

PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF POLLS AND SUPPORT FOR RESTRICTIONS ON THE PUBLICATION OF POLLS: DENMARK'S 2000 EURO REFERENDUM

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have focused on either media coverage of polls or on their effects. This study investigated the visibility and quality of news reporting of opinion polls and the public evaluations of polls in the context of the 2000 Danish referendum on the introduction of the euro. A content analysis of the news coverage showed that more than one-third of all news in the campaign referred to polls and that newspapers were significantly better than television news in providing methodological information about the polls. Focus group interviews revealed that voters were dissatisfied with too many polls in the news and concerned about the possible influences of polls. Panel survey data substantiated this finding suggesting a broadly shared perception that the referendum campaign was dominated by polls. Voters who were frequently exposed to news about the referendum showed an increase in dissatisfaction with the dominance of polls during the campaign. Those who supported a more restrictive policy on the publication of polls in future campaigns included elderly voters, people dissatisfied with the campaign, and people who had cast their vote for the losing side. Results are discussed in the light of policy recommendations for the reporting of polls in campaigns.

The centrality of public opinion polls in politics today is well established (e.g., Herbst 1998, Lavrakas and Holley 1990, Lavrakas and Traugott 2000, Mancini 1999). Previous studies have either focused on the quantity and quality of news reports about opinion polls during national elections (e.g., Andersen 2000, Brettschneider 1997, Smith and Verall 1985) or the effects of opinion polls and exit polls during national and state level elections (e.g., Atkin 1969, Ceci and

The authors wish to thank the Danish Research Academy, the Nordic Film Foundation, the Danish Broadcasting Association and the Dutch Science Foundation (NWO) for providing funding for the study. The authors gratefully acknowledge the thorough and helpful comments provided by Peter Neijens, the Journal's editor and three anonymous reviewers. A previous version of this article was presented to the WAPOR conference Democracy and the Millennium: The Role of Media and Public Opinion in Elections, Pamplona, Spain, November 21–23, 2000. The article was first submitted to *IJPOR* May 25, 2001. The final version was received April 8, 2002.

Kain 1982, Schmitt-Beck 1996, Sudman 1986).¹ Little attention, however, has been paid to the role of polls in referendum campaigns (LeDuc 2000). As a political and democratic instrument, referendums play an increasingly important role as a supplement to the representative democracy, and they have been of special importance in the process of European integration (Butler and Ranney 1994). A number of countries have held referendums with close races on the issues of joining the European Community/Union or on ratifying key EU treaties, and several member states have announced referendums to determine national policy positions on European issues in the future (Hug and Sciarini 2000).

Denmark is one country that has utilized national referendums to determine policies of integration in Europe. The referendum outcomes have been both supportive and opposing of further European integration, often following heated public debates and close electoral races. Denmark remains one of the countries where there are currently no legal restrictions on the publication of polls at election time. There is a longstanding gentleman's agreement, however, to end campaigning the day before an election and not to publish exit polls before voting has ended (Siune 1987). This corresponds with a number of countries where pollsters, networks, and others engaged in exit polling accept a 'self-denying ordinance not to release their figures until the last vote has been cast' (Butler 1996, p. 247).

In this study we investigate both the media coverage of polls and the effects on public perceptions of polls in a national referendum campaign: the 2000 Danish referendum on the introduction of the euro, the common European currency. Contrary to the advice of most political parties, financial elites, and major newspapers, a majority of Danes (53 percent) voted 'no' to the euro. We also explore public support for policies regarding the publication of opinion polls. We begin with a review of the literature on the visibility and assessment of the quality of poll coverage in the news. We then turn to an investigation of the public perception of polls before discussing public support for policy recommendations on publications of polls.

¹ While pre-election polls and exit polls are mentioned together, the distinction between the two is acknowledged and is also applied in the investigation of public support for policies concerning the publication of polls. Pre-election polls are typically based on (representative sample) surveys prior to election day and they typically measure turnout intention, vote preference, party leader preferences, policy issue support, etc. Exit polls are (representative) surveys that measure actual voting behavior of voters after they have cast their votes. The organization and methodology of exit polling is different from pre-election polls and are discussed elsewhere (Hofrichter 2000).

THE ROLE OF POLLS

POLLS IN THE NEWS

News coverage of election campaigns is saturated with polls and expressions of public opinion. In the USA, the use of polling has grown considerably in the last two decades (Lavrakas and Traugott 2000). More precisely, the number of American newspaper polls doubled and television polls tripled in the period between 1976 and 1988 (Ladd and Benson 1992). Results from more recent elections echo this impression. Kerbel (1994), for example, described the network coverage of the 1992 US presidential campaign as a 'poll orgy' and Norris (2001) quoted figures that show almost three-quarters of all election stories focused on the horse race in the 2000 US presidential campaign (see also Semetko 2001). Polls have become a more prominent feature of election news reporting. Polls, together with 'people-on-the-street' (vox-pops), form the two most common expressions of public opinion which drive 'horse race' news coverage (Daschmann 2000, Larson 1999, 2000).

A content analysis of presidential campaign news from 1960 to 1992 found that it has become increasingly focused on the 'strategic game' of politics and polls are central to this type of reporting (Patterson 1993). But polls may be more common to US election reporting than elsewhere. Even in the 1984 US presidential, for example, when Democrat Walter Mondale was never within ten percentage points of Republican Ronald Reagan, polls occupied a much more important place in the news than in the 1983 British general election when the Conservatives, led by Margaret Thatcher, were well ahead of Labour led by Michael Foot (Semetko *et al.* 1991). Poll coverage in the UK appears to depend on the type and intensity of the race and it has not consistently increased over time. The news media referred less often to polls in the 1997 UK general election coverage for example in comparison with Britain's 1992 election, largely because 1992 was a much closer race (Norris *et al.* 1999). Nevertheless, in Britain as in most other countries, there has been a growth in the frequency of surveys, including surveys commissioned directly by the media (Donsbach 2001). Given the centrality of polls and media coverage of public opinion in campaigns, two questions arise: How important are polls to the campaign coverage? To what extent are polls reported in a way that enables the audience to judge the quality of the poll and the interpretations derived from it?

One study concluded that while impressions of poll coverage tend to convey an image of superficiality and inaccuracy, the empirical evidence for this claim is missing as only 'very few systematic studies of poll coverage have been published' (Smith and Verrall 1985, p. 59). They concluded that 'simplification was achieved by omitting methodological details, reporting results in general terms, and committing the errors of overgeneralization, ambiguous comparison,

and evaluative description' (Smith and Verrall 1985, p. 77). Brettschneider (1997) investigated the news media reporting of poll results and comments on public opinion prior to national German elections from a longitudinal perspective from 1980 to 1994. He concluded that the quantity of reports on public opinion had increased over the years, but that the formal quality leaves much to be desired. A study of the television and newspaper reporting of pre-election polls in the 1997 Canadian elections examining both the emphasis given to polls and the quality of reporting of methodological information also found that the media relied heavily on polls to chart the dynamics of the campaign, but that polls were often reported with little or no information about methodology (Andersen 2000).

EFFECTS OF POLLS

The empirical evidence for the effects of polls is inconclusive and recent systematic analyses stress that strong, general, and uni-directional effects have not been established (Donsbach 2001, Hardmeier and Roth 2001). To understand the continuous discussion of the role of opinion polls in the political process, it is essential to discern different types of effects. We propose a typology of effects of polls that include both individual level effects and institutional level effects. Individual level effects include behavioral effects on turnout or electoral participation ((de)mobilization effect) and on the electoral choice (effects on vote choice). Institutional level effects may be found on political structures (such as, for example, on party campaign organization), the reputation of pollsters and the polling industry, on policymaking, and on journalistic practices. Table 1 provides an overview of the different types of effects which are addressed below.

TABLE 1 Direct and indirect effects of polls

Individual level effects	Effect type
Turnout	(De)mobilization
Vote choice	Vote preference influences, e.g. bandwagon, underdog, coalition tactical voting
Institutional level effects	Effect type
Campaign organization	Funding, campaign focus (feedback loop public-political parties/candidates)
Polling organizations	Credibility, authority, reputation
Policy making	Policy decisions (feedback loop public-political decision makers)
Journalism	Work style, story focus, editorial concerns

The effects of polls on mobilization and electoral turnout have been investigated in studies of the reporting of exit polls in US presidential campaigns (e.g., Epstein and Strom 1981, Sudman 1986, Wolfinger and Linquinti 1981) as well as in a cross-nationally comparative perspective (Hofrichter 2000). These survey data based studies yielded little or no evidence of effects of polls in either mobilizing or demobilizing voters to turn out to vote. This conclusion is in line with evidence from experimentally based studies that did not find any significant difference between participants exposed to polls compared to participants in a poll free condition in the intention to turn out to vote (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994).

The bandwagon and the underdog effects are perhaps the two most well-known effects on voter preferences. These effects specifically refer to jumping on the bandwagon of a candidate who appears to be ahead, or to fight for the underdog, the candidate who is behind. These effects have been a topic of concern since the first US election studies in the 1940s (Atkin 1969, Ceci and Kain 1982, Cook and Welch 1940, Glynn and McLeod 1982, Lavrakas and Holley 1990, Marsh 1985, Traugott and Lavrakas 1996) and later also during elections in Europe (e.g., Schmitt-Beck 1996). A meta-analysis of empirical studies of the effects of polls found that although the evidence is not unequivocal, bandwagon effects predominate while underdog effects occur less frequently (Hardmeier and Roth 2001). Another review of the literature on media polls and their effects concluded that effects of polls on vote choice cannot be expected to be large-scale shifts in voter preferences, but rather that 'the influences of poll reports on voter preference are likely to be small, although not insignificant in close races' (Traugott 1992, pp. 145-6).

Turning to the institutional level effects of polls, one effect of polls is on candidates, their campaign organizations, and campaign strategies. Donsbach (2001) notes the increase in the number of surveys commissioned by individual politicians and/or political parties to fine-tune political strategies and target specific public remarks. In the US context especially, polls also play a role in candidates' ability to continue to raise money which is an essential element of their campaign viability (Barber 1978). For example, media commissioned 'trial heat' polls in the 1988 Democratic presidential primaries asked how voters would cast their ballot 'if Michael Dukakis ran against George Bush' versus 'if Jesse Jackson ran against George Bush'. Results published in the news corresponded with a sharp decline in the amount of money coming into the Jackson campaign despite his clear success in the primaries in many states around Super Tuesday (see Bartels 1988, Bartels and Broh 1989).

A second potential institutional level effect of polls is on the reputation of pollsters and on the media organizations that emphasize polls in their coverage of campaigns. This has been a major concern after pre-election polls and/or exit polls have turned out to be far away from the actual result. In the

aftermath of the British 1992 general election campaign, for example, because the pre-election polls had been so far off from the actual result, a special commission was set up to investigate what went wrong and who was to blame (Curtice and Payne 1995, Matthias and Cowling 1995, Waller 1995, Worcester 1995, Wybrow 1995). Similar concerns were raised in the aftermath of the 2000 US presidential elections where major networks claimed a winner based on flawed exit polls (Frankovic 2001), which raised questions about the credibility of the polling industry.

A third institutional level effect of polls is the potential influence on policy decisions and processes (Crespi 1989). The question at stake here is, for example, whether political decision-making and policy preferences of members of the government are responsive to and influenced by public preferences about political issues as expressed in polls. Two studies suggest that the decisions of the US government are consistent with public preferences (Monroe 1998, Page and Shapiro 1983). Page and Shapiro (1983) found that public opinion releases preceding policy decisions were increasingly consistent in a period from the 1930s to the 1980s. A comparison of national public opinion surveys with actual policy outcomes on more than 500 issues from 1980 to 1993 found that outcomes were consistent with the preferences of public majorities in most cases (Monroe 1998). In a European context, Brettschneider (1996) compared almost 100 time-series of public opinion polls with more than 3,000 parliamentary documents in Germany. He found that when public opinion about a policy changes, about 60 percent of the consequent respective parliamentary actions were congruent with the direction of opinion change.

A fourth institutional level effect of polls is on journalism. The wide availability of polls, in addition to media commissioned polls, influences the topical focus of news reports. One example is the 'poll-beat' in election campaigns in which a story about the race or candidates' popularity is the story (Kagay 2000, Ladd and Benson 1992). Beyond the evidence found in the content of news itself, an effect of the proliferation of polls and the increase in expressions of public opinion may also be seen in journalistic practice. The choices a journalist makes when constructing a news story are increasingly determined by knowledge of audience preferences and opinions so that information about audience preferences becomes the backdrop against which policy debates occur (Herbst 1998). Polls are also frequently used as a tool to tell a news story in the emerging civic journalism tradition (Meyer and Potter 2000). Herbst (1998, p. 100) summarized the significance of polls for journalists by suggesting that many journalists 'approach polls from a completely utilitarian standpoint, using them if they are available and might enhance a story'.

A continuous review of the empirical evidence of both individual level and institutional level effects of polls is crucial from both a behavioral perspective and from a democratic-normative perspective (Donsbach 2001). Recent studies

provide either a general discussion of the normative and empirical arguments for the freedom to conduct pre-election surveys (Donsbach 2001) or a meta-analytical assessment of the empirical evidence of effects of polls (Hardmeier and Roth 2001). In this study we focus on the public perception of polls as well as public support for policy recommendations with respect to the publication of polls. Although these topics are not prominent in previous research, they are important because the reporting of polls may have the additional individual level effect of influencing public attitudes towards polls and their uses in political processes. We therefore assess the visibility and quality of news reporting about polls and then investigate the effects of poll reporting on public attitudes towards polls.

THE CONTEXT: DENMARK, EUROPE AND THE EURO

Since the Danish entry into the European Community in 1973, European integration has been a much debated political issue. Located at the northern periphery of Europe, Denmark has played a central role in the history of European integration, most notably when the Danes rejected the 1992 Treaty of Maastricht. Public opinion about European integration is divided in Denmark and the public skepticism towards the introduction of the euro has been documented over time (Eurobarometer 49–53, 1998–2000). From the day the Danish referendum was called on March 9, 2000, the ‘YES’ and ‘NO’ camps were almost equal in the polls until Election Day on September 28, 2000. The outcome of the referendum was: 53 percent ‘NO’ and 47 percent ‘YES’, with a turnout of 87.5 percent. This referendum on joining the common European currency was important because of the ‘NO’ outcome and the ramifications this may have on EU publics both within and outside the euro zone. Britain and Sweden are still to hold national referendums to determine their policy on the common currency.

In Denmark as in most European countries, campaigning traditionally stops on the day before Election Day, giving parties and candidates a day off and the public a day to reflect on their decision. But in this referendum campaign, electioneering continued until the polling stations opened. In Denmark there are also no restrictions on the publication of polls before an election, though by tradition they are not published on Election Day. This time, however, newspapers on Election Day were saturated with polls forecasting a very close race. Added to this was the public discussion during the final week of the campaign about whether a commercial television channel would test the limits of the system and broadcast the results of part of its exit poll in the middle of Election Day, well before the polls closed. By tradition, exit polls are never released before the polling stations close. On Election Day, however, the popular channel TV2 nevertheless went ahead and published exit polls on-line and in

extra national news bulletins at 2 p.m. (based on 6,000 voters), with an update at 4 p.m. and again when the polling stations finally closed at 8 p.m.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study has three goals. First, to analyze the importance of polls and the quality of media reporting of polls in the news coverage of the 2000 Danish referendum campaign. Second, to establish how voters perceived polls in the campaign and to identify the effects of polls that voters themselves perceive as common. Third, to link the evaluations and perceptions of the importance of polls in the campaign to voters' attitudes towards publication of polls in campaigns. Given the close race and the introduction of new dimensions in the use of polls, the Danish case is an interesting one to investigate public perceptions of polls and their possible impact. Our research questions pertain to the content of the news coverage of polls, the perception of polls, and policy recommendations. Our first set of research questions deals with the visibility and quality of reporting of polls in the campaign.

RQ1a: How visible were polls in the referendum campaign news coverage?

RQ1b: What was the quality of poll news coverage?

Our second set of research questions deals with public evaluations of the role of polls in the referendum campaign:

RQ2a: How was the use of polls in the campaign evaluated by the electorate?

RQ2b: What effects did the electorate perceive polls to have?

In relation to the potential effects of polls, we also explore whether there is any evidence to suggest that the publication of the TV2 exit poll in the middle of Election Day had any impact on vote choice. TV2's decision to go ahead and publish exit polls during Election Day was exceptional. This became such an issue of concern in the final days before the vote that one political party put forward a motion in Parliament to prohibit the publication of the poll but this motion did not receive sufficient support. Concern was based on the assumption that the publication of the exit polls would have an influence on the vote.

Our third question concerns the recommendations and policy guidelines supported by voters on the publication of polls during the final weeks of the campaign and the publication of exit polls on Election Day:

RQ3a: What are the antecedents of support for the introduction of a poll free period prior to Election Day?

RQ3b: What are the antecedents of support for a ban on exit polls on Election Day?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

We draw on three primary sources of data: (1) a content analysis of the main national news outlets during the campaign; (2) focus group interviews with television audience members; and (3) a two-wave panel survey using a representative sample of the Danish electorate.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

A content analysis of the news coverage of the referendum campaign addresses the first set of research questions. The content analysis includes the two main evening news bulletins of the two most widely-watched networks (the public broadcaster DRTV and the public-private network TV2) and the front-page of the five most widely-read daily newspapers (*JyllandsPosten*, *Politiken*, *Berlingske Tidende*, *BT*, and *EkstraBladet*). This news outlet sample covers the main sources of political information and includes broadsheet and tabloid newspapers with editorial policies concerning the referendum ranging from YES to NO.

The content analysis covers the hot phase of the referendum campaign (i.e. the final month of the campaign, from August 28 to September 27, 2000). A team of trained and supervised Danish native-speaking MA students at the University of Amsterdam conducted the content analysis. The content analysis explored several aspects of the news coverage and for this study we draw on measures of the presence of polls to investigate the visibility of polls in the news. We distinguish between news stories that make reference to polls and news stories that deal substantially with a specific poll. For stories dealing with a specific poll, we additionally use a number of indicators to assess the quality of poll reporting. These indicators are partly derived from Smith and Verrall (1985) and de Boer (1995) and pertain to the presence of methodological information in reports of poll results such as provision of question wording, population definition, sample size, interview method, and data collection field dates.

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

To investigate the public evaluation of the role of polls in the campaign we draw on focus group interviews with members of the electorate conducted in August about a month before Election Day.² Focus groups are appropriate for gathering rich data from distinct subgroups, for generating insights into less well understood areas, and for enhancing understanding of complex cognitive processes (Morgan 2000, Wimmer and Dominick 1997). Participants in the

² The focus groups were conducted in cooperation with the Audience Research Department and News Department of The Danish Broadcasting Association (DR) between August 21 and 24, 2000.

focus groups were recruited by the Danish affiliate of AIM Nielsen Media Research to ensure participation of a broad range of the electorate in terms of age, education, and gender. Four groups were created using vote intention in the referendum as an additional selection criterion. The groups were homogeneous in terms of vote intention in the referendum resulting in one 'YES', one 'NO', and one 'undecided' group. A fourth group of younger persons (age 18–27) was recruited since experience shows that smaller age range is an asset to the group dynamics. A total of 33 participants (16 women and 17 men) participated in the groups.³

Participants were invited to the Headquarters of the Danish Broadcasting Association in the capital Copenhagen. Each group consisted of no fewer than seven and no more than ten participants, which is a standard group size (Adams 2000). A professional moderator from the Audience and Research Department hosted all sessions and they followed an identical procedure.⁴ Three news stories were selected from the television news coverage of the campaign in the period March 2000, when the referendum was announced, till August 2000 when the focus group interviews were held, and these were stories shown during the sessions.⁵ One story contained an overview of the development of public support for the euro and referred to several opinion polls during the campaign. The moderator addressed the role of opinion polls in the campaign with questions until discussion was exhausted. The moderator probed the participants for additional contributions, but did not actively generate follow up comments. All sessions were recorded by video cameras and relevant passages were transcribed.

PANEL SURVEY

To further investigate the public evaluation of the use of polls and public policy recommendations for the publication of polls, we use data from a two-wave panel study with a representative sample of the Danish electorate. Data were collected in the final days of August 2000, one month prior to the referendum, and again immediately after the referendum (September 29–October 5, 2000).

³ While focus groups are not designed to obtain a representative sample, the participants in the focus group interviews largely reflected the composition of the general electorate. The participants in the focus groups all completed the questionnaire used in the two-wave panel study. A comparison of EU attitudes, level of political knowledge and media use revealed a similar distribution within the focus group participants compared to the approximately 1,000 respondents in the survey.

⁴ The following procedure was used in the focus group interviews: (a) welcome and introduction; (b) EU association game; (c) watch two news stories; (d) break and news program association game; (e) watch news story three; (f) questionnaire and debriefing. The sessions took approximately two hours which is slightly longer than usually recommended for focus groups (Morgan 2000), but it was considered appropriate given the use of news stories as material throughout the session.

⁵ An archival search identified all stories broadcast about the euro referendum in that period. The three stories were selected because they were (a) thematically representative of the coverage of the campaign so far, (b) journalistically and stylistically typical for the news coverage, and (c) because the topics of the news stories were believed to play a role also in the final month of the campaign.

The survey was fielded by GfK Danmark, the Danish branch of the German *Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung*, that maintains a consumer and opinion panel with continuous replacement of respondents. Approximately 1,350 respondents were contacted in each wave. The response rates were 77 percent in wave 1 and 79 percent in wave 2, which means that about 1,100 questionnaires were returned.⁶ Given panel mortality and non-response, the two-wave panel survey produced a net sample of 962 respondents who participated in both waves (mean age = 52.2 years (*SD* 15.2); 46 percent female; see Appendix A for more information on the sample). In both waves a postal-distributed self-administrated paper and pencil questionnaire was used.

To investigate the evaluation of polls in the campaign, we used repeated measures of the perceived importance of polls in the campaign. The panel data allowed us to investigate changes in this perception during the campaign on both the aggregate and the individual level. In the individual-level analysis we specified an OLS regression model explaining change in attitudes during the campaign. As the dependent variable we used a five-point scaled measure of the perception of the role of polls in the campaign. As predictor variables we included demographics (age, gender, and education) and the perception of polls in the campaign in wave 1. In addition we included a measure of exposure to news about the referendum campaign (including polls) to investigate if frequent exposure to news coverage facilitated a negative change in the perception of polls (the wording of all items is found in Appendix B).

To investigate the willingness to introduce restrictions on polls, we followed previous research by Price *et al.* (1999) who investigated the willingness to censor opinion polls. As dependent variables we used the willingness to introduce restrictions on the publication of polls in the final phase of a campaign and exit polls published during Election Day (dummy variables; supportive or non-supportive of restrictions).⁷ As independent variables, we included demo-

⁶ The response rate is very satisfactory and is in part explained by the careful maintenance of the panel by GfK. Nevertheless in Scandinavia response rates of this magnitude—as well as actual turnout—are not unusual (Granberg and Holmberg 1991).

⁷ Our investigation of public support for restrictions on publication of polls used an ‘informative question format’ in which a brief introduction was provided to respondents to emphasize the difference between pre-election polls and exit polls and outline potential pro’s and con’s of restrictions. This method is used in regular public opinion surveys (van Knippenberg and Daamen 1996, Neijens 1987) and frequently in various types of deliberative polls (Price and Neijens 1998). The informative question format on the one hand reduces biases induced by a respondent’s interpretation of the question based on the questionnaire context (e.g. previous questions). The format leads to a more focused question processing (Neijens *et al.* 1992). On the other hand the inherent risk of bias by providing information in survey questions has been addressed in studies of how question wording influences the distribution of responses (e.g., Adams 1956, Wänke 1997) and studies have shown how this may affect, for example, support for Contra Aid (Lockerbie and Borrelli 1990) or strength of party loyalties (Abramson and Ostrom 1994). The level of support for introducing restrictions on the publication of polls in our study may have been biased upwards somewhat because of our question wording although we aimed at providing balanced information in the question. Our concern is not with the absolute level of support, however, but with the antecedents of support for policy recommendations. We do not attempt to compare absolute levels of support for restrictions with data from other elections or countries.

graphic measures, political leaning, and concerns about the issue. Age and gender were included as demographic indicators together with education.⁸ Issue concern was measured through satisfaction with the campaign, operationalized using a four-item index with five-point scaled measures of satisfaction with the political parties' campaign and the news media's coverage of the campaign. Additionally a scaled one-item measure, used in both waves, tapped the respondents' perception of the role of polls in the campaign. Finally, a dummy variable of voting behavior was included indicating if the respondent voted for the losing side in the referendum.

RESULTS

VISIBILITY AND QUALITY OF POLL REPORTING IN THE NEWS

The first set of research questions addressed the visibility and quality of news reports including opinion polls. The analysis of the television news and newspaper coverage of the campaign revealed that, on average, more than one-third of all news stories made reference to a poll. Table 2 shows that more than 15 percent of all television news stories and almost one-fourth of all front page newspaper stories about the referendum dealt with a specific poll.

TABLE 2 Visibility and quality of news coverage of polls

	Television		Press
	Public TV DR1 (n = 76)	Private TV TV2 (n = 79)	Broadsheet (n = 160)
Stories referring to a poll	33	37	34
Stories dealing with a specific poll	17	15	23
<i>Of the stories dealing with a specific poll:</i>			
Pollster identified	92	75	95
Population identified	15	17	3
Sample size identified	15	62	92
Data collection method identified	8	8	84
Error margin identified	23	25	84
Field work dates identified	39	33	87
Question wording mentioned	0	39	87

Note: Data entries are percentages. Tabloid newspapers are excluded from the table as they did not carry polls on the front page, with the exception of Election Day.

In terms of providing methodological information about the polls, newspapers more often than television news identified the sample size and mentioned the

⁸ An additional measure of political knowledge was also included using four dichotomous items tapping general political and campaign specific knowledge. Political knowledge correlated positively with education which was used in the subsequent analyses.

data collection method, margin of error, dates of field work, and the specific question wording used in the poll. An additional daily breakdown of the coverage during the campaign showed that the frequency and number of references to polls increased in the final phase of the campaign. The content analysis of the news media coverage shows the centrality of opinion polls to the campaign coverage. The figures in Table 2 do not include the presence of, for example, interviews with voters or portraits of undecided voters. These features also dominated the news coverage and are also expressions of public opinion.

THE PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF OPINION POLLS

Focus groups interviews were used to address the exploratory research question (2b) about the perceived impact of opinion polls. The results can be organized along three main findings. First, participants from all groups expressed frustration about the frequent use of polls in the news coverage of the campaign. Second, polls were seen as disabling components and distractions in processing the news. Third, polls were seen as providing information that may cue undecided voters to formulate vote preferences. The following examples from the focus group interviews illustrate these findings:

All those percentages, it doesn't grab my attention. I don't remember it. It is just used for mud-throwing. (NO voter, female, 51 years)

It is annoying, confusing with all those polls. (YES voter, female, 63 years)

I cannot retell the news, it's two steps ahead and one back in the polls, they do keep you listening. (Undecided, male, 58 years)

What I missed were references to studies telling us who changes their mind and why, not just the numbers. (Undecided, male, 31 years)

Many don't know what to vote. They use the polls: 'Oh, now a lot of people say yes, well, then I better vote yes'. (NO voter, male, 35 years)

It makes people confused. If they don't know what to vote they are confused if they hear that one day 'no' is ahead and the next day 'yes'. (YES voter, female, 47 years).

Overall then, the focus group participants believed that polls were complex and too dominant in the campaign.

EVALUATION OF THE ROLE OF POLLS DURING THE CAMPAIGN.

The impression that opinion polls played a too dominant role in the campaign was investigated further in the panel survey. On the aggregate level, we found that the opinion was pervasive and shared by a majority of the respondents and that this perception remained stable over the two waves. (In Appendix C, the distribution of responses in waves 1 and 2 of the panel survey in different

TABLE 3 Predictors of negative change in perception of role played by polls in the Danish 2000 euro referendum campaign

	'The campaign was too dominated by polls' Standardized beta	Standard error
Age (in years)	.09*	(.03)
Gender (female)	-.00	(.06)
Education	-.03	(.03)
Voted for loser in the referendum ('YES')	-.05	(.06)
News media exposure	.08*	(.01)
The campaign is too dominated by polls (time1)	.30**	(.03)
R^2	.11	
n	818	

Note: OLS regression, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$.

subgroups is found.) While the public evaluation of polls in the campaign remained stable at the aggregate level, we also investigated changes in the perception on the individual level.

Table 3 shows that when controlling for the perception of polls at the outset of the campaign, elderly respondents as well as those who were more frequently exposed to news media displayed an increase in the negative perception of polls during the campaign. In other words, frequent exposure to news and information about the referendum contributed to the perception that polls were too dominant in the campaign.

Turning to the exit poll, there is no evidence in our panel data to suggest that the publication of the exit polls by TV2 at 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. affected turnout or vote choice. The actual turnout followed pre-Election Day predictions and was high: 87.5 percent. Of the panelists, almost 80 percent reported having made their decision on how to vote more than a month in advance of Election Day. About ten percent said they did so two weeks prior to the referendum and about ten percent reported having made their decision within the last two days, and only three percent on Election Day itself. Only six percent of the panelists reported hearing or seeing the exit poll at 2 p.m., and nine percent reported hearing or seeing the exit poll broadcast at 4 p.m. A breakdown of the distribution of 'YES' and 'NO' votes throughout the day does not indicate that any significant swings or shifts took place after the publication of the exit polls.

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR RESTRICTIONS ON THE PUBLICATION OF POLLS AND EXIT POLLS

The electorate was divided over the question of whether a poll-free period prior to Election Day should be introduced and whether exit polls published during

TABLE 4 Support for restrictions on the publication of polls and exit polls

	Support for poll-free period prior to election day	Support for ban on exit polls on election day
Overall ($n = 956$)	45	51
Yes voters ($n = 471$)	53	61
No voters ($n = 464$)	38	43
Women ($n = 495$)	46	50
Men ($n = 461$)	45	53
<i>Age</i>		
15–25 ($n = 127$)	38	27
26–39 ($n = 220$)	36	51
40–54 ($n = 272$)	45	50
55–69 ($n = 194$)	53	59
70+ ($n = 144$)	57	67
<i>Education</i>		
Less than 16 years in school ($n = 355$)	49	51
16–19 years in school ($n = 355$)	41	50
More than 19 years in school ($n = 99$)	42	56

Note: Data entries are percentages.

Election Day should be banned. On average, 45 percent favored the introduction of a poll-free period and about half of the respondents favored banning the publication of exit polls on Election Day. Table 4 shows that the support for restrictions varied by vote, gender, age, and education: those who voted ‘YES’ (the losers) and elderly voters were more inclined to support restrictions.

To better understand the willingness to express support for restrictions on the use of polls and a ban on publication of exit polls on Election Day, we turn to multivariate analyses. We estimated one model for support for restrictions on the publication of opinion polls and conducted a logistic regression analysis for each of the dependent variables (Pampel 2000). It is important to note that support for the two types of restrictions is distinct and that support for banning exit polls was greater than for restricting the use of traditional polls. Support for restrictions on both was, however, correlated (Pearson’s $r = .58$, $p < .01$).

Table 5 shows that a consistent pattern emerged for the predictors of support for the two types of restrictions. In both cases, the demographic predictors behaved similarly. Gender was not an important predictor whereas age was a significant positive predictor. Older voters were more likely to express willingness to restrict the use of polls while level of education did not have an impact on favoring restrictions on the use of polls. Dissatisfaction with the campaign and perceiving the campaign as being too dominated by polls both exerted a significant positive effect on the willingness to restrict polls. That is to say, the

TABLE 5 Predictors of support for introduction of poll free period and ban of publication of exit polls on election day

	Support of poll-free period		Support of ban on exit polls	
	beta	(S.E.)	beta	(S. E.)
Gender (female)	.06	(.14)	-.13	(.14)
Age	.19*	(.06)	.38**	(.06)
Education	-.09	(.08)	.15	(.08)
Dissatisfaction with campaign	.34**	(.11)	.36**	(.11)
Voted for loser ('YES')	.62**	(.14)	.61**	(.14)
'Campaign too dominated by polls'	.49**	(.09)	.37**	(.08)
-2 log likelihood	1202.16		1196.55	
Nagelkerke Pseudo R^2	.12		.13	
Cases correctly classified (percent)	62.6		63.5	
<i>n</i>	943		943	

Note: Logistic regressions, data entries are standardized beta coefficients, standard errors in parentheses. ** $p < .001$, * $p < .01$.

more dissatisfied with the campaign and the more under the impression one was that polls played a too dominant role in the campaign, the more likely one was to express support for the introduction of restrictions. Finally, voting for the losing side in the referendum, that is voting 'YES' to the introduction of the euro, was a significant positive predictor variable for expressing willingness to introduce restrictions.

DISCUSSION

Polls and news media are two crucial components of the political system. Some observers have even suggested that 'polls are the media' during elections (Frankovic 1998, p. 156). The first set of research questions addressed the visibility and quality of poll-driven news reports. The overall conclusion from the analysis of the five largest and most widely read daily newspapers as well as the two most widely viewed main evening news programs is that polls and expressions of public opinion played an important role in the referendum campaign coverage. More than one-third of the stories referred to polls and the YES and NO sides' standing. With many news organizations joining forces with renowned pollsters in conducting regular, sometimes even daily, polls, the poll coverage has become a news beat of its own. However, while polls may seem to have been a prominent feature of the coverage, comparatively speaking the share of the Danish referendum news coverage focused on the horse race aspect of the campaign is much less than what was found in, for example, the

2000 US election campaign where more than 70 percent of the news stories mentioned the horse race (Norris 2001).

In terms of the quality of news reports, newspapers did a better job than television in providing methodological information about the polls. This result finds resonance in previous analyses of the features and quality of poll reporting which also found newspapers to be superior to television (Hardmeier 1999). By applying simple layout tools such as adding high-density information boxes to the poll, Danish newspapers were able to provide elaborate technical information. This strategy is in line with the recommendations from a recent analysis of poll news coverage (Hardmeier 1999). Comparatively speaking, Danish news media overall seemed to do well in providing information about the poll which is required to evaluate the quality of the information and the accuracy of the conclusions drawn. In most cases all news outlets, both television and the press, provided some methodological information which is a better performance record than what was found in other countries (Smith and Verrall 1985).

Our second research question concerned voters' perception and evaluation of polls. Qualitative data from our focus groups suggested two things: first, voters perceive polls as important but also challenging to understand and to grasp. Second, voters believe polls to be influential and powerful. Participants in the focus group displayed a general negative attitude towards the dominance of opinion polls in the campaign and this question was also investigated using data from both waves in the panel. The results suggested the presence of a pervasive opinion among voters that the campaign was too focused on polls with about 70 percent sharing this view. This impression did not change during the final month of the campaign on the aggregate level. On the individual level, however, we found that respondents who were exposed to news coverage about the referendum became more skeptical about the role of polls in the campaign. This finding is bolstered by the content analysis of the media coverage which showed that the amount of polls and poll-coverage increased in the final phase of the campaign. The negative evaluation of the role of polls in the campaign is in line with findings from the 1992 US presidential elections where a large majority of the electorate said that the nation would be 'better off' with less opinion polls (Traugott and Kang 2000, p. 196).

Our exploratory investigation of the potential impact on voter choice of the publication of the exit polls in the middle of Election Day suggested that there were no discernable effects of the publication of TV2 exit polls. First, with the exception of a few voters, most people in general held strong opinions on the euro issue that were not formed on Election Day itself. In fact most voters made up their minds well ahead of the referendum. Second, only a small number of our panelists reported having seen or heard the exit poll and there are no independent sources of data to confirm whether this was common to all voters. Third, an analysis of the distribution of voting among our panel

throughout the day did not suggest that any swings took place. We conclude, therefore, that the potential problem of exit polls having a distorting effect if findings are released before the close of the vote, mentioned by, for example, Butler (1996), did not appear to be the case in this referendum.

Our third research question addressed the guidelines considered appropriate by the electorate for the future use of polls during an election campaign. Our survey data suggested a general division in public opinion on whether to introduce a more restrictive policy on polls, both regular polls and the publication of exit polls on Election Day. The analyses showed a similar pattern explaining support for restrictions with older voters, voters dissatisfied with the campaign, and voters who voted for the losing side more likely to favor restrictions on the use of polls. The finding that voters supporting the losing side were more likely to display willingness to restrict the use of polls is in line with findings by Price *et al.* (1999, p. 20) who suggested that 'what is bad news to some (e.g., Republicans) may well be greeted as good news to others (Democrats)'. Future research may investigate the psychological antecedents of support for restrictions on polls in detail by drawing on exploratory work on individual-level manifestations of pro-censorship attitudes (Rojas *et al.* 1996).

This study provides support for the notion that polls are important and perceived as powerful in referendum campaigns, and in particular those campaigns in which public opinion is almost equally divided on the issue. The policy recommendations that may be drawn on the basis of these results point in the direction of cautious use of polls by media organizations. The perceived importance of polls in the news led most of the electorate to consider polls as being too dominant in the campaign. This attitude in turn was positively related to willingness to introduce a more restrictive policy on the use of polls. Although this opinion was expressed within one week of the actual referendum and the strength of this opinion may decrease as we move further away from the referendum campaign (Butler 1996), it is nevertheless noteworthy that a negative evaluation of the role of polls in a campaign contributed to supporting restrictions on the publication of polls in a country that has never before endorsed any restrictions.

Other research in political communication has suggested that poll-driven and strategic news media coverage of politics may encourage cynicism about politics and elections (Cappella and Jamieson 1997). Comments from participants in the focus groups in this study suggest that a strong and sensationalist focus on polls, which is almost inherent to contemporary politics (e.g. Brettschneider 1997), may generate a cynical view of the campaign. This may in turn contribute to a willingness to restrict the publication of polls, when the more appropriate conclusion would be fewer and better polls. The Danish referendum provides an interesting starting point from which to further explore the relationship between the amount and quality of polls during referendum campaigns, voters' perception of polls, and their policy recommendations on the use of polls.

APPENDICES

A. SAMPLE PROFILE

TABLE A1 Sample profile

	Panel	Census		Panel	Census
Male	54	49	Urbanization		
Female	46	51	(Greater Copenhagen)	22	26
<i>Age</i>			<i>Interest in politics</i>		
15–24 years	3	15	Very strong	25	24*
25–59 years	64	61	A little/somewhat	71	74*
60+ years	33	24	Not interested	2	3*

Note: Cell entries are percentages. Census data are available from Statistics Denmark, ‘Data on Denmark 1999’ (also available online *www.dst.dk*). The age categories used in the analyses in this article differ from the census with a cut at 59 years given the pre-retirement age of 60 in Denmark.

Source: Census, * indicates Danish Election Study 1998.

B. VARIABLES AND QUESTION WORDING

Age. In years

Education. Years in school

News media exposure. We created an additive index for exposure to news about the referendum. We measured exposure to the seven news outlets included in the content analysis (two television news programs and five dailies). The exposure to each of these outlets was multiplied by the frequency (number of days per week) to derive a ‘total media exposure’ indicator. Given the high degree of similarity in terms of the visibility of poll reporting in the different news outlets, it is appropriate to consider exposure to the campaign in the media as unidimensional.

Perceived importance of polls in the campaign. Five-point agree–disagree scale: ‘The campaign is too concerned with the yes and no sides’ standing in the polls’.

Policy recommendations regarding the publication of polls. ‘A ban on the release of political opinion polls in a certain period prior to the referendum has been under discussion. The argument is that the opinion polls could influence the election turnout as well as the result even though there is no clear evidence on this. Are you for or against imposing a ban on the release of political opinion polls in a certain period (e.g. one week) prior to a referendum?’ ‘TV2 carried out a so-called exit poll, that is, asking a number of voters about their vote when they leave the polling stations. Thus, the exit polls differ from ordinary opinion polls because people are asked immediately after voting. On the day of the election TV2 released the results from the exit polls at 2 p.m. and at 4 p.m. It has been discussed to ban such *exit* polls, which are released and broadcast throughout the day of the referendum, because it is believed that they might influence the result of the referendum, and because many voters have not voted yet when the results are released. These exit polls are not illegal, but a lot of people believe that an ethical threshold is being crossed if the results of the referendum are released before the polling stations have closed. For this reason, there has been a political

initiative to ban these polls and the release of their results on the day of the referendum. What is your opinion, should these exit polls be banned?’

Time of vote. Respondents were asked to indicate the time (in hours and minutes) they cast their vote.

Satisfaction with the campaign. ‘The referendum on the Euro was given a lot of attention. We would like to know how satisfied you are with the following things: The campaign of the Yes-side, The campaign of the No-side, Television’s coverage of the campaign, The newspapers’ coverage of the campaign’. Five-point scales. The four-item index of campaign satisfaction forms a scale with Cronbach’s $\alpha = .60$.

C: PERCEPTION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF POLLS IN THE DANISH 2000 EURO CAMPAIGN

TABLE A2 Percent indicating campaign is/was too much about yes and no sides in poll (‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’)

	Wave 1 (n = 946)	Wave 2 (n = 935)		Wave 1 (n = 946)	Wave 2 (n = 935)
Overall	71	71	Age 15–25	66	77
			Age 26–39	64	63
Yes voters	65	74	Age 40–54	73	71
No voters	77	69	Age 55–69	76	74
			Age 70+	71	74
Women	75	70			
Men	66	72	<i>Education</i> (years in school)		
			Less than 16	72	75
			16–19	71	67
			More than 19	60	64

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