency. In 2003, nine of the ten accession countries scheduled to enter the EU in 2004 held national referendums to endorse the country's EU membership application. In the past, France, Ireland, Britain, Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Denmark have on more than one occasion held national referendums to deal with European Economic Community (EEC)/EU membership and to ratify key treaties, and several countries have planned referendums to ratify the future constitution of the EU.

This study has effectively demonstrated that incumbent governments face significant challenges when campaigning in a referendum. Lessons can be learned from the Danish example in 2000. The YES camp consisted, as is often the case, of centrist, centre-left, and centre-right political parties. Although these parties share little common ground in most domestic political matters, they present a unified YES camp. This study suggests that the

performance rating of these parties must be favourable at the outset of the campaign and that YES camp internal fighting must be avoided in order to ensure reasonable ratings on the handling of the referendum issue. If incumbents and their partners in campaign are seen to mismanage the issue of the referendum, they are likely to be primed by the public and to pay a considerable domestic political price.

Appendix. Description of Variables in Tables 4 and 5

Dependent Variables

Government approval rating. A scale from 1 to 5 where 1 equals 'very good', 3 'neither good nor bad', and 5 'very bad'.

Political leader evaluation. A scale from 1 to 10 where 1 equals 'very unsympathetic', 5 'neither nor', and 10 'very sympathetic'.

Independent Variables

Gender. Female = 1; male 0.

Age. In years.

Education. <16 years: primary school and high school = 1; otherwise = 0.

Education long. >19 years: university degree = 1; otherwise = 0.

Issue-specific evaluation. Evaluation of topics such as the euro, unemployment, health care, and food safety on five-point scales ranging from 'very well' to 'very bad'.

Political involvement. A four-point scale ranging from 1 to 4 where 1 equals 'not at all interested in politics' and 4 'very interested'.

Ideology. Left political leaning: self-placement on a left-right scale, where 1 equals 'left' and 10 'right', between 1 and 3 = 1; otherwise = 0. Right political leaning: self-placement between 7 and 10 = 1; otherwise = 0.

Exposure to public television news. Watching TV1 news (0-7 days per week).

Exposure to private television news. Watching TV2 news (0-7 days per week).

Exposure to NO press. Reading *Ekstra Bladet* (0-7 days per week).

Exposure to YES press. Index of reading one or more YES press newspapers daily (YES papers are: *Politiken*, *Berlingske Tidende*, *JyllandsPosten*, and *BT*, range 0-28).

NOTES

1. The referendum was officially on Denmark's entry to the third phase of the European Monetary Union (EMU). The key element in the third phase is the fixing of the exchange rates between national currencies and the introduction of euro coins and notes. The referendum was popularly referred to as the 'euro referendum', which is also the term used in this paper.
2. Response rates of this magnitude are not unusual for survey research in Scandinavia, where actual turnout is also comparatively high (Granberg & Holmberg 1991). The questionnaire was a postal self-administered paper-and-pencil questionnaire.

3. The selection criterion for inclusion in the analysis was defined as 'All stories that mention the euro, the campaign, or the referendum'.
4. The scale ranged from 1 to 5 where 1 equals 'very good', 3 'neither good nor bad', and 5 'very bad'.
5. The scale ranged from 1 to 10 where 1 equals 'very unsympathetic', 5 'neither nor', and 10 'very sympathetic'.
6. Respondents with a left political leaning are classified as those who placed themselves between 1 and 3 on the scale; those with a right political leaning are classified as those who placed themselves between 7 and 10. The effective reference category includes those in the political centre.
7. In addition, the evaluation of the handling of unemployment was a significant negative predictor for overall performance evaluation by the low-involvement group. For the high-involvement group, the evaluations of the handling of immigration and social issues were negative predictors for the overall performance evaluation.
8. The terms 'government support' and 'assessments of government performance' are often used interchangeably with little consistency in terms of operationalization and question wording. Nonetheless, all empirical evidence on the importance of government support and/or performance for referendum outcomes seems to point in the same direction. Franklin and colleagues (1994; 1995) put the government performance hypothesis in the form of a probabilistic tendency. The proposition is that 'While a popular government might expect to see its referendum proposals approved, an unpopular government will often see its proposals turned down' (Franklin et al. 1994, 106). In a later article, this thesis was modified to apply in particular to referendums on issues that are of low salience to the electorate (Franklin 2002).
9. In an investigation of vote choice, coexisting hypotheses of voting behaviour in referendums were tested (de Vreese & Semetko in press). We found varying support for previous propositions in the voting literature: economic considerations and expectations (see Clarke et al. 2000), the government's popularity (see Franklin et al. 1995), and attitudes towards the subject of the referendum (European integration) (see Svensson 2002) mattered.

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