

POLITICAL PARTIES IN DIRE STRAITS?

Consequences of National Referendums for Political Parties

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the challenges that political parties face in referendums. While political parties are still key actors in a referendum campaign, a number of factors weaken their position. Ambiguous cueing, internal dissidence, electoral volatility and limited impact on citizens' prime information sources reduce the influence of political parties. Large, centrist political parties have the worst performance record in terms of getting their voters to follow the recommendation of the party, while smaller, ideologically strongly profiled parties are more successful in aligning their voters with party policy. At the individual level, we find that, in particular, efficacious voters are likely to disregard the recommendation of their preferred party, while politically disinterested voters are more likely to follow the party endorsement. The article concludes with a discussion of the contingent nature of party control over referendums.

KEY WORDS ■ campaign effects ■ direct democracy ■ electoral volatility ■ party cues ■ referendum

Introduction

Common wisdom suggests that political parties are weakened by direct democracy. Indeed, it has been demonstrated how parties struggle to send (comprehensible) cues to voters in citizen initiative and referendum campaigns (e.g. Magleby, 1989; Scarrow, 1999). Though the influence of parties and political elites on the outcome of exercises in direct democracy differs greatly between different countries in Europe and the United States, a number of shared characteristics of direct democracy processes challenge political parties. This article focuses on some of the challenges that

political parties face in national referendums. It outlines the key actors of a referendum and it illustrates the varying degrees of electoral volatility and uncertainty in a case with substantial past referendum experience and in a case of a first-time national referendum. The article demonstrates the, in some cases, modest *direct* influence that political parties can exert on providing its voters with cues. Finally, the degree to which voters follow the referendum endorsement of political parties in a referendum is assessed and we analyse which voters tend to follow the recommendation of their preferred party and which voters do not.

Actors in a Referendum Campaign

A referendum can reshape the space of political contestation. In addition to political parties and leaders, the media and the electorate, non-party groups such as single-case interest and lobby actors also characterize a referendum. Moreover, a referendum can alter the spatial relations between political parties. On issues of European integration, for example, a referendum affects the traditional, domestically anchored party system such that political parties at the (extreme) left and right ends of the ideological spectrum may join forces in a No camp, leaving the centrist political parties to campaign together (e.g. De Vreese and Semetko, 2004b). The reservations of the ideologically strongly profiled parties towards European integration relate to issues such as loss of national sovereignty, undermining of welfare state facilities as well as nationalistic considerations about immigration and integration, but they end up campaigning for the same message though with different strategies. These dynamics, which include unusual coalition formation (see Kriesi, 2005), have turned the ideological political spectrum upside down on a number of occasions (e.g. Denmark on the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, Denmark (2000) and Sweden (2003) on the EMU, The Netherlands on the EU Constitutional Treaty (2005)).

In addition, a number of parties do not offer a firm recommendation on how to vote, which makes it easy to see how the parties in the above cases ended up signalling ambiguity to the voters. This political ambiguity may be further fuelled by the failures within political parties or camps in the referendum. In Denmark in 2000 and again in Sweden in 2003 on the issue of the single currency, for example, the Yes sides campaigned on a single message: the economy. However, when this argument was discredited by several expert reports signalling no discernible difference whether inside or outside the single currency, the Yes campaigns shattered and no alternative strategy was in place. Failing to stay 'on message', a primary strategic goal in a referendum campaign to reduce the ambiguity in cues, made voters respond promptly by favouring the political alternative and voting No to the euro (De Vreese and Semetko, 2004b; Oscarsson and Holmberg, 2004).

Part of the success of the No camps was the uncertainty among the Yes

parties about the No camps' strategy. In national politics, parties 'own' certain issues, and although this may change over time free-market liberals campaign on tax reductions and individual choice, while social democrats and socialists campaign on welfare state values. Issue ownership in referendums, however, is by no means clear, and the Yes campaigns in the above examples were beaten by their own arguments falling apart and the No camps' successful broadening of the referendum issue.

In addition to forcing political parties to adjust, a referendum also implies that media organizations must prepare and plan how to report the campaign. Some of this advance planning shares similarities with preparation for other electoral contests, but in a number of ways media organizations have to respond to characteristics of the referendum contents. Prior to any electoral contest, news organizations typically decide on funding available for the coverage and the allocation of staff and resources (e.g. De Vreese, 2001). This is no different in a referendum campaign and these measures are basic indicators of the priority given to a campaign. In addition, news organizations typically prepare using background research which results in canned items for television and feature articles in the press. These preparations are made in anticipation of certain issues that are likely to occur in the campaign, and, when they do, background information for a story as well as potential interviewees and key facts are already on file to make it possible to report in a timely manner. Some news organizations may utilize a number of additional tools in the planning, such as commissioning a survey to identify topics of interest to their viewers (De Vreese and Semetko, 2004b).

While these elements have more similarities than differences with a national election campaign, there are distinct differences too. The notion of balance is altered in the context of a referendum campaign. While the 'typical' interpretation of political balance in television news involves giving access to political parties across the ideological spectrum, often in some ratio of the size of the party (Semetko, 1996, 2003), a referendum challenges these existing conceptions of balanced news reporting. As the vote in a referendum is neither party nor candidate based, the balance issue becomes a question of hearing the Yes and No camps. This can have the (unintended) effect of a magnifying glass being placed on smaller parties or individuals on either side of the issue.

A referendum campaign, finally, affects voters. Broadly speaking, research in political science and political communication takes two perspectives on the contribution of the media to the electoral process and the public perception of the political system. One strand of literature contends that the media and political journalism contribute to political alienation, political inefficacy and a decline in participation in elections (e.g. Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995; Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993). Another strand of literature suggests that the media-public interface is fruitful and contributes to knowledge gains and political participation (e.g. Newton, 1999; Norris,

2000). Finally, others point out that effects of news coverage on political attitudes and engagement are contingent on conditions such as political sophistication or expertise (e.g. Moy and Pfau, 2000; Pinkleton and Austin, 2001) and the specific contents of news programmes and newspapers (Aarts and Semetko, 2003; De Vreese and Boomgaarden, forthcoming).

Previous research has demonstrated how a referendum campaign may accentuate existing cleavages among the public, such that citizens who are already more politically interested and knowledgeable are also more prone to expose themselves and search for new information about the referendum (Borg and Essaisson, 1998). Bowler and Donovan (2002) found that political advertising in citizen-initiated referendums did not much affect vote choice, but did increase awareness of the ongoing referendum. In a European context, it has been found that a national referendum campaign induces political cynicism, dependent upon the media content to which citizens are exposed and listen to (De Vreese and Semetko, 2002), affects citizens' evaluations of domestic political leaders (De Vreese, 2004) and serves to crystallize opinion on the topic of the referendum and influence some voters on how to vote (De Vreese and Semetko, 2004a).

In the interaction between the key actors in a referendum, political parties are potentially weakened by the absence of clear-cut issue ownership, the likelihood of internal dissidents and the changed dynamics of coalition formation, all of which result in signals to the media and the electorate that deviate from those of 'normal' domestic politics. This affects voting behaviour in referendums. Voting behaviour is traditionally seen as a function of party identification, predispositions and ideological preferences (Campbell et al., 1960; Zaller, 1992), but the impact of these explanations is decreasing (Dalton, 2000). An increasing share of the electorate makes up its mind about which way to vote during the campaign leading up to an election. In the United States, for example, there was an increase in the proportion of voters making up their minds about presidential voting in the final two weeks of the campaign from around 10–15 percent in the 1950s and 1960s to, on average, about 20 percent in the 1970s and onwards (NES, 1948–2000). In a referendum, a substantial proportion of voters make up their minds about how to vote even later in the campaign. The proportion of the electorate making up their minds towards the end of the campaign is conditional upon the overall volatility in a given referendum (LeDuc, 2002).

Political Parties and Differences in Electoral Volatility

In empirically demonstrating the nature and scope of problems for political parties in different referendum contexts, we rely on voter studies from two national referendums. The first is the 2000 national Danish referendum on the third phase of the European Monetary Union (including the

introduction of the euro), the second the 2005 national Dutch referendum on the EU Constitutional Treaty. These are two interesting cases: Denmark has a more than 30-year-long tradition of voting in national referendums on issues of European integration and has held more referendums on such issues than any other country. The 2000 referendum on the euro was called in March 2000 and the referendum in September 2000 resulted in a 53 percent No vote, which means that Denmark is currently outside the euro zone. The Netherlands is one of the founding members of the EU and held its first ever national referendum on an issue of European integration in 2005. The Dutch government called for a consultative national referendum in early 2005 and in June 2005 the Dutch electorate rejected the Constitutional Treaty with a 62 percent majority.

For this article we rely on a study of each of the referendum campaigns. In each case, a representative sample of the Dutch and Danish electorate was interviewed. Respondents were interviewed about 4–5 weeks prior to the referendum and again immediately afterwards. In both cases, more than 900 respondents participated in both panel waves. A number of identical questions were repeated in each study, enabling a direct comparison of the distribution on variables of key interest.¹

In the Danish case, which arguably has more voter stability and experience with respect to voting in national EU-related referendums (Franklin, 2002; LeDuc, 2002; Svensson, 2002), about 10 percent of the electorate reported deciding which way to vote in the final days of the campaign or on election day (Table 1). Almost another 10 percent reported making up their minds in the final two weeks before the referendum, which means that, in the ‘stable’ case, one-fifth of the electorate took a decision during the hot phase of the campaign. In The Netherlands, more than a quarter of voters reported that they took the decision on which way to vote in the final days of the campaign or on election day (Table 1). Another quarter decided in the two weeks prior to the referendum. In total, more than half of the electorate took the decision during the hot phase of the campaign.²

Table 1. Late deciders: significant proportion of the electorate takes voting decision late in referendum campaigns

	<i>Denmark</i> (<i>N</i> = 940)	<i>The Netherlands</i> (<i>N</i> = 1652)
On election day	4.1	8.6
In the final days	6.0	20.4
In the final two weeks	8.9	26.6
More than a week before the referendum	81.1	44.4
Total	100.1	100.0

Note: Danish data from Danish Euro referendum study (2000) and Dutch data from ASCoR EU Constitutional Referendum Study (2005).

In referendums in other countries, such as the 1994 EU membership referendums in Norway (which has experience of national referendums on EU issues), Sweden and Finland (with no prior experience), between 17 percent and 22 percent of the electorate reported deciding how to vote in the last week of the referendum campaign; between 16 percent and 24 percent reported making a decision during the campaign; while between 58 percent and 62 percent of the electorate reported making a decision in advance of the campaign (Pesonen, 1998). In the other 2005 referendums on the EU Constitutional Treaty in France, Spain and Luxembourg, 63 percent, 54 percent and 43 percent, respectively, reported taking a decision on which way to vote in the final weeks or days before the referendum (Eurobarometer Flash 168 (Spain), 171 (France) and 173 (Luxembourg)).

Comparatively late decision-making, contingent upon the topic of the referendum and previous experience with referendums, is thus one of the characteristics of referendum campaigns. Political parties are therefore dependent upon getting their message across to voters during the campaign, since many votes are still to be influenced. However, political parties are relatively unsuccessful in getting their message across to voters in an unmediated fashion. Central to understanding the role of political parties in the dynamics of direct democracy are general changes in national and international political and media systems. First, an increasing degree of professionalization of political campaigning, including news management and spin-doctoring, has been detected in the United States, and European political communication research has been concerned with a 'spillover' of 'American-style politics' (see, e.g., Swanson and Mancini, 1996). Second, in just two decades, the European broadcasting market has shifted from strong public monopoly dominance to full competition. Today, there are no countries in Europe with a public broadcasting monopoly (Semetko et al., 2000). Numerous studies have documented the changed cultural, political and economic context within which public broadcasters have to operate as the number of competing, commercially funded channels is increasing (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; McQuail, 1995). The changes in political and media systems over the past 20 years are important to an understanding of the news coverage of politics (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) and to why political parties are relatively unsuccessful in communicating with voters outside the mediated channels. Moreover, the changes in the past decade, both external and internal to the broadcasting organizations, have been more far-reaching than ever before (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995). These changes occur simultaneously with developments towards more complex and internationalized governance systems, where political parties have to operate and compete on local, regional, national and supranational (e.g. European) levels (Mair, 2001; Marks and Steenbergen, 2004).

In this changed context, the contact between parties and voters can still take place either through direct means of communication (public meetings, canvassing, party programmes) or indirectly through the media (such as

television and newspapers). The Internet provides the opportunity for political parties to communicate directly and unmediated through personal and party websites, but is also a forum of mediated, indirect communication where citizens experience politics through the websites of traditional news organizations.

Turning again to the two cases, it is evident that most voters experience referendum campaigns through mediated channels and not in a direct way. Two percent of the Dutch electorate and 7 percent of the Danish electorate (Table 2) reported attending a public meeting organized by political parties about the campaign. About one-quarter of the Danish and 14 percent of the Dutch electorate reported reading regularly about the referendum on the Internet (without specification of the site). The Danish electorate reported a substantially higher level of exposure to a national referendum through traditional mass media (television and newspapers) than the Dutch electorate did. In general, respondents in Denmark reported a higher level of engagement in the campaign through the use of information sources; turnout, too, was higher in Denmark than in the Dutch case.

Research from national elections also stresses the mediated character of most of the information that citizens receive about politics (Bennett and Entman, 2000). Since many citizens rely on shortcuts when making political judgments, new information is essential to influence the accessibility and salience of different information. Political parties are generally not particularly successful at providing potential voters with information cues directly, but instead have to rely on the media to do this. This general observation is accentuated in the context of referendum campaigns where only a small minority of voters are exposed to party viewpoints or material in an unmediated fashion. Similar results have been found in referendums in, for example, Finland, Norway and Sweden (Borg and Esaiasson, 1998). In sum,

Table 2. Parties without citizens: most citizens experience referendum campaigns through the media

	<i>Denmark</i> (<i>N</i> = 962)	<i>The Netherlands</i> (<i>N</i> = 2424)
Watched a programme or news about the referendum on TV	97%	43%
Read an article about the referendum in the newspaper	97%	43%
Read about the referendum on the Internet	27%	14%
Attended a meeting organized by political parties about the referendum	7%	2%

Note: Percentage of respondents answering 'often' or 'sometimes' to a question how often they engaged in either activity within the past month.

Source: Danish Euro referendum study (2000) and ASCoR EU Constitutional Referendum Study (2005).

therefore, by far the largest part of the electorate only experience referendum campaigns in an indirect fashion, through the prism of the media.

Party–Voter Alignment

A crucial question in regard to understanding the relative success of political parties in referendum campaigns is the proportion of voters who follow the recommendation of their party. Previous analyses have shown considerable variation between political parties and their success in getting their voters to follow the official party line (Siune and Svensson, 1993), in so far as each political party has a coherent standpoint.

In the Danish referendum in 2000, about 60 percent of voters of the Labour Party followed the official party line and endorsed the introduction of the euro by voting Yes (see Table 3). Almost 40 percent of voters went against the official party policy. The smaller centrist parties (Radikale Venstre, Centrum Democrats and the Christian Party) varied in terms of voter alignment. Radikale Venstre mobilized 80 percent of its electorate to follow the party line. Centrum Democrats ensured that 62 percent of its supporters voted Yes, and the Christian Party, advocating a No, had 82 percent of its voters following the party line. The centre–right parties (Conservatives and Liberals) achieved more than three-quarters of their voters following the party line. The left parties (Socialist People’s Party and the Unity List) enjoyed 85 percent and 93 percent party alignment, respectively.

Compared to earlier referendums, the strong performance of the left-wing parties was to be expected. In the 1992 referendum on the Maastricht Treaty, the Socialist Party had 92 percent of its voters following the party line. The Conservatives and the Liberals saw more of their voters go against the party line in 2000 than in 1992. In 2000, 22 percent and 28 percent voted No when their party recommended Yes, while the numbers for 1992 were 13 percent and 18 percent. The Social Democrats did better, with 60

Table 3. Dissidents: voter–party alignment

<i>Denmark</i>	(%)	<i>The Netherlands</i>	(%)
Social Democrats	64	Social Democrats PvdA	42
Liberals	78	VVD	56
Radical Liberal	82	D66	63
Conservatives	76	Christian Democrats CDA	75
Socialist People’s Party SF	86	Socialist Party SP	79
Danish People’s Party	87	List Pim Fortuyn LPF	67
Christian People’s Party KrF	78	SGP	95
Unity List	96	Green Left GL	51
Centrum Democrats CD	58	Group Wilders	88

Note: Percentage of voters following the recommendation of their preferred political party.

Source: Danish Euro referendum study (2000) and ASCoR EU Constitutional Referendum Study (2005).

percent of their voters following the Yes policy in 2000; in 1992, 64 percent voted No, despite the official Yes endorsing policy (Siune and Svensson, 1993).

In 2005 in The Netherlands, the governing parties (CDA, VVD and D66) mobilized 75 percent, 56 percent and 63 percent of their respective electorate to follow the party recommendation (a Yes to the EU Constitutional Treaty).³ The major opposition parties, such as the PvdA Labour Party, mobilized 42 percent of their electorates to follow the party's Yes policy, while the Socialist Party, the SGP Christian Party, LPF and Group Wilders saw between 67 percent and 95 percent of their voters follow the party's No recommendation.

De Vreese and Semetko (2004b) define successful party-voter alignment as 75 percent of a party's voters following the party line. A moderate performance is defined as between 66 and 74 percent alignment and a poor performance as parties getting less than two-thirds of its voters following the party policy. Following these criteria, the Danish political parties in 2000 had an overall stronger alignment between the official recommendation of parties and its voters. With the exception of the Liberal Party (moderate performance) and the Social Democrats (poor performance), most parties achieved strong party-voter alignment. In the Dutch case in 2005, the left-wing SP party, the minor Christian Party (SGP) and Group Wilders all mobilized more than three-quarters of their respective electorate to follow the official (No) recommendation of the party. The government party CDA did well, while coalition partners D66 and VVD as well as the Labour Party (in opposition, but pro-Constitution) performed poorly.

In sum, there is strong variation in the 'success' rate of political parties in getting their voters to follow the party. The most successful parties are typically smaller, strongly ideologically profiled, and campaign with a consistent party message (typically a No recommendation). The most challenged are the larger, typically centrist, catch-all parties that tend to have several often high-profile dissidents within their ranks. Their electorate is often fairly heterogeneous, which in itself contributes to the relative failure of these parties to align their voters with party policies.

However, this picture is less clear when the situations in Spain and France are considered in relation to the 2005 referendums. In Spain, of the large parties, 72 percent of PP voters and 93 percent of PSOE voters followed the party recommendation. In France, 70 percent of UMP/UDF voters, 40 percent of PS (Socialist) voters and 95 percent of Front Nationale voters followed the respective party recommendation (EB Flash 168 and 171). These figures confirm the success of smaller parties, such as FN, in mobilizing their electorates, but they also point to the necessity of campaigning in a coherent single message style. The successful larger parties in these referendums all remained 'on message', while the less successful parties saw several high-profile internal dissidents.

Who Are the 'Dissident Voters'?

Some voters tend to deviate more from the official endorsement of their parties than others. We can expect systematic differences between voters at the individual level to influence this dynamic. Previous research has demonstrated how education, age and being active in social structures positively affect the likelihood of participation in elections, such that voters with more education (Lipset, 1960), higher age groups and those who participate in other areas of society tend to vote more often (Putnam, 2000; Verba et al., 1995). These factors, along with a feeling of political efficacy and political interest, also positively contribute to voting in referendums and other electoral contests (Finkel, 1985).

However, we know comparatively little about the antecedents of following one's preferred political party in a referendum. The question at stake is whether there are differences between the 'obedient' voter who follows the preferred party recommendation and the 'disobedient' voter who chooses to ignore the party cues. First of all, not all individuals are equally aware of the standpoint of different political parties in a referendum. Some might not be exposed to it at all, whether in communication with the party or indirectly through the media, while others might be aware regardless of whether or not they have received direct elite cues or indirect media cues. Moreover, while some individuals are more likely to resort to the cues provided by political parties, others are more likely to disregard them or consider them as only one among several considerations that weighs in when they make their decision.

The work by John Zaller (1992) may provide some guidance as to which individuals are likely to resort to elite cues when formulating their standpoint and those who are less likely to rely on such cues and more likely to consider other information in addition. In high-intensity campaigns, such as both the 2000 Danish euro referendum campaign and the 2005 Dutch Constitutional Treaty campaigns, we can expect the group with the lowest level of general political awareness to be exposed to information and cues and also the group most affected by them (Zaller, 1996). This expectation is slightly different from the general dynamics advanced by Zaller (1992), who proposes that the group most likely to be both exposed to and affected by messages is the medium awareness group. However, this process is moderated by the intensity of the referendum, such that in intense campaigns the low awareness group is both exposed and susceptible.

Translated within the context of a referendum campaign, we might therefore expect individuals with low levels of political awareness to follow their preferred political party's vote recommendation. In the same vein, we might expect individuals with higher levels of political competency and greater feelings of political efficacy to be less reliant on their political parties and more frequently to formulate an independent standpoint, one that may deviate from the preferred political party.

For both the Danish and the Dutch case it was recoded for each respondent whether s/he had followed the vote recommendation of the individual's preferred political party.⁴ The dependent variable is a dummy variable signifying whether or not the respondent followed the party line. It is thus unimportant whether the party recommended voting Yes or No, the crucial matter is whether the voter followed the official party recommendation.

Table 4 gives the analyses (logistic regression models) of the likelihood of following one's preferred party endorsement in the referendum. Individuals with low levels of political interest are more likely to follow the recommendation of their preferred political party (regardless of this being a Yes or No recommendation), while elderly voters and individuals with longer education are more likely to deviate from the party recommendation than young voters and individuals with shorter education (reference groups). Efficacious individuals are more likely to deviate from the recommendation of the preferred political party than inefficacious voters.⁵

The results from two different referendums provide corroborating evidence. Younger voters, those less politically interested, those with shorter education, and those who feel less efficacious are, regardless of the direction of the party recommendation, more likely to follow the official standpoint of the party. Conversely, efficacious voters, those with longer education and higher age are more likely to divert from the party recommendation and cast a vote in a referendum that counters the party's policy. This pattern suggests that voters in national referendums who do not follow the party endorsement may do so fairly consciously and deliberately.

Table 4. Who follows the party recommendation? And who does not?

	<i>Denmark</i>		<i>The Netherlands</i>	
	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>
Gender (female)	0.18	0.14	-0.09	0.12
Age	-0.16*	0.07	-0.02***	0.00
Long education	-0.41#	0.23	-0.76***	0.12
Low political interest	1.49*	0.76	0.36	0.24
Political efficacy	-1.14***	0.12	0.55***	0.06
N	929		1.407	
Percentage correctly classified	66.8		65.4	
Nagelkerke Pseudo R ²	0.18		0.16	

Note: Logistic regression analyses (DV: voter followed preferred party's recommendation in referendum). *** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.01$, # $p < 0.10$.

Source: Danish Euro referendum study (2000) and ASCoR EU Constitutional Referendum Study (2005).

*Consequences of a Referendum Campaign for Political
Leaders and Parties*

In this final section of the article we turn to the question of the implications of national referendums. Does the potentially weakened situation for political actors and parties matter? Does the degree of 'dissidence' among the electorate of each party matter? Or, are the implications to be understood merely as short-term reactions? Key political actors and political parties may lose credibility as a result of a lost referendum. Moreover, they may lose framing power over the referendum issue if they are seen to have mishandled the issue. Finally, they may lose in popularity, which may (or may not) have consequences in the following general election.

The popularity of politicians is an important benchmark. In national referendums, initiated by or compulsory for the incumbents, the government's popularity, in particular, is at stake. In the case of referendums on issues of European integration, it is often the case that a significant proportion of the opposition are in line with the governing party's recommendation, while the remainder of the opposition constitutes the *de facto* opposition in the referendum. Based on priming theory, we can expect losing parties and candidates to be negatively affected by a referendum, while winning parties and candidates should profit from a successful referendum campaign. Political priming theory suggests that political leaders are evaluated on the basis of readily accessible information. That is to say, they rely on information that most readily comes to mind (Krosnick et al., 1996). Iyengar and Kinder's (1987) experimental studies effectively showed that news media, in particular television, by calling attention to certain matters while simultaneously ignoring others, influenced the standards by which the United States President was judged. In the same vein, one study showed that when the United States news media covered the 1991 Gulf War extensively, President Bush Sr's performance was evaluated on his warfare abilities. Less than a year later, the news focused on the state of the American economy and Bush was evaluated on his economic performance (Jasperson et al., 1998). A salient and prominent referendum campaign can therefore provide information for citizens to use when making their overall political evaluations.

In the 2000 Danish referendum on the euro, the popularity of the leaders of the political parties was assessed. Following priming theory and the fact that candidates from the losing Yes camp were evaluated negatively in the news (De Vreese, 2004), one might have expected party leaders from the government and the losing opposition parties to have experienced a decrease in general popularity during the referendum campaign period. Conversely, leaders of the winning part of the opposition should have experienced an increase in general popularity.

Table 5 demonstrates the effects of a referendum campaign on party leader popularity. The dynamics of party leader popularity, expressed on a 10-point sympathy scale, generally follow the expectations outlined above.

Table 5. Party leader (un)popularity: consequences of referendum campaigns

	<i>Pre-referendum campaign</i>	<i>Post-referendum campaign</i>
Losing camp – government		
Prime Minister	5.2*	4.7
Minister of Finance	4.8*	4.6
Losing camp – opposition		
Leader Liberal Party	6.2*	6.4
Leader Conservative Party	6.1	6.0
Winning camp – opposition		
Leader Danish People's Party	3.8*	4.0
Leader Christian Party	5.5	5.5

Note: Danish Euro referendum study (2000). Party leader evaluation on 10-point scale.

*Significant change between waves 1 and 2. Based on De Vreese (2004).

The most actively campaigning members of the losing government, the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister, saw their popularity decrease as a result of the referendum. Members of the opposition who were in the losing camp experienced stability or even an increase in popularity, as did the members of the winning part of the opposition. In sum, if incumbents and their partners in the campaign are seen to mismanage the issue in a referendum, they may pay a considerable political price domestically. In electoral systems where coalition governments are the norm, shifts in popularity of the magnitude discussed above can be sufficient for a different coalition with a different ideological leaning to be installed. In fact, in 2001, just one year after the 2000 Danish referendum, the then incumbent Social Democrat-led government lost the general election. A centre-right minority coalition government led by the Liberal Party and the Conservatives replaced the Social Democratic government.

Conclusion and Discussion: Political Parties and Direct Democracy

This article has shown why and in what ways political parties are challenged in national referendums. Even though the dichotomous choice facing voters in a referendum is simpler than it is in most general elections, political parties often send ambiguous cues to voters. The volatility of a referendum varies in accordance with several structural and situational factors (LeDuc, 2002, 2003), and at the level of voters the degree of volatility and uncertainty in a referendum campaign is expressed by the fact that many voters make their decision on which way to vote during the campaign and in some cases even in the very last days of the campaign.

An important source of cueing for how to vote in a referendum comes from the political parties, and although these are sometimes followed, they

are often ignored. In particular, smaller parties campaigning with a clear message and supported by a fairly homogeneous electoral segment are successful in aligning their voters with the party, while larger and broader political parties are less successful. At the individual level, the analyses have shown that voters of higher age, with longer education and a greater feeling of political efficacy are more likely to deviate from the recommendation of the preferred political party than inefficacious voters. Inefficacious voters are more likely to take a peripheral route during decision-making and to rely more on elite cueing. The role played by feelings of political efficacy in this process is noteworthy. Feeling efficacious is related to choosing the alternative to the party recommendation, but efficacy itself is also affected by participation in direct democracy. Finkel (1985) has pointed out the reciprocity of this relationship and suggested that efficacious citizens are more likely to participate in actions of self-governance, but that participation itself also increases feelings of efficacy.

In this article, the pitfalls facing political parties have been demonstrated in different national referendums, one in a context of more than 30 years of referendum voting history, the other in a first national referendum. The analyses show similar processes at work, but also demonstrate that previous referendum experience appears to moderate the dynamics, such that volatility and voter dissidence are more pronounced in contexts with less referendum voting history. The limited number of cases examined, however, does not allow for more general inferences to be drawn. More data are required, but referendums are not usually accompanied by dynamic data collections such as panels or rolling cross-sectional surveys.

Future research needs to further disentangle some of the relationships proposed here. In the analysis of antecedents of non-compliant voting behaviour, where individuals vote against the recommendation of their preferred party, we had to rely on a relatively crude measure of political party preference. A worthwhile study might be to investigate whether citizens with soft party identifications are more likely to ignore the recommendation of 'their' party compared to citizens with stronger party attachments. Such dynamics would concur with models proposed by Zaller (1992) that highlight the significance of strength of partisanship and predispositions for attitudinal change. Such explorations, however, are not possible with the current datasets, but provide an interesting avenue of future research.

The findings in this article may seem alarming for political parties and suggest that they are indeed in dire straits in a referendum campaign and have little control over the outcome or electorate. This is only partially the case. First of all, the degree to which parties are generally weakened by direct democracy is of course prefaced by the observation that referendums are infrequent, and take place typically when parties cannot arrive at a coherent stance (Butler and Ranney, 1992). The referendum situation is therefore a tough case among other issues where political parties are still

strong political actors. Second, and much more importantly, political parties matter a great deal when they bother to campaign more intensely or when they present a coherent standpoint (Kriesi, 2005). For political parties the good news is that they themselves can play a significant role in determining their own success. Having a (coherent) message and staying on message, thereby reducing the ambiguity of cues, are simple, but surprisingly infrequently applied, prescriptions for party control and success in referendums.

Notes

- 1 For more information about the Danish data, cf. de Vreese and Semetko (2004), and for the Dutch data, cf. De Vreese (2005).
- 2 These numbers correspond well with the Eurobarometer data collected after the Dutch referendum. They show that 62 percent of the Dutch people decided how to vote during the campaign (EB Flash, p. 172).
- 3 All political parties in The Netherlands took an official stance on the referendum issue.
- 4 In the analyses, respondents reporting to be abstainers in the referendum, casting invalid votes or respondents not indicating a party to vote for in the case of national elections were excluded.
- 5 Gender is entered as a dummy variable (1 = female), age is coded in years, long education signifies 'university degree' (or comparable), political interest was measured with a single item (ranging from 1–4); the dummy variable included in the regression was constructed by splitting the sample at the mean. Finally, political efficacy was measured by the item 'Political parties are only interested in my vote and not in my opinion'; the dummy variable included in the regression was constructed by splitting the sample at the mean.

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