

CLAES H. DE VREESE¹
HOLLI A. SEMETKO

Cynical and Engaged

Strategic Campaign Coverage, Public Opinion, and Mobilization in a Referendum

This study investigates the effects of exposure to strategic news coverage on political cynicism and campaign evaluations using a nationally representative two-wave panel study and a content analysis of the national news media coverage of the 2000 Danish referendum campaign on the introduction of the euro. The study shows (a) voters were generally cynical about the referendum campaign, (b) the level of political cynicism and negativity about the campaign increased during the campaign, and (c) exposure to news that reported about the campaign in terms of strategy contributed to an increase in political cynicism and negative campaign evaluations. Turnout, however, remained high, suggesting that strategic news coverage and political cynicism in the campaign did not diminish mobilization. The study suggests that the conclusions of previous research about the link between news, cynicism, and participation in U.S. elections need to be modified when other national and electoral contexts are considered.

Decreasing trust in political institutions and increasing public cynicism about politics have led scholars to search for explanations in terms of social and cultural changes and developments in political parties and partisanship (e.g., Abramson & Aldrich, 1982; Miller, 1974; Nye, Zelikow, & King, 1997). The contents of campaign communication and political campaigning styles have also been blamed for driving some of these trends. Beginning with the "video-malaise" thesis (Robinson, 1976), several studies have focused on the role played by the media in undermining political trust and producing political cynicism (e.g., Hart, 1994). Patterson (1993), for example, argued that "election news, rather than serving to bring candidates and voters together, drives a wedge between them" (p. 52). Cappella and Jamieson (1997)

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suggested that the way in which news about politics is framed activates cynicism and negative political evaluations. They found that strategic news media coverage during election campaigns, that is, coverage focused on candidate motivations and the electoral game rather than substantive issues, generates cynicism about politics and fuels a disengaged and disinterested public. Going one step further, Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) concluded “negative campaigning may diminish the power of civic duty and may undermine the legitimacy of the entire electoral process” (p. 110).

Previous studies of the effects of strategic and negative campaign communication have investigated either the link between strategic news coverage of politics and public cynicism (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997) or the effects of negative advertising on the likelihood of turning out to vote (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Garramone, Atkin, Pinkleton, & Cole, 1990). The majority of studies in the realm of effects of campaign communication on public perceptions of politics and elections and likelihood of voting is experimental, and most of them have been conducted in a U.S. context.

Given these characteristics of previous research, this study has three aims. The first is to investigate the effects of strategic news coverage of politics on both the public perception of politics and links between campaign-fostered cynicism and participation in the form of voting. We focus on news rather than political advertising because the news media are the most important source of political information (Eurobarometer, 2001; Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Zhao & Chaffee, 1995). The second aim is to provide a more compelling link between measures of exposure to the specific content of news outlets and the effects on cynicism and evaluation of the campaign. Previous research has criticized the often relatively weak link between surveys and media content data (Bartels, 1993; Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger, & Bennett, 1999; Freedman & Goldstein, 1999; Pinkleton & Austin, 2001). Rather than drawing on an experimental design, as has been common in previous studies, we investigate this by utilizing panel survey data in combination with content analysis of the news. The third aim is to expand the geographical scope of research on the effects of strategic news coverage by investigating a campaign in a European country with a political system and media landscape that is fundamentally different from the United States. As Agger, Goldstein, and Pearl (1961) argued more than four decades ago, research on political cynicism in more geographical areas is needed for producing generalizations. Recently it was effectively demonstrated that levels of trust in different Western countries vary considerably, that aggregate level trends found in one country may not generalize to other countries, and that one parsimonious model predicting trust was incapable of accounting for these differences (Newton, 1999). Without broadening our research focus, our knowledge may

otherwise entail the danger of a “naive universalism” by drawing on single-country data only (Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990, p. 308).

The national referendum in Denmark on the introduction of the common European currency, the euro, in September 2000 provides the context for this study. The referendum result was a 53% majority voting no on the question of (adopting the third phase of the European Monetary Union and) replacing the Danish *Krone* with the euro. Denmark thus remains outside the euro zone. The referendum campaign was the fifth national referendum on a European integration issue in the country, and the result of the referendum was in line with previous levels of skepticism about the European Union (EU) found in Denmark (Eurobarometer, 2001).

*The Effects of Negative and Strategic
Campaign Communication on Political Cynicism*

Research in political science and political communication has generally taken two perspectives on the contribution of media to the electoral process. One perspective in the literature contends that the media and political journalism contribute to political alienation, political inefficacy, and a decline in participation in elections (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993). Another perspective in the literature suggests that the media-public interface is fruitful and contributes to knowledge gains and political participation (e.g., Norris, 2000). More recent data suggest that we may find differential relationships between media use and political cynicism, trust, and efficacy, depending on audience characteristics and the type and contents of different media outlets so that both developments occur simultaneously (Aarts & Semetko, in press; Moy & Pfau, 2000; Moy & Scheufele, 2000; Pinkleton & Austin, 2001; Pinkleton, Austin, & Fortman, 1998).

Although media have been blamed oftentimes for fueling political cynicism, the empirical evidence is insufficient and ambiguous. The baseline for this claim is the observation that the balance of news coverage changed from issue-based stories to strategic coverage emphasizing who is ahead and behind and the strategies and tactics of campaigning necessary to position a candidate to get and maintain a lead position (Jamieson, 1992; Patterson, 1993). Indicators of *strategic coverage* have been defined as coverage of candidate motivations and personalities; focus on disagreement between parties, candidates, or voters; and the presence and emphasis on polls in the news (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Jamieson, 1992). In the same vein, *game news* has been defined as (a) the game of the campaign providing the plot of the news story, (b) focus on polls, and (c) positioning the electorate as spectators and candidates as performers (Patterson, 1993).

The tendencies documented in election news are not isolated, and the strategic frame also applies to news coverage of public policy issues (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Lawrence, 2000). The consequences for public trust in political leaders are considerable, and Cappella and Jamieson (1997) suggested that by

reporting about politicians and their policies repeatedly framed as self-interest and seldom in terms of the common good—whether such characterizations are correct or incorrect—the public’s experience of their leaders is biased toward attributions that induce mistrust. (p. 142)

In other words, strategic news coverage invites the attribution of cynical motives to political actors and activates political cynicism.

Whereas the initial studies by Cappella and Jamieson (1997) suggest an across-the-board effect of strategic news coverage, more recent advancements in the field suggest that the effects of strategic news coverage on political cynicism are conditional on political involvement and sophistication (Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001). An experimental study found that political sophistication and involvement moderate effects so that the less politically involved and less educated are more susceptible to effects of strategic news compared to the more politically sophisticated and highly educated (Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). This is in line with other experimental studies of the effects of television news that showed those with less political information (so-called novices) to be more open to media influence (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Similarly, Crigler, Just, and Belt (2002), using an elaborate field experiment during the 1996 U.S. presidential elections, also found exposure to strategic news to fuel political cynicism, and particularly so for undecided voters.

Beyond the aforementioned studies, investigations providing a compelling link between news media exposure and public perceptions of politics are rare. One study based on two experiments showed how strategic campaign news coverage negatively affected individuals’ interpretations of a campaign (Rhee, 1997). In another study, the relationship between the degree of negative political criticism found in newspapers and their readers’ feelings of trust in government and a sense of their own political effectiveness was investigated (Miller, Goldenberg, & Erbring, 1979). Drawing on 1974 American national election survey data and a front-page content analysis of 94 newspapers, the study concluded that “although newspaper reporting was primarily neutral or positive, readers of highly critical papers were more distrustful of government” (Miller et al., 1979, p. 67).

The studies suggesting negative effects of news coverage of politics on the public perception of politics are supported by, for example, Neustadt (1997), who claimed that the press “is very much an actor in today’s political drama, conveying a steady stream of unambiguously negative cues about government and politics” (p. 97). Such conclusions are balanced by studies reporting no substantial effects of news exposure on, for example, trust in political institutions. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1998) tested medium specific effects on emotional reactions versus cognitive evaluations drawing on 1992 national survey data in the United States. They found that people

who primarily obtain their news from television or radio are not any more or less likely to evaluate Congress negatively than are people who primarily obtain their news from newspapers. Similarly people who are exposed to news a great deal do not evaluate Congress more negatively than those who pay little attention to news. (p. 475)

Drawing on cross-sectional survey data in the United States and several European countries, it was recently found that “the attentive public exposed to the most news consistently displayed the most positive orientation towards the political system” (Norris, 2000, p. 251). A similarly designed study also concluded that exposure and attention to news is positively (although not significantly) associated with political trust (Bennett et al., 1999).

Political Cynicism

Despite the widespread agreement about the importance of scholarly research on (changes in) political cynicism (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Erber & Lau, 1990; Hetherington, 2001; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001; Wilkins, 1995), there is little agreement on the conceptualization and measurement of cynicism. Many have criticized conventional measures of political trust such as those used in the American national election studies (see e.g., Lodge & Tursky, 1979; Muller & Jukam, 1977). Moreover, these measures of political trust should not be taken at face value as an approximation of political cynicism. Equating standard measures of political trust, alienation, and efficacy is not appropriate in the attempt to gauge specific dimensions of cynicism about politics (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Because of the lack of standardized measures, quantifying cynicism has “proven elusive” (Hetherington, 2001, p. 106), and many arguments over the antecedents and effects of cynicism stem from different measures and interpretations (Erber & Lau, 1990; Hetherington, 1998).

At the core of the notion of cynicism is an absence of trust (Agger et al., 1961). But this absence of trust may not be captured with American national election studies items such as "Do you think that people in government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don't waste very much of it?" Previous studies have therefore operationalized political cynicism differently even though the absence of trust was the core of the concept. Agger et al. (1961), for example, developed six items tapping different dimensions of cynicism focusing primarily on perceptions of politicians' motivations. Meyer and Potter (2000) derived two items from the American national election studies dealing with the perceived motivations and capabilities of "the government." Pinkleton and Austin (2001) suggested six items dealing with the nature of politicians and government. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) in experimental studies utilized a number of items dealing with both politicians' motivations and evaluation of the election campaign. A number of other studies in the United States has also discussed political cynicism from the perspective of research on political efficacy (e.g., Acock & Clarke, 1990; Acock, Clarke, & Stewart, 1985; Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990; Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991). Outside of the United States, discussions of political cynicism have been related to trust in different social, economic, and political institutions (Mishler & Rose, 2001).

Missing in most of the previous work is a distinction between the different dimensions of political cynicism. Cynicism as absence of trust has been treated at the level of the institutions of government and the regime as a whole (e.g., Miller, 1974), whereas others interpret cynicism as negativism and disapproval at the level of candidates and incumbent political leaders (e.g., Citrin, 1974). This observation led to a distinction between political cynicism directed toward persons on the one hand and issues and institutions on the other (Erber & Lau, 1990).

Apart from reactions directed toward persons and issues/institutions, an additional dimension of cynical perceptions of politics is campaign evaluation. Beyond how people see candidates and political institutions, it is also important to consider evaluations of the campaign. The link between exposure to strategic and negative news coverage and campaign evaluations has not received much attention. One study that tapped campaign evaluation included items such as "the campaign was concerned with policies to meet the city's need" and "the campaign was concerned with standing in the polls" (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, p. 266). In addition, a recent experimental study (Valentino, Buhr, & Beckmann, 2001) concluded that "campaign news that emphasizes the strategic motivations for a candidate's promises increases negative evaluations of the campaign" (p. 93).

*The Effects of Negative and Strategic Campaign
Communication on Mobilization*

Studies that have concentrated on behavioral effects of negative campaign communication on mobilization and turnout have for the most part been focused on the effects of negativity found in political advertising and commercials. Ansolabehere and colleagues (Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon, & Valentino, 1994; Ansolabehere, Iyengar, & Simon, 1999) challenged the notion that campaigns boost citizens' involvement (in terms of interest, awareness, and sense of importance) as suggested in classical voting behavior studies (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954). They found that exposure to negative advertising dropped intentions to vote by 5 percentage points and concluded that "the demobilizing effects of negative campaigns are accompanied by a weakened sense of political efficacy. Voters who watch negative advertisements become more cynical about the responsiveness of public officials and the electoral process" (Ansolabehere et al., 1994, p. 829).

Drawing on aggregate-level survey data and content indicators for political ads, they also demonstrated that electoral turnout was lower in states with a higher presence of negative ads (Ansolabehere et al., 1994). A later review of experimental and survey data boldly concluded that "negative advertising demobilized voters" (Ansolabehere et al., 1999, p. 901). Similarly, it was found that strong attack advertising demobilizes the electorate, whereas "balanced" or contrasted ads have a mobilizing effect (Romer, Jamieson, & Cappella, 2000). In contrast to the demobilization effect, Finkel and Geer (1998) drew on content analysis of presidential ads and panel survey data and found no demobilizing effects of negative ads. Freedman and Goldstein (1999) even found that exposure to negative ads increased likelihood of voting. Wattenberg and Briens (1999) questioned the demobilizing effects of negative campaigns and attack advertising by arguing that the intent of these campaign messages is to change voters' minds and voting preferences rather than to demobilize the electorate and depress turnout. These studies and others suggest that the evidence on the effects of negative advertising with respect to turnout in U.S. elections is mixed (see also Lau, Sigelman, Heldman, & Babbitt, 1999). The role of campaign communication in the electoral process nevertheless remains a key question for the vitality of democracy.

Hypotheses

We are concerned with changes in cynicism toward political candidates as well as evaluations of the referendum campaign and the effect of strategic

news exposure on these opinions. Given that previous studies have focused the investigation on the (de)mobilizing role of negative advertising but have not addressed the role of news, we also consider the possible consequences of strategic news for electoral mobilization.

To first get an understanding of the antecedents of political cynicism, we test a model built on previous research that includes partisanship/ideology (Agger et al., 1961), gender, age, education, and political efficacy (Misher & Rose, 2001; Pinkleton & Austin, 2001) as predictor variables for understanding political cynicism. We also include government disapproval and EU skepticism as independent variables as they were found to be among the most powerful predictors of vote choice in Denmark's 2000 euro referendum (de Vreese & Semetko, 2001). Building on this initial exploration of the antecedents of political cynicism, we, according to the first goal of the study, investigate the effects of strategic news coverage of politics on public perceptions of the referendum campaign. Based on earlier findings (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001) on the effects of strategic news coverage on the perception of politics, we test the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Exposure to strategic news reporting about politics increases the level of political cynicism during a campaign.

Second, we consider the effects of strategic news coverage on campaign evaluation. In line with previous studies (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Valentino, Buhr, et al., 2001), we expect that strategic news fuels negative perceptions of the campaign. Accordingly, we state:

Hypothesis 2: Exposure to strategic news reporting about politics stimulates negative campaign evaluations during a campaign.

We are also interested in the relationships between the effects of strategic news coverage on cynicism and campaign evaluations on the one hand and voter mobilization on the other. In the United States, strategic news coverage has been said to contribute to diminished engagement with politics (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), but levels of turnout in U.S. elections are of an entirely different order in comparison with elections in Scandinavian countries, where it remains above 80%. We also know that in Denmark, turnout in referendum campaigns on European issues has remained relatively high, and the 2000 referendum was no exception. We therefore conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings on the aforementioned two hypotheses for mobilization in the Danish context.

Method

The study draws on the following two primary sources of data: a content analysis of the most important national news media outlets and a two-wave panel survey, including a pre- and postelection wave, with a representative sample of the electorate.

Content Analysis

The content analysis includes the main evening news bulletins of the two most widely watched networks (the public broadcaster “TV1” and the public-private network “TV2”) and the front page of the five most widely read daily national newspapers.² This news outlet sample covers the main sources for political information and includes a range of editorial policies concerning the referendum ranging from yes to no press. 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). We analyzed 140 front pages and 843 television news stories to identify news about the referendum.³ The unit of coding and analysis is the individual news story defined as a semantic entity with at least one topic. The analysis was conducted with a team of four trained and supervised Danish native speakers enrolled in the MA program at the University of Amsterdam. Questions were resolved during regular meetings and in the supervision of individual coders. Reliability tests were performed and are reported when discussing the relevant measures.

Measures

Strategic news coverage. We used three dichotomous indicators of strategic news derived from Cappella and Jamieson (1997). All stories about the referendum were coded yes (1) or no (0) for the presence of (a) emphasis of performance, style, and perception of the candidate; (b) analysis of candidate actions as part of a consolidation of positions; and (c) language of wars, games, and competitions. Unlike Cappella and Jamieson, we do not include polls in our content measure because polls have been found not to affect the level of cynical responses to politics (Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). In addition to these specific measures, we analyzed all news stories about the referendum to determine if the topic of the story was focused on strategy (e.g., stories about campaign conduct and analyses of the personalities of candidates and the motivations of political actors), a combination or mixture of strategy and policy issues (e.g., stories about rallies and the historical evolution of the EU),

or policy issues (e.g., stories about the political and economic consequences of the referendum or stories about the exchange rate of the euro). The intercoder reliability test, conducted on a randomly selected subsample of 20 newspaper and 20 television news stories, resulted in a pair-wise intercoder agreement (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998) of 84% to 97% for these measures.⁴

Panel Survey

The two-wave panel survey with a representative sample of the Danish electorate at the time of the referendum consisted of a first wave, fielded 4 weeks prior to the referendum, and a second wave, fielded in the immediate aftermath of the referendum.⁵ In Wave 1, 1,065 of 1,382 respondents completed the questionnaire (response rate 77%), and 1,084 of 1,370 in Wave 2 completed it (response rate 79%). Because of continuous replacement of respondents in the panel, a net sample of $n = 962$ participated in both waves. Both waves were postal-administrated paper-and-pen questionnaires. We draw on a set of repeated measures of political cynicism and campaign evaluation included in both waves (see the following). This allows investigations at both the aggregate and at the individual levels. Using multiple ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses, we first test a model exploring the antecedents of political cynicism and campaign evaluations. Second, we test a model investigating the effects of exposure to news reporting about the campaign in terms of strategy on changes in political cynicism (Hypothesis 1) and campaign evaluation (Hypothesis 2).

We are interested in investigating the specific influence of exposure to news framed in terms of strategy on political cynicism and campaign evaluation. As Cappella and Jamieson (1997) noted, “establishing causality requires knowing the cynicism level respondents brought to the study and being able to accurately characterize the content they actually read and watched” (p. 56). This comment essentially calls for an experimental investigation with an appropriate pretest, manipulation of realistic stimulus material, and posttest measures or, which is what we use, a panel study with repeated measures assessing the level of cynicism in both Wave 1 and Wave 2 combined with individual-level data on news exposure and a content analysis of the actual news media coverage. This provides a compelling link between exposure to strategic news coverage and its effects on political cynicism and campaign evaluation that is absent in previous studies (Bennett et al., 1999; Pinkleton & Austin, 2001).

Measures

Political cynicism. We measured political cynicism directed at candidates (Erber & Lau, 1990) with two items tapping trust in the motivations of political candidates derived from Cappella and Jamieson (1997) and Pinkleton and Austin (2001). Respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed (on a 5-point agree-disagree scale) with the following statements: “The candidates are open and honest in their campaigning” and “the candidates are superficial in their arguments.” The two items formed a reliable measure of political cynicism ranging from 1 to 5 (Pearson bivariate correlation = .50; Cronbach’s α = .67). The mean values were: Wave 1: $M = 3.55$, $SD = .76$; Wave 2: $M = 3.70$, $SD = .72$.

Campaign evaluation. Four standard items used in previous research (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997) were used to build a scale of campaign evaluation. Given the contextual bias of the items used by Cappella and Jamieson (1997), the wording was slightly adjusted to the Danish election campaign context. The items were (a) “The campaign was more about strategy than content,” (b) “the campaign gave me sufficient information to make a qualified choice,” (reverse coded), (c) “the campaign was about what is best for Denmark,” and (d) “the campaign was too concerned with the YES and NO sides’ standing in the polls.” All statements were answered using a 5-point Likert agree-disagree scale. The order of the items was randomized in the two waves of the survey and included both positively and negatively framed items. The items formed a reliable scale (Cronbach’s α = .59) (Stevens, 1996) and were converted to a 1 (positive campaign evaluation) to 5 (negative campaign evaluation) scale. The mean values were: Wave 1: $M = 3.26$, $SD = .64$; Wave 2: $M = 3.57$, $SD = .60$.

Turnout. We also asked respondents in the second wave whether they voted yes, no, intentionally left the ballot blank, or did not vote at all. Bias in self-reported measures of turnout are well known (Belli, Traugott, Young, & McGonagle, 1999). The actual turnout in the referendum was 87.5%, and our panel reported a 96% turnout, which is an often noted discrepancy between reported survey data turnout and actual turnout in elections and national referendums in both the United States and Scandinavia (Granberg & Holmberg, 1991). Because there was so little variance on both actual turnout and reported turnout, it is not relevant to formally model and test for effects of strategic news coverage on mobilization. Our discussion nevertheless

focuses on how mobilization could have remained so high given the conditions found in this campaign.

Exposure to strategic news coverage. Respondents reported the number of days per week that they read a daily newspaper and watched news on television. We asked specifically about exposure to the two news programs and five dailies included in the content analysis. We created an additive index for exposure to news about the referendum. The exposure to each of the seven news outlets was multiplied by the frequency (number of days per week) to derive a total media exposure indicator. For other analyses, it is important to distinguish medium differences (television vs. press) or outlet differences (e.g., TV1 vs. TV2), but given the high degree of similarity in terms of reporting strategically about the referendum (see following results), it is appropriate to consider exposure to the campaign in the media as unidimensional in this context.

Control variables. To investigate the effect of strategic news coverage on political cynicism and campaign evaluation, we include a number of control variables, including standard sociodemographics (gender, age, and education), political efficacy (six-standard-item index, Cronbach's $\alpha = .69$), campaign involvement (three-item index, Cronbach's $\alpha = .65$), government approval (single item), and EU skepticism (seven-item index, Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$). The composition and question wording of these variables is listed in Appendix A.

Findings

Descriptive Results

For initial insight into political cynicism and public evaluations of the campaign, we begin with a discussion of our different measures of political cynicism and campaign evaluation on the aggregate level (see Appendix B for aggregate-level distributions). We found that at the outset of the final month of the campaign, the electorate displayed a fairly high level of political cynicism and strong negative evaluations. Of the sample, 12% found the candidates "open and honest," for example, and more than 60% considered the campaign more about strategy than content. We also found that on the aggregate level, the public's political cynicism and negative campaign evaluations increased during the campaign. Between the two waves, the confidence and trust in the political candidates dropped, and at the end of the campaign,

three of four respondents considered the campaign to be more about strategy than content.

To explore the level of cynicism and negative evaluations in different groups in the electorate, we turn to multivariate analysis. Table 1 reports the results of two multiple OLS regressions investigating the antecedents of political cynicism and campaign evaluations. Table 1 shows a similar pattern predicting political cynicism and negative campaign evaluations. The more politically efficacious tended to be less cynical and less negative in their evaluation than other voters. Respondents disapproving of the incumbent government's performance record tended to display higher levels of cynicism and negative evaluations together with the anti-European integration segments of the electorate, who were also more cynical and negative than respondents in favor of enhanced European integration. In addition, women were less cynical about the candidates, and younger voters tended to evaluate the campaign more negatively than elderly voters.

The Effect of Strategic News Coverage on Political Cynicism and Campaign Evaluations

To test the effects of the campaign on political cynicism and campaign evaluations, we next turn to the content analysis of the different news media outlets to investigate the nature of the campaign coverage. Table 2 summarizes the content analysis of the television and newspaper coverage of the referendum campaign.

The content analysis shows that in the final month of the campaign more than 300 news stories about the campaign appeared in the main evening television news and on the front page of the largest national newspapers. The referendum was, in other words, highly visible in the news environment during the campaign. Section A in Table 2 shows that about 50% of the television news and between 25% and 45% of the broadsheet press news stories dealt with strategy-related topics. The low number of front-page stories in the tabloids is due to format because only one story was on the front page each day. Section B in Table 2 shows that reference was made to the presentation and style of a politician and/or party in one fourth of the stories on average and that actions of politicians and/or parties were interpreted in terms of strategy and consolidation of their position in one in three news stories on average. Finally, the analysis showed that roughly half of the news included terminology from war, games, or sports situations, which is often used to illustrate and emphasize the electoral battle. The share of news framed in terms of strategy did not differ significantly between media (newspaper vs. television) or

Table 1
Predicting Political Cynicism and Negative Campaign Evaluation (Ordinary Least Squares Regressions)

| | Political Cynicism | | Negative Campaign Evaluation | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|-----------|------------------------------|-----------|
| | β | <i>SE</i> | β | <i>SE</i> |
| Demographics | | | | |
| Female | -.06* | .04 | .08 | .04 |
| Age 15 to 25 | .02 | .16 | .08 | .13 |
| Age 26 to 39 | .02 | .08 | .09* | .07 |
| Age 40 to 54 | .05 | .07 | .14** | .06 |
| Age 55 to 69 | .01 | .07 | .08 | .06 |
| Education | .06 | .03 | .04 | .02 |
| Predispositions | | | | |
| Left political leaning | .04 | .06 | .04 | .05 |
| Right political leaning | -.04 | .05 | -.01 | .05 |
| Political efficacy | -.28*** | .04 | -.27*** | .03 |
| Government disapproval | .15*** | .03 | .07*** | .02 |
| European Union skepticism | .26*** | .03 | .27*** | .03 |
| <i>n</i> | 892 | | 889 | |
| Adjusted <i>R</i> ² | .27 | | .25 | |

Note. Only respondents answering all questions are included in the model.

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

between news outlets such as public and private news programs. Given this similarity in content between the news outlets in terms of reporting strategically about the referendum, we use one additive measure for media exposure in the subsequent analyses.

To test the effect of the campaign, and in particular campaign communication, we conducted an analysis to explain cynicism and negative campaign evaluation at the end of the campaign. Here we include a number of campaign-specific predictors such as engaging in discussions of the euro issue, campaign involvement, and vote intention. Finally, we include exposure to strategic news about the campaign. We also control for each respondent's level of cynicism and evaluation of the campaign prior to the final month of the campaign to investigate the specific contribution of the final weeks of campaign to the degree of political cynicism and negative campaign evaluation displayed at the end of the campaign (Markus, 1979).⁶

Hypothesis 1 predicted that exposure to news reporting about the referendum campaign in terms of strategy would increase the level of political cynicism. Table 3 shows that exposure to strategic news was positively associated with an increase in the level of cynicism. The hypothesis is supported in the finding that the more respondents were exposed to news about the

Table 2
Indicators of Strategic News Coverage in the Campaign

| | Television News | | Broadsheet Newspapers | | | Tabloids | |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|--|
| | TV1 (n = 76) | TV2 (n = 79) | <i>Politiken</i> (n = 52) | <i>Jyllandsposten</i> (n = 50) | <i>Berlingske</i> (n = 58) | <i>BT</i> (n = 8) | <i>Eksta-Bladet</i> ^a (n = 13) |
| A. Topic | | | | | | | |
| Strategy | 54 | 42 | 42 | 30 | 45 | 25 | 69 |
| Mix issue-strategy | 23 | 41 | 27 | 42 | 36 | 50 | 31 |
| Issue | 24 | 16 | 31 | 28 | 19 | 25 | 0 |
| Total topic | 101 | 99 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| B. Strategic news indicators | | | | | | | |
| Focus on candidate presentation style | 32 | 28 | 23 | 22 | 26 | 0 | 23 |
| Focus on candidate position consolidation | 40 | 25 | 33 | 28 | 28 | 13 | 0 |
| Use of war, games, and sports language | 54 | 46 | 31 | 42 | 46 | 38 | 39 |

Note. The analysis covers the period August 28, 2000, to September 27, 2000. Data entries are percentages.
a. Denotes official no-vote supportive editorial policy.

Table 3
Effects of Strategic News Coverage on Political Cynicism and Campaign Evaluation

| | Political Cynicism | | Negative Campaign Evaluation | |
|------------------------------|--------------------|-----------|------------------------------|-----------|
| | β | <i>SE</i> | β | <i>SE</i> |
| Demographics | | | | |
| Female | -.02 | .05 | .00 | .04 |
| Age | .00 | .02 | .02 | .02 |
| Education | .01 | .03 | -.02 | .02 |
| Predispositions | | | | |
| Left political leaning | -.01 | .06 | .01 | .05 |
| Right political leaning | .04 | .05 | -.06* | .04 |
| Government disapproval | .06* | .03 | .11*** | .02 |
| Campaign variables | | | | |
| Discuss euro issue | .04 | .03 | .03 | .03 |
| Campaign involvement | -.07* | .04 | -.10** | .03 |
| Exposure to strategic news | .08* | .01 | .09** | .01 |
| No vote intention (Time 1) | -.01 | .05 | .04 | .04 |
| Undecided (Time 1) | -.01 | .08 | .04 | .07 |
| Political cynicism (Time 1) | .43*** | .03 | — | — |
| Campaign evaluation (Time 1) | — | — | .51*** | .03 |
| Adjusted R^2 | .20 | | .29 | |
| <i>n</i> | 757 | | 752 | |

Note. Only respondents answering all questions are included in the model.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

referendum framed in terms of strategy, the more cynical they became, also when controlling for their initial level of political cynicism at the outset of the campaign.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that exposure to news reporting about the referendum in terms of strategy would increase the level of negative evaluations of the campaign. This hypothesis is also supported as the more respondents were more exposed to news about the referendum framed in terms of strategy, the more negative they became in their evaluation of the campaign.

In addition, the findings show that respondents who became more disapproving of the incumbent government during the campaign became both more cynical and more negative about the referendum campaign. Respondents with a preference for the political right became less negative about the campaign over the course of the campaign. Finally, the analysis also showed that involvement in the campaign by, for example, attending public meetings about the euro, was negatively associated with increases in cynicism and negativity. In other words, those more involved in the campaign became less cynical and less negative during the campaign.

Strategic News and Mobilization

The actual turnout in the national referendum was 87.5%, and respondents in this panel study reported a somewhat higher turnout of 96%, a well-known self-reported turnout bias (Granberg & Holmberg, 1991). A turnout of this magnitude almost makes the dependent variable in an analysis a constant, which is why no table is presented to address the question of whether exposure to news media covering the referendum in terms of strategy and political cynicism (de)mobilized the electorate.⁷ We comment further on this in the next section.

Discussion

Our investigation of the effects of strategic news coverage of a national referendum on the introduction of the euro on political cynicism and campaign evaluation and possible consequences for mobilization leads to the following conclusions. First, the level of political cynicism about political candidates was fairly high 1 month prior to referendum day, the beginning of the hot phase of the campaign. Political cynicism and negative campaign evaluations at that point in time were less driven by standard demographic predictors such as gender and education. These attitudes were better explained by political efficacy that was negatively associated with political cynicism. This is supportive of Pinkleton and Austin's (2001) exploration of antecedents of cynicism. Our analysis also showed that more context-bound predictors such as government disapproval and general negative attitudes toward advanced European integration were important for understanding political cynicism and negative campaign evaluations at this stage in the campaign.

Second, the hot phase of the campaign produced an increase in the level of political cynicism and an increase in negative campaign evaluations. The news media contributed to this increase in cynicism and negativity, which can be observed in the finding that persons who were exposed the most to strategic news about the campaign, even when controlling for a number of other influences, displayed the strongest increases in cynicism and negative evaluations of the campaign. The study suggested that news media play an important role in shaping the attitudes of an electorate toward an ongoing election campaign. This is an important finding in a nonexperimental setting where media effects have been challenging to establish (Bartels, 1993; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997).

Our content analysis of the news media coverage of the campaign suggested that the news media emphasized strategy. Only minor differences were found between the different news outlets in terms of the emphasis on

strategy, which suggests a fairly homogeneous news environment. This degree of similarity across the media market may explain the consistent positive contribution of news exposure to increases in political cynicism and negative campaign evaluations. These results echo findings by Cappella and Jamieson (1997), who also suggested that the more strategic news coverage a voter is exposed to, the higher the level of political cynicism.

We also suggest that the strategic news coverage—and the cynicism and negativity that it fueled—did not appear to have any detrimental influence on turnout or mobilization, as has been suggested in previous U.S. studies of the effects of negative advertising (e.g., Ansolabehere et al., 1999; Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995). What might explain these cross-national differences? Because the evidence from the United States on the effects of negative campaigning on turnout is not consistent, we need to address the specific conditions under which such negative effects may occur. This referendum campaign took place in a country with a fundamentally different political tradition from the United States, one in which voters are generally engaged and where participation in national elections is high (above 80% of the eligible voters). Turnout in the past referendums concerning Europe was also over 80%, with two low points with 75% turnout. We do not know much about the campaign information environments in these previous referendum campaigns, although we do know that the news media coverage of referendums in the early 1990s was characterized as playing “an informative role during the campaign” (Siune, 1993, p. 102). In these referendums, media coverage might have been less focused on strategy and turnout was high. In the 2000 referendum we found substantial strategic news coverage and turnout remained the same. Admittedly these observations do not merit any conclusions about causal relationships, but they do point out that strategic news and negative campaigning do not per se demobilize.

Any effects of strategic campaign news coverage on a Danish electorate may be very different from effects in a U.S. context. There is some evidence to suggest that voters with different levels of political involvement or knowledge respond differently to negative campaigning so that the same kinds of messages may serve to mobilize some (the highly involved) and demobilize others (the uninvolved) (Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Valentino, Buhr, et al., 2001). We also know that in Denmark, the levels of political knowledge among citizens in general and in particular in this referendum campaign was quite high and displayed little variance or change during the campaign (Buch & Hansen, 2002).⁸ All this is meant to suggest that in a context in which most citizens were highly aware of the issues at stake, strategic or negative news while increasing cynicism and negative campaign evaluations may have played little or no role in mobilizing electors to go to the polls on election day.

It may very well be that voters have the capacity to distinguish between their cynical views of politics and the importance of participating in an election. Earlier research suggests that there is a difference between political cynicism about political candidates on the one hand and political institutions on the other (Erber & Lau, 1990). Voters may be dissatisfied, cynical, and negative but still mobilized and sufficiently engaged to turn out to vote. Such an explanation finds resonance in recent work in political science trying to make sense of the Clinton era in American politics. Popular wisdom during the Clinton presidency and later studies suggested that citizens were stunningly capable of distinguishing their rating and evaluation of Clinton as a person, on which he scored poorly, and as a president, for which he received high ratings (see e.g., Cohen & Hamman, 2000; Shah, Domke, & Fan, 2001; Zaller, 1998).

There is also the question how strategy driven the Danish news media coverage in fact was, relatively speaking. We found substantial elements of strategy in the coverage and only small differences between the media outlets, but how does that compare to the news coverage of referendum politics in, for example, other European countries and the United States? We found, for example, that about 30% of all television news stories dealt with the style and presentation techniques of candidates and that on average, 50% of television news stories utilized language of war, games, or sports. It is difficult to compare these absolute figures in a meaningful way as most studies of referendum campaigns pay only negligible attention to the role of (news) media and do not provide any comparable or detailed measures of the actual media content (e.g., Bowler, Donovan, & Tolbert, 1998; Jenssen, Pesonen, & Gillijam, 1998).

The Danish electorate was relatively cynical and negative about the campaign, and although the levels of cynicism and negativity increased over the course of the campaign, partly due to the media coverage of the campaign, this did not result in an apathetic, disengaged, and disinterested electorate. The Danish case suggests that voters may be cynical and skeptical, the news media may even contribute to this during a campaign, but this may not have the detrimental effects on democracy, at least in terms of mobilization, which is often an (implied) assumption in the “demobilization” literature. Our findings dovetail with findings of, for example, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) and Valentino, Beckmann, et al. (2001) on the contribution of strategic news coverage to political cynicism and negative campaign evaluations. This does not, however, appear to be linked in any way to turnout. This conclusion must be seen as tentative, however, because actual and reported turnout was so high in this referendum campaign that we are unable to model it appropriately. Future research should aim at investigating these processes in settings

where the dependent variable of election turnout produces more variance. One interesting case is, for example, the elections for the European Parliament where turnout is considerably lower than in the case of this Danish referendum and in many countries has been lower than the lowest levels ever recorded in U.S. presidential elections (Franklin & van der Eijk, 1996).

Future research may also address changes in political journalism and coverage of politics and political cynicism. Various scholars have noted that in addition to being laced with numerous stories about strategy and the campaign game, media coverage of politics is increasingly emphasizing yet other facets of the “process” (as distinct from “substance”). In what Blumler and Gurevitch (2000) identified as a “third age” of political communication, there is more reflexive reporting—that is, more comment on the role of the media in campaign and on the motives, calculations, and relationships that underlie it. These observations have been supported empirically in recent studies of election campaign coverage in Europe and the United States (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001; de Vreese, 2001). The term *meta-coverage* has been coined for the situations in which news media provide self-referential reflections on the relationship between professional political strategists and political journalism (Esser, Reinemann, & Fan, 2001). By stressing that the media are being manipulated, they aim to deconstruct this relationship. These observations suggest that issues have become buried behind yet another layer of communication where reference is made not only to staged artificiality and strategic nature of trying to communicate a message, but the interface between journalism and the political arena has become the story. If strategic coverage indeed fuels cynicism and negativity, a relevant question is to assess how this new type of self-spin or meta-communication may affect public perceptions of politics.

Appendix A

Overview of Independent Variables

Gender: female = 1; male 0.

Age: in years.

Education: Four levels of education.

Discuss euro: 1 (*never discuss euro*) to 4 (*often discuss euro*) scale.

Left political leaning: Self-placement on left-right scale where 1 = left and 10 = right; recoded as 1 to 3 = left = 1; otherwise = 0.

Right political leaning: Self-placement on left-right scale where 1 = left and 10 = right; recoded as 7 to 10 = right = 1; otherwise = 0.

Efficacy: Six standard items. Items recoded to form an index of political efficacy (Cronbach's $\alpha = .69$). (1) At times, politics can be so complex that people like me don't understand what is going on. (2) People like me don't have any say in what the government does. (3) I think that I am better informed about politics than others. (4) MPs want to keep in touch with the people. (5) Parties are only interested in people's vote, not their opinions. (6) There are so many similar parties that it does not matter who is in government.

Government disapproval rating: 1 (*very bad*) to 5 (*very good*) performance rating scale. Reverse coded. In Table 3 the change in government rating between panel Wave 1 and 2 is used as predictor variable.

European Union (EU) skepticism index: Seven-item index tapping general attitudes about European integration, Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$. 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*) scale. (1) European integration is being pushed too fast. (2) I would be willing to make a sacrifice to help a less strong country. (3) Denmark should maintain its exceptions from the Treaty of Edinburgh. (4) The EU has more disadvantages than advantages for people like me. (5) The EU should be enlarged with former Eastern Bloc countries such as Lithuania and Poland. (6) The EU should be enlarged with southern European countries such as Cyprus and Turkey. (7) EU and the European integration is moving toward becoming a European "super state."

Exposure to strategic news: An additive index for exposure to news about the referendum. Specific exposure to each of the seven outlets (five dailies and two main evening news programs) was multiplied by the frequency (number of days per week) to create a total media exposure indicator. Exposure was tapped with questions assessing exposure to specific news programs.

Intention to vote no: Intention to vote no in wave = 1; otherwise = 0. The panel contained very few vote switchers, which is why the no vote intention is almost equal to actual vote.

Undecided in Wave 1: Undecided what to vote Wave 1 = 1; otherwise = 0.

Campaign involvement: Three-item index tapping engagement in various campaign-related activities. The three items all correlate positively and form a scale of campaign involvement, Cronbach's $\alpha = .65$. 1 (*never*) to 4 (*often*) scale. (1) Take part in a public meeting about the euro. (2) Visit an Internet Web site about the euro. (3) See an advertisement or commercial about the euro.

Appendix B
Aggregate-Level Change in Political Cynicism
and Campaign Evaluation

| | Wave 1 (n = 946) | Wave 2 (n = 935) | Change |
|---|---------------------|---------------------|--------|
| Political cynicism | | | |
| The candidates are open and honest | 12 | 8 | -4 |
| The candidates are too superficial in arguments | 58 | 61 | +3 |
| Campaign evaluation | | | |
| The campaign is about what is best for Denmark | 53 | 31 | -21 |
| The campaign is too much about yes and no sides in polls | 70 | 71 | +1 |
| The campaign gives me sufficient information to make choice | 31 | 31 | — |
| The campaign is more about strategy than content | 62 | 78 | +16 |

Note. Cell entries are percentages answering strongly agree or agree. Poststratification weights on age, gender, and education are added for descriptive data.

Notes

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2. The television news programs were DRTV1 TV-Avisen (9 p.m.) and TV2 Nyhederne (7 p.m.). The newspapers were *Politiken*, *Jyllandsposten*, *Berlingske Tidende*, *EkstraBladet*, and *BT*.

3. During the entire referendum campaign (March 9 to September 28, 2000) we analyzed a total of 4,953 television news stories. Almost 500 stories dealt with the referendum, of which most were in the final month of the campaign, which is analyzed in this study.

4. The intercoder agreements for newspapers were emphasis on performance = 84%, candidate action as strategy/position consolidation = 84%, presence of language of games/wars = 84%, and topic = 88%. The intercoder agreements for television news were performance = 97%, strategy/consolidation = 91%, language of games/wars = 91%, and topic = 84%.

5. The survey was administrated by *GfK Danmark*, which also maintains the panel. To test the suitability and representativity of the panel for this study, we included a number of measures, including voting intention, on a wave 4 months prior to the referendum. The distribution of the vote intention mirrored that of other publicly available polls from, for example, Gallup.

6. We do not include political efficacy and European Union (EU) skepticism in this model explaining political cynicism and campaign evaluations at the end of the campaign. Both of these indicators were measured in the first wave of the panel. The two measures explain a substantial part of the variance in political cynicism in Wave 1 (see Table 1). Political cynicism and campaign evaluation at Time 1 is included as a control

variable in Table 3, which then also accounts for some of the effect of political efficacy and EU skepticism. Table 3 reports two ordinary least squares regressions with the level of cynicism and negative campaign evaluation in Wave 2 as the dependent variables. As suggested by Aiken, West, and Reno (1991), we also ran the model with the net change between Wave 1 and 2 as the dependent variables. These analyses yielded a similar result to what is reported in Table 3.

7. A logit regression model predicting turnout suggested that being undecided about vote choice at the start of the hot phase of the campaign had a marginal negative effect on turning out to vote, whereas engaging in discussions about the euro issue with friends or colleagues had a negligible mobilizing effect. The analysis suggested that exposure to news about the campaign framed strategically had neither a mobilizing nor a demobilizing effect.

8. This impression is supported by our data. We also included knowledge measures in our survey, and most respondents displayed a high level of knowledge.

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