Opinion change and voting behaviour in referendums

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Abstract. Voters in a referendum obtain information and derive voting cues from a variety of sources. Some of these, such as political parties or ideological orientations, are similar to those also found to be influential in elections. Others can be quite different. In some referendums, the issue may be entirely new and unfamiliar to many voters, initiating a 'learning' or 'cue-taking' process specific to the campaign itself. In referendum campaigns, parties may be internally divided and sometimes send conflicting signals to their electorates. As a result, voting behaviour in referendums often exhibits greater volatility than is found in elections. In the ten papers included in this Special Issue of *EJPR*, we focus on the process of opinion formation and change which occurred in a number of European, North American and Australia/New Zealand referendums held under a variety of different institutional and political conditions. In this essay, I argue that there are three distinctive patterns of opinion formation and reversal that tend to occur in referendum campaigns, each of which has significant consequences both for voting choice and for referendum outcomes.

A referendum presents different sets of choices to the voter than an election. In a referendum, unlike in an election, no political parties or candidate names appear on the ballot. Voters must choose among alternatives that are sometimes unfamiliar and perhaps lacking in reliable voting cues. Yet some referendums are highly partisan contests, even without the appearance of party or candidate names on the ballot. Where the positions of parties on an issue are well known, or where a referendum debate follows clearly understood ideological lines, voting behaviour may tend to conform to familiar and relatively predictable patterns. In such situations, the voting choice may be driven by partisan or ideological cues, or by familiarity with one or more of the issues in a longstanding political debate. Scottish voters entered the 1997 referendum strongly predisposed toward a YES vote (see the Denver article in this issue). In Quebec, strong supporters of the *Parti québécois* likewise needed little additional information in order to make up their minds how to vote in the 1995 Quebec sovereignty referendum, given both the longstanding public debate on the issue and the reinforcing effects of partisanship. By contrast, in the 1992 Canadian constitutional referendum, party positions were not readily distinguishable because all the mainstream political parties campaigned on the

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same side, urging voters to support a package of constitutional changes which had been negotiated by the federal and provincial governments (LeDuc & Pammett 1995; Johnston et al. 1996). Similarly, the 1994 Nordic referendums on European Union membership or the 1995 Irish divorce referendum found political parties who regularly oppose each other in elections campaigning together on the same side of an issue. In some other instances, parties that might normally provide their supporters with reliable voting cues are internally divided. In the 1992 French Maastricht referendum, for example, or the 1980 Swedish nuclear power referendum, prominent figures from the same political party were found actively campaigning on opposite sides of the issue.

Voting choice in referendums can also become entangled with other short-term political factors, above and beyond the issue presented on the referendum ballot. In this respect, referendums may take on some of the characteristics of 'second order' elections (Van der Eijk et al. 1995; Reif & Schmitt 1980). Franklin (in his article in this issue) argues that shifting attitudes toward domestic political actors, or the relative popularity or unpopularity of the government of the day, can sometimes provide a more plausible explanation of outcomes than feelings about the referendum issue itself. However, Svensson (also in this issue) finds such an argument overstated in the five Danish cases analysed in his article. Leaders can also make a crucial difference in the outcome of a referendum, just as is often the case in elections. The endorsement of Spain's entry into the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in the 1986 referendum was a personal triumph for Felipe Gonzalez, just as the narrow endorsement of the Maastricht Treaty by French voters in the 1992 referendum reflected discontent with the government of François Mitterrand.

Although models of electoral behaviour that are familiar to election scholars can work reasonably well in explaining referendum voting in some instances, the relative weight of campaign effects can vary substantially as the *context* in which a referendum takes place changes. In this set of articles, we examine characteristics of the process of opinion formation and change, and effects on voting behaviour, in a number of national and sub-national referendums held in diverse political and institutional settings. The diversity of contexts ranges from countries in which referendums are commonplace events (Switzerland, Italy, western states in the United States) to those where they are rare events (Canada, the United Kingdom, Sweden). Our cases include referendums on a number of important and highly salient issues such as European Union membership, Quebec sovereignty, electoral reform in New Zealand, Scottish and Welsh devolution, divorce and abortion (Ireland) or the creation of an Australian republic. This set of countries and cases provides sufficient diversity to permit an analysis of the dynamics of opinion formation

and change in referendum campaigns generally, and of the factors which shape voting behaviour in referendums, within a broadly comparative context. We do not, in this set of articles, attempt to take a normative position on the merits of referendums or initiatives in the various political systems in which they occur either occasionally or with some frequency. Neither do we attempt to assess the contribution which such devices might make toward improving the quality of democracy.[1] Rather, our goal in this Special Issue is to assess the interplay of interests and information in the electoral arena once the decision to hold a referendum on a particular issue has been taken. As we shall see, the empirical reality of referendum campaigns is often more complex than theories of democratic deliberation sometimes tend to suggest.

The theoretical issues

Zaller's (1992) model of opinion formation is particularly well suited to the study of public opinion and voting behaviour in referendums. As he argues, any process of opinion formation proceeds from an interaction of *information* and *predisposition*. Tonsgaard (1992) has likewise proposed that the extent to which basic values and beliefs are linked to a referendum issue in public debate provide a key starting point for understanding the empirical reality of referendum voting behaviour. For some voters, opinions on Quebec sovereignty or on European integration reflect strongly held fundamental beliefs about the nation or a sense of political identity. For others, however, such attitudes might be less the product of deeply held beliefs than a more mutable opinion based on the persuasive arguments of an advertising campaign, apprehensions about the state of the economy, or judgements about the relative credibility of those delivering the message. When strongly held predispositions are reinforced by the campaign, referendums begin to take on some of the characteristics of elections, in which factors such as party identification or ideological orientation typically play a crucial role. However, when parties are internally divided, ideological alignments are unclear or an issue is new and unfamiliar to the mass public, voters might be expected to draw more of their information from the campaign discourse. Under these circumstances, the outcome of the contest becomes highly unpredictable.

Factors such as party identification, the linkage of the referendum issue to particular groups or its identification with established political actors provide operational examples of Zaller's 'predispositions'. Figure 1 outlines a conceptual map, on which a number of the relevant variables are arranged to fit the context of referendum voting as it might vary from issue to issue or case to case. I will argue here that the closer a particular referendum comes to

involving elements at the left-hand side of the diagram, the more its outcome is likely to be driven by predispositions and the more limited (or reinforcing) the effects of the campaign. As one moves towards the right-hand side of the diagram, the potential for movement over the course of the campaign increases and the outcome becomes more uncertain. In those instances where the issue(s) of the referendum are entirely new to the voter, the learning process of the campaign becomes highly critical to the determination of the outcome. Bowler and Donovan (in this issue) note that voters draw upon a variety of sources in forming opinions about the sometimes complex and confusing initiatives that appear on many state ballots in the United States. Among the most frequently mentioned sources of such information are campaign pamphlets, television advertising and direct mailings from various campaign organisations. Voters in such situations take 'cues' from these and other sources, and can often find 'short-cuts' which enable them to cut through conflicting information (Bowler & Donovan 1998; Lupia & McCubbins 1998).

Thus, a referendum which involves a cleavage or ideological issue, and/or in which political parties take well-known and predictably opposite positions, ought to hold the least potential for opinion change. One which involves a new or previously undiscussed issue, or in which parties line up in a non-traditional manner, is more likely to promote some of the short-term variables towards the right side of Figure 1. However, this is only a starting point for estimating the potential for opinion change on a referendum issue. Often, an important part of the dynamic of a referendum campaign involves changing and redefining the subject matter of the referendum through the campaign discourse. Hence, the 1986 Irish divorce referendum might have seen less movement over the course of the campaign had it been fought solely along religious or partisan lines. However, the rather dramatic shift which took place in voter sentiment during that campaign was attributable in part to the success of

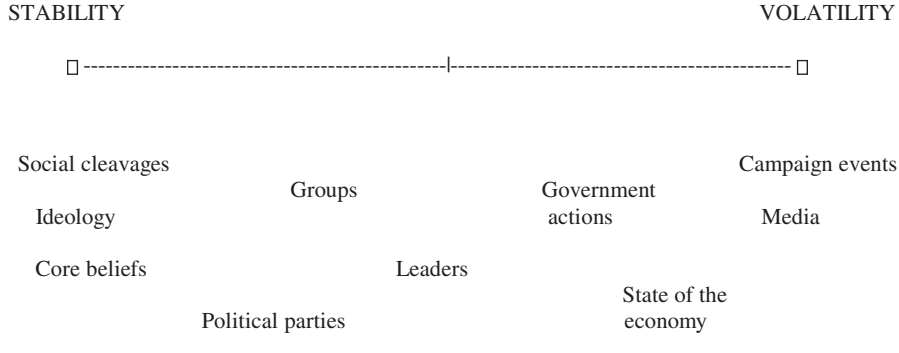

Figure 1. Elements leading towards stability or volatility in referendum voting.

certain campaign actors in persuading voters to view the matter as something *other* than a traditional cleavage issue (Darcy & Laver 1990). Similarly, many Australian voters became persuaded over the course of the 1999 referendum campaign to view the choice in terms of an elected or appointed presidency rather than maintaining or abolishing the monarchy (Higley & McAllister in this issue). Attitudes toward the latter question tended to be more stable in the aggregate than those involving the newer and less widely discussed issue of an elected presidency. Changing the subject was thus, in that instance, a more effective campaign strategy for those advocating a NO vote.

Participation and voter turnout

One of the first issues that arises in comparing referendum and election voting behaviour is that of voter turnout. Evidence suggests that turnout can vary much more widely in referendums than it does in national elections. In Switzerland, where referendums are commonplace events, turnout is generally below 50 per cent, and can sometimes be much lower. As Uleri (in this issue) notes, turnout in Italian referendums in the 1990s has often been *the* crucial variable, since Italian law requires a minimum turnout of 50 per cent plus 1 of the total electorate in order to be legally binding.

Butler and Ranney (1994) found that turnout over a large number of referendum cases in various nations averaged 15 percentage points lower than that found in general elections in the same countries. Cronin (1989) found a comparable rate of 'drop-off' (i.e., the difference between voting for the candidate and propositions sections of the ballot) in American state referendums. However, there is no reason to believe that turnout in referendums is *necessarily* lower than that found in elections. The turnout in some of the more important European referendums has generally been comparable to that found in national elections, and turnout in the 1995 Quebec sovereignty referendum registered an astonishing 94 per cent, a full 12 per cent higher than that of the provincial election held a year earlier. Other important referendums in which turnout registered *higher* than that of a comparable election are the 1992 Canadian constitutional referendum, the 1994 Norwegian European Union membership referendum and the Danish referendums on the Edinburgh Agreement (1993) and European currency (2000). However, it is clear that a referendum held separately on a less salient issue runs the risk of lower voter participation. The first (1992) New Zealand referendum on electoral reform, the 1980 Swedish nuclear power referendum and the 1986 Spanish referendum on NATO are all cases in which turnout fell significantly below that of the immediately preceding national election.

The wider variations in turnout found in referendums suggest a greater potential for volatility. The electorate found in a referendum is not always the same one that participates in elections. In an aggregate analysis, Saint-Germain and Grenier (1994) found a strong resemblance between patterns of vote for the *Parti québécois* in the 1989 Quebec provincial election, the vote for the *Bloc québécois* in the 1993 federal election and the NO vote in the 1992 referendum – with turnout in all three instances fluctuating within a fairly narrow range. In examining California state propositions, however, Bowler and Donovan (1998) found considerable variation in participation across 190 votes over a 14-year period. Accounting for this variation were some factors specific to the proposition itself (type of measure, ballot position), some external to it (presidential election, state primary) and others relating to characteristics of the campaign (e.g., spending). Where parties fail to mobilise their supporters on behalf of an issue, or where non-party groups succeed in mobilising *theirs*, the outcome of a referendum can be more directly subject to a differential turnout effect (see Christin et al. in this issue). Since turnout in referendums can fluctuate so widely, the potential for turnout effects in a referendum is significantly greater than that typically found in elections.

Campaign effects

Over the course of a referendum campaign, public opinion can sometimes shift dramatically. In a number of the referendum cases considered here, polls taken in advance of the campaign period would have suggested very different results from those which actually occurred. The dynamics of a referendum campaign can often be harder to anticipate than those of an election, and the breadth of participation of the electorate cannot always be assumed. It follows, therefore, that the outcome of many referendums is not easily predictable, even in some cases where the distribution of public opinion on the underlying issue of the referendum is well known. The short-term perceptions of the ballot question on the part of voters, the images that they hold of the groups and individuals involved, or their reactions to the campaign discourse can be as important to the voting decision as their opinions or beliefs on the issue itself.

In an earlier paper (LeDuc 2000a), I conducted an analysis of the magnitude of opinion change in a number of referendum campaigns by comparing outcomes with the result which would have been predicted by a public opinion poll taken one or two months before voting day.[2] The patterns found conformed roughly to the theoretical expectations suggested in Figure 1. Referendums on issues which had been debated extensively in political arenas *other*

than that of the referendum campaign, or in which there were strong linkages to the positions taken by political parties, generally displayed less campaign volatility. Those involving 'new' issues or areas of political debate in which the mass public was not highly engaged tended to show greater movement in public opinion over the duration of the campaign, often culminating in an outcome which would *not* have been predicted by pre-campaign polls on the central issue of the referendum. Figure 2 summarizes some of the results of that exercise.

The type of referendum campaign that is *least* like that of an election is one in which there is little partisan, issue or ideological basis from which voters might tend to form an opinion. Voters cannot generally be expected to have well-formed opinions on an issue that has not previously been the subject of any broad public debate. Some referendums fitting such a profile are those that involve multiple issues, complex international treaties or large packages of constitutional provisions. The 1988 Australian and 1992 Canadian constitutional referendums seem to conform to this pattern, with elite-driven projects being decisively rejected once the voters had learned enough about them. In such circumstances, the degree of change in opinion over the course of even

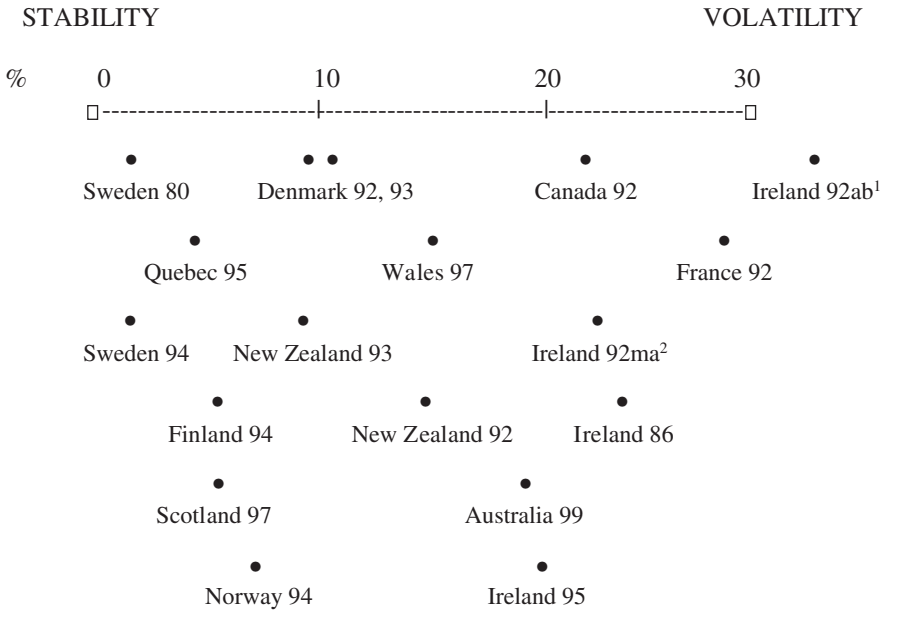

Figure 2. Categorising selected referendum campaigns by degree of volatility.
Notes: [1]1992 abortion referendum – substantive item (No. 1); [2]1992 referendum on the Maastricht Treaty.

a short campaign is potentially large, because there is little in the way of stable social or political attitudes which might anchor opinions on the issue of the referendum.

By contrast, where an issue is a familiar one in the political arena, or where parties take clearly competing positions, the voting decision is easier and tends to be made earlier in the campaign. Here, opinion is much firmer and less subject to rapid change or sudden reversal. Voters will often have strong cues based on partisanship or ideology and be receptive to arguments presented by familiar and trusted political leaders. In such a campaign, much of the attention is directed toward wavering or 'undecided' voters in the knowledge that a swing of only a few percentage points might make the crucial difference in the outcome. The 1995 Quebec sovereignty referendum is a good example of a campaign in which the *Parti québécois* Government knew that it could count on the nearly universal support of the partisan voters who had brought it to power, but it also needed the votes of others in order to secure a majority for its sovereignty proposal.

Referendums, such as the 1980 vote on nuclear power in Sweden or the Irish referendums on abortion (1983, 1992), may also serve as possible examples of issues on which a significant part of the electorate could be expected to have strong pre-existing views. However, the existence of predispositions on an issue does not in itself assure the predictability of a referendum outcome, as the analysis by Higley and McAllister of the 1999 Australian referendum (in this issue) demonstrates. In some instances, a different dynamic can develop when a referendum on a reasonably well-known issue begins to take on a new and unanticipated direction over the course of the campaign. Often this occurs when opposition groups are successful in 'changing the subject' of a referendum or in raising doubts about the true motives of those behind it. Darcy and Laver (1990) documented this type of campaign in their study of the 1986 Irish divorce referendum, describing the dynamic in that instance as one of 'opinion reversal'. 'Reversal' in this sense does not necessarily mean that opinions on the underlying issue have necessarily changed. However, as Higley and McAllister (in this issue) show, the rhetoric of the 1999 Australian referendum on the monarchy caused about a third of the voters to 'think about' changing their initial preference. It also caused many to delay the voting decision until later in the campaign.

The Quebec sovereignty referendums provide a particularly good test of the differing potential of campaigns to shift public opinion on a referendum issue. The two Quebec referendums displayed different dynamics, even though the issue was essentially the same in both instances. This is because the context in which they occurred was quite different given the 15 years of debate over Quebec sovereignty which had taken place in the interim between the two

votes. In the first (1980) referendum, the sovereignty issue in Quebec was still a new political phenomenon, and the campaign represented an important part of the learning process for many voters. The Quebec government's strategy of promoting 'sovereignty' together with a continuing economic association with Canada was widely thought at the time to be a winning formula.[3] Polls commissioned by the Quebec government at the time suggested that this strategy was capable of attracting the support of well over 50 per cent of the electorate. Yet the 1980 referendum proposal ultimately went down to a decisive defeat, in part because the federalist side was able to effectively shift the terms of the debate over the course of the campaign, arguing instead for 'renewed federalism' as an alternative vision. The message of renewed federalism was delivered by a respected and credible federal Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau, who was still highly popular in Quebec at that time. While 'renewed federalism' was not on the ballot, the NO campaign ultimately persuaded many voters to view the choice in these terms, rather than as the *status quo* versus sovereignty-association.

The relative newness of these issues at that time and the nature of the campaign discourse itself meant that the decision was not a clear cut or easy one for many 1980 Quebec voters. By 1995, however, the positions of both the federal and provincial political parties and their leaders were very different. The federal Prime Minister, Jean Chrétien, was highly unpopular among Quebec francophones and widely mistrusted. More importantly, the political context in which the vote took place in 1995 had changed dramatically since 1980. Positions on the sovereignty issue by that time were well known and well entrenched. A Quebec electorate frustrated with the failed constitutional initiatives of the past 15 years was much more prepared to listen to the arguments put forward by the YES side during the course of the 1995 campaign. There were simply fewer voters in 1995 who had not already made up their minds on an issue that had by that time become *the* defining cleavage of Quebec politics. The potential for movement over the course of that campaign, important though it proved to be, was far less in 1995 than had been the case in 1980.

The vote decision

We would expect that, in those instances where the issues of a referendum are entirely new to the voter, predispositions will be weaker and the learning process of the campaign will be more critical for deciding how to vote and therefore also more important in determining the outcome. In those cases where voters clearly 'need' the campaign in order to form an opinion on the

issue(s) of the referendum, we might expect more individual voting decisions to be made late in the campaign, after a sufficient amount of information has become available about the issue on which voters are being asked to render a decision. Conversely, where voters are able to make up their minds on the basis of clear partisan or ideological cues, or where there is a high degree of prior familiarity with the issue(s) of the referendum, we might expect voting decisions to be made earlier. The timing of the vote decision, therefore, may be a useful indicator of the extent to which an 'opinion formation' process is actually taking place over the duration of a referendum campaign.

Survey data on reported time of vote decision are available for ten of the referendums considered here (see Table 1), a number sufficient to provide some variation in the amount of prior knowledge that a voter might have been expected to have regarding the issue being voted upon in the referendum. The 1992 Canadian constitutional referendum provides a fairly extreme example because that referendum was not anticipated and voters could not have been expected to have a high degree of prior knowledge of the content of a constitutional agreement which was negotiated in closed sessions before being put to a popular vote. Not surprisingly, therefore, nearly two-thirds of those voting in that referendum reported having made their decisions over the course of the campaign, a substantial number of these as late as the final week. By contrast, voters in the 1995 Quebec sovereignty referendum were able to come to a decision much more quickly on the issue, in part because the subject matter of the referendum was so well known, but also because the campaign provided strongly reinforcing partisan cues for many voters. While the campaign was still important to the outcome, given the closeness of the result, fewer voters needed the additional information provided by the campaign in order to reach a decision. Three-quarters of the Quebec electorate had already made up their minds how to vote at the time that the referendum was called.[4]

The 1994 European Union membership referendums in the Nordic countries provide examples which fall between these two extremes, as does the 1992 French referendum on Maastricht. It is logical that these cases would fall towards the middle of the distribution suggested by Table 1 because many voters in the European Union referendums would have had a high degree of knowledge of the underlying issue, but would still have needed the campaign in order to assess arguments regarding the specific accession agreements which were being put forward or, in the case of France, the actual content of the Maastricht Treaty and the interpretations being placed on it by those conducting the campaigns. The fact that political parties that are normally opponents in elections were campaigning together in support of European Union membership in several of the Nordic countries would also have served to

Table 1. Reported time of vote decision in 10 referendums (percentage)

	Long before	At call	During campaign	Final week
Quebec[1] 1995	70	5	14	11
Finland[2] 1994	62		16	22
France[3] 1992	60		20	20
Norway[2] 1994	59		24	17
Sweden[2] 1994	58		17	25
Quebec[4] 1980	49	19	27	5
Australia[5] 1999	42	19	20	19
Scotland[6] 1997	40	21	16	24
Wales[6] 1997	32	20	16	33
Canada[7] 1992	–	38	33	29

Notes: [1]1995 Carleton ISSP Study; [2]Comparative Nordic Referendums Study (Pesonen 1998); [3]SOFRES/ Le Figaro (Franklin et al. 1995); [4]1980 Canadian National Election Study: Quebec referendum wave; [5]1999 Australian Constitutional Referendum Study; [6]1997 CREST surveys; [7]1992 Carleton Referendum Study.

present voters with 'new' information, thus requiring more time for this to be factored into the voting decision. In Sweden, divisions among the governing Social Democrats spilled over into the campaign, with the government actively supporting the YES side but some of its own partisans campaigning against it under the umbrella group 'Social Democrats Against the EU'. These circumstances present a quite different picture than the 1995 Quebec case, in which parties with well known and strongly held positions on the sovereignty issue were putting forward highly familiar arguments right from the beginning, and mobilizing their traditional supporters in support of a cause for which they could be expected to have a strong predisposition.

The four remaining cases for which data on time of vote decision are presented in Table 1 – the 1980 Quebec sovereignty referendum, the 1999 Australian republic referendum and the 1997 Scottish and Welsh devolution referendums – are ones in which a somewhat larger share of the electorate is found deciding later in the campaign. In these cases, like that of the 1992 Canadian referendum, the actual call of the vote was important because it provided the first real signal to voters of the decision to come. The announcement of the Scottish and Welsh votes came only after Labour's victory in the May 1997 election and Blair's subsequent decision to make these reforms his first legislative priority (see Denver in this issue). In the 1980 Quebec case, no one knew exactly when the referendum would take place or what the wording of

the question would finally be until the date of the referendum was announced. In Australia, a referendum on the monarchy had also been the subject of political debate since the former Labor Prime Minister, Paul Keating, signaled his government's intention to propose a constitutional amendment to end the role of the British monarch as the Australian head of state. However, Labor's defeat in the 1996 election shifted the course of that debate and the new Liberal government referred the matter to a constitutional convention (see Higley & McAllister in this issue). This continual flow of new information, both on the proposal itself and on the nature of the debate, would have made it difficult for all but the most strongly committed republicans among Australian voters to have made up their minds very far in advance of the referendum.

Partisanship, ideology and voting behaviour

The linkage between pre-existing partisan attitudes and the referendum issue provides one of the strongest clues with regard to the relative influences of predispositions and the flow of information derived from the campaign on voting choice. Ideology, where it forms a substantial underlying component of the party system, can similarly predispose a voter to a particular position on a referendum issue. The positions which political parties take, either in the evolution of the referendum issue or during the campaign itself, provide one of the strongest available information cues to voters. Where these are present, voters with partisan predispositions are able to find their own positions on an issue fairly quickly. Where they are absent, other short-term elements tend to become more powerful or well-known groups, organizations or individuals may intervene to generate the same types of 'short cuts' that political parties might otherwise provide (Lupia 1992, 1994; Lupia & McCubbins 1998; Bowler & Donovan 1998). Surveys which contain data on partisanship, ideology, attitudes toward the referendum issue (or its underlying components) and voting choice (or intention) can provide rough measures of the relative effects of partisan or other predispositions on voting choice in several referendums.[5]

The Quebec example (see Table 2) provides one of the clearest illustrations of the ability of political parties to mobilize their supporters behind a referendum issue. Even in the case of the 1980 Quebec referendum, which occurred at a time when the present Quebec party system was still in its formative stages, the correlations between the referendum issue and feelings about the *Parti québécois* and the Liberals, the two main provincial parties, were very strong. Not surprisingly, partisanship under these conditions was a

Table 2. Partisanship and voting behaviour in 13 referendums

		r*	% YES
Australia 1999rep[1]	Labor	0.30	60
	Liberal	–0.25	34
	National	–0.22	26
Canada 1992con[2]	Liberal	0.20	57
	Progressive-Conservative	0.26	60
	NDP	0.08	42
Finland 1994EU[3]	Social Democrat	0.13	77
	Centre party	–0.17	34
	National Coalition	0.24	91
Norway 1994EU[3]	Labour	0.30	65
	Conservative	0.35	85
	Centre party	–0.59	2
Sweden 1994EU[3]	Social Democrat	–0.11	48
	Moderate party	0.43	89
	Centre party	–0.05	43
Quebec 1980sov[4]	*Parti québécois*	0.73	96
	Liberal	–0.72	7
Quebec 1995sov[5]	*Parti québécois*	0.76	96
	Liberal	–0.54	6
Denmark 1992ma[6]	Social Democrat		31
	Liberal		73
	Conservative		68
France 1992ma[6]	PS		76
	RPR		38
	UDF		56
Ireland 1992 ma[6]	*Fianna Fáil*		74
	Fine Gael		74
	Labour		70
Ireland 1995div[7]	*Fianna Fáil*		44
	Fine Gael		51
	Labour		66
Scotland 1997dev[8]	Labour		93
	Scottish National		97
	Conservative		19
Wales 1997dev[8]	Labour		60
	Conservative		10
	Plaid Cymru		93

Notes: *Pearson r; [1]1999 Australian Constitutional Referendum Study; [2]1992 Carleton Referendum Study; [3]Comparative Nordic Referendums Study; [4]1980 Canadian National Election Study: Quebec referendum wave; [5]1995 Carleton ISSP Study; [6]*Eurobarometer 38*, September/October 1992; [7]November 1995 MRBI survey; [8]1997 CREST surveys.

powerful predictor of the vote, even in 1980 when the party system had not fully aligned into its present form.[6] Similarly, in the New Zealand referendums on electoral reform (see Aimer & Miller in this issue), partisanship emerges as a strong correlate of the vote, even though the issue itself was not fundamentally a partisan one.

The 1992 Canadian constitutional referendum provides an almost exactly opposite set of circumstances with regard to the existence of partisan cues. Here, the three main federal parties (Liberals, Conservatives and New Democrats) all endorsed the constitutional agreement and campaigned actively on its behalf. Therefore, the contest could hardly have been seen as primarily a partisan fight, even though the smaller Reform Party and *Bloc québécois* opposed the agreement and campaigned actively against it. Because the three main federal parties all supported the agreement, partisanship proved to be a relatively weak cue for most voters and a poor predictor of voting behaviour in the referendum. In fact, the ability of a number of other variables which are often important in explaining voting in Canadian federal elections to predict voting behaviour in the 1992 referendum was also fairly limited. A multivariate analysis which included factors such as language, age and income, and feelings about individual political leaders, in addition to partisanship, yielded an estimated r^2 of only 0.36 (Clarke et al. 1996).[7]

Survey data from some of the other referendum cases considered here suggest a number of other patterns that fall between these two polarities. Table 2 displays the relationships found in the Nordic countries between feelings toward the parties and voting behaviour in the 1994 referendums on European Union membership.[8] In Norway, for example, the correlation between feelings about the European Union and feelings toward the Labour and Conservative parties, both of which campaigned for European Union membership, were moderately strong and positive. Yet the Conservatives managed to deliver a much higher percentage of their supporters to the YES side in the referendum (85 per cent) than did the governing Labour Party (65 per cent). In Finland, the relationships between party feelings and those toward the European Union were generally weaker. Yet several of the parties which campaigned for a YES vote delivered high percentages of their supporters in support of European Union membership. Some 91 per cent of conservative KOK supporters, for example, were found to have voted YES, while 77 per cent of Social Democrats did so. The correlation with ideology in Finland, as measured by the left/right self placement scale (see Table 3), was substantially weaker than in the other two countries.

Data collected at the time of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty referendums in Ireland, France and Denmark provide some additional evidence regarding the

Table 3. Correlations between ideological self-placement and voting behaviour in seven referendums

		r*
Finland[1]	1994 European Union membership	–0.10
Ireland[2]	1992 Maastricht Treaty	–0.13
Australia[3]	1999 republic	0.18
France[2]	1992 Maastricht Treaty	0.25
Norway[1]	1994 European Union membership	–0.25
Denmark[2]	1992 Maastricht Treaty	–0.41
Sweden[1]	1994 European Union membership	–0.47

Notes: *Pearson r; [1]Comparative Nordic Referendums Study; [2]*Eurobarometer 38*, September/October 1992; [3]1999 Australian Constitutional Referendum Study.

linkages between partisanship and referendum voting.[9] In Ireland, where all of the main political parties endorsed the Maastricht Treaty, percentages reporting a YES vote in the referendum were high within each group. The data suggest that voters who placed themselves on the left of the political spectrum in Ireland were nearly as likely to support measures leading to further economic and political integration in Europe as those on the right. The pattern was quite different in Denmark, however, where the correlation between support for Maastricht and ideology was much stronger. With the exception of the small Progress Party, parties on the right of the political spectrum in Denmark were generally more supportive of Maastricht and more positively disposed in general toward the concept of greater European unity. Social Democratic supporters displayed the same sort of ambivalence found among Social Democrats in Sweden two years later. Only 31 per cent of those who had voted for this party in elections reported a YES vote in the 1992 referendum, in spite of their party's official endorsement of Maastricht. On the broader issue of European unity, Danish Social Democrats at the time were nearly evenly split.

The data for France from *Eurobarometer 38* show a distinctly different pattern. Here, the correlation between ideology and support for, or opposition to, Maastricht runs in a different direction, with respondents who placed themselves on the *right* of the political spectrum somewhat more likely to be opposed. In part, this reflected President Mitterrand's success in maintaining support for the treaty among Socialists, and the divisions over the issue which surfaced within the RPR (Appleton 1992). Although Gaullist voters in France at the time displayed generally positive attitudes toward Europe, the active

opposition to Maastricht of prominent party figures such as Philippe Seguin and Charles Pasqua, together with the weak support given to the treaty by Chirac, cut deeply into support for the YES side among Gaullists. Combined with the more united opposition coming from the smaller far-left and far-right parties, this was almost enough to defeat the Treaty in what ultimately proved to be an extremely close vote.

The 1999 Australian referendum on the monarchy presents a case involving an entirely different type of issue, and one in which linkages between party feelings and attitudes toward the underlying issue were also quite weak. Nor was the issue primarily an ideological one for most voters (see Table 3). The republican movement was largely an elite initiative at its inception, little understood and lacking in relevance for many Australians (see Higley & McAllister in this issue). Nevertheless, some fairly clear partisan voting patterns were in evidence, at least on the central issue of the referendum involving replacement of the monarchy, with 60 per cent of Labor partisans voting YES on that issue compared to only 34 per cent of Liberals (see Table 2). Had the referendum itself been either a straight party fight or a contest driven entirely by public opinion on the underlying issues, the outcome very likely would have been different. In reality, it was neither of these. As the discourse of the campaign shifted the debate away from the underlying issue of the monarchy and more toward the question of an elected presidency, predispositions on the issue of the Queen as head of state mattered less. As in the 1992 Canadian constitutional referendum, opponents of the initiative were successful in linking it to more generalized discontent with the political class, thereby further undermining support which might otherwise have been won on the merits of the proposal alone.

A further example of this pattern of opinion formation and change is found in the Irish referendums on divorce (see Sinnott in this issue). In the 1995 referendum on this question, both public opinion on the divorce issue itself and the positioning of the parties should have brought about easy passage of the amendment. But, as is seen in Table 2, although all of the Irish parties endorsed the amendment, neither *Fianna Fáil* nor *Fine Gael* supporters voted in any substantial numbers in favour of it. While the 1995 amendment carried by the narrowest of margins, this result was not due either to the ability of the parties to rally their supporters behind it or to a clear expression of the public will on the issue of divorce. Rather, it reflected the uncertainty that often prevails when an issue which is not firmly anchored in existing social or political cleavages is subjected to the intensity of a referendum campaign. Opponents of the proposal had a unique opportunity to change the subject of the debate and to develop and promote other linkages that were less favourable to its passage.

Conclusion: The dynamics of opinion change in referendum campaigns

In a referendum, voters must choose among alternatives that are often (but not always) unfamiliar and lacking in reliable voting cues. Magleby (1989) attributes the volatility of opinion on many ballot propositions in the United States to the typical absence of simplifying party and candidate cues. In many of the cases considered in this Special Issue, however, the decision to hold a referendum was taken by a governing political party (or parties). Sometimes this occurred for legal or constitutional reasons, or merely because the governing party concluded that a particular political agenda required demonstrated public support in order to carry it through. When a governing party opts for a referendum strategy, it generally does so in the expectation that it will win or that its position on a particular issue will be sustained. However, such a strategy can easily fail, because the uncertainties of a campaign can place at risk even the most carefully structured referendum proposal. François Mitterrand may not have fully anticipated the high degree of political risk involved in putting the Maastricht Treaty to a referendum in 1992, believing as he did that the Treaty would be readily endorsed by French voters. Likewise, Canadian political leaders, having committed themselves to a referendum following the 1992 constitutional agreement, did not anticipate that the electorate would decisively reject their carefully balanced package of reforms. While the strategy which lays behind the decision to call a referendum may be clear, a campaign can introduce a new set of variables, and these are sometimes capable of producing substantial shifts in sentiment, particularly when the factors anchoring opinions on an issue are weak to begin with.

Pulling together the theoretical threads of this discussion, we can see that the most volatile referendum campaigns will be those in which there is little partisan, issue or ideological basis on which voters might tend to form an opinion easily. Lacking such information, they take more time to come to a decision, and that decision becomes highly unpredictable. Where an issue is a familiar one, or where political parties take clear competing positions, the voting decision is easier and tends to be made earlier in the campaign. We might here distinguish between three distinctly different types of referendum campaigns, all of which are amply represented among the various cases considered in this Special Issue. In the first of these, which I term *opinion formation*, voters cannot be expected to have well-formed opinions on a issue that has not previously been a subject of public debate in other political arenas. In Zaller's terms, these are situations of low cognitive engagement with a particular issue. As the campaign progresses, opinions gradually begin to form, with voters taking cues from various sources. The potential for volatility in such cir-

cumstances is very high, because there is little in the way of core beliefs or attitudes to anchor the opinions which are formed. The 1992 Canadian constitutional referendum represents just such a case.

A second type of dynamic occurs when a referendum on a reasonably well-known issue begins to take on a new direction over the course of a campaign. Often this happens when opposition groups are successful in 'changing the subject' of a referendum or in raising doubts about the issue that is *really* being discussed. Darcy and Laver (1990) coined the term *opinion reversal* to describe the dynamic of the 1986 Irish divorce referendum campaign, in which such a sharp change in opinion occurred. In the 1999 Australian republic referendum also, polls indicated that a majority of Australians favoured ending the monarchy, both before *and* after the referendum. However, opponents of that change, including the incumbent Prime Minister, were successful during the campaign in shifting the debate to the issue of an elected versus appointed presidency, thereby dividing potential YES voters. Persuaded that the 'politician's republic' deserved to be defeated, many voters who might otherwise have supported the YES side opted for the NO.

Finally, we come to a third type of referendum campaign, which might seem more familiar to students of elections. Here, opinion is much firmer and is less subject to rapid change or sudden reversal. Either the nature of the issue itself or the circumstances of the referendum generate strong cues based on partisanship, ideology or pre-existing opinions. Voters take their cues from familiar sources and make their voting decisions early in the campaign. In such a contest, much of the attention is directed towards wavering or 'undecided' voters, in the knowledge that a swing of only a few percentage points might make the crucial difference in the outcome. Following such a strategy, the Swedish government successfully overcame well-known and well-organised opposition to European Union entry in the 1994 referendum. The 1995 Quebec sovereignty referendum also stands as a good example of a campaign in which the *Parti québécois* Government knew that it could count on the support of sovereignist voters, but also needed the votes of 'soft nationalists' in order to secure a majority for its proposal. The fact that it was nearly successful was due more to effective campaign leadership than to the underlying fundamentals of opinion on the issue (Pammett & LeDuc 2001). I term this type of campaign dynamic the *uphill struggle*. The party initiating the referendum knows that it can count on the votes of its core supporters. It knows also where the additional votes may lie that it needs in order to security a majority and that it can win these only through a hard fought campaign. However, as the Norwegian and Quebec cases demonstrate, such a strategy is not always successful even when it is well conceived and well executed. While

the campaign strategy behind the 'uphill struggle' referendum is to win over the additional votes that may be needed for passage or to out-mobilise the opposition, it is entirely possible that these strategies may produce no net change at all in public opinion. When it fails, the losing side will typically call for another referendum at some time in the future. Although referendums are sometimes promoted as a device capable of resolving difficult political issues, there is no real evidence that they are any more successful than various other institutional devices in delivering on this promise when electorates remain deeply divided on an issue of fundamental importance to them.

Figure 3 presents a graphic illustration of these three types of referendum campaigns and of the dynamic of opinion formation or change that might be expected to occur in each of them. To a large extent, these are representations of pure types that may portray only an abstraction of the reality of opinion formation and change in many actual referendums. In fact, some referendums may readily combine elements of more than one type. Yet, the typology shown in Figure 3 seems to capture many of the characteristics of campaign dynamics in the various referendums treated in this Special Issue. The 'opinion formation' model resembles that of the most highly de-aligned polities, in which short-term variables become the dominant element in understanding and explaining electoral outcomes. While we do not attempt here to typologise the referendums treated in this Special Issue according to such a schema, it is clear that all three types of cases occur frequently in those polities where the referendum device is employed to resolve particular political issues. Theories of direct democracy tend to presume that referendum voters are 'issue' voters. However, the empirical evidence suggests that attitudes towards issues are only one of the variables affecting voting choice, and that they are not always the most important one in determining the outcome of a referendum.

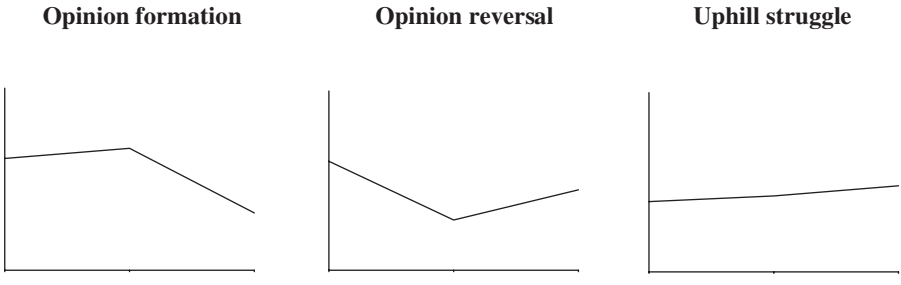

Figure 3. Three patterns of opinion change in referendum campaigns.

Notes

1. There is, of course, an extensive literature on this subject. See, especially, Budge (1996) or Setälä (1999) for a review of some of these larger theoretical issues.
2. The poll chosen was as close to the beginning of the campaign as possible. For a more detailed discussion of this exercise, involving a larger number of referendum cases than are treated here, see LeDuc (2000a). A revised version of that paper will be published in David Farrell and Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck, *Do political campaigns matter?: Campaign effects in elections and referendums* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).
3. The text of the 1980 Quebec referendum question was as follows: 'The Government of Quebec has made public its proposal to negotiate a new agreement with the rest of Canada, based on the equality of nations. This agreement would enable Quebec to acquire the exclusive power to make its laws, levy its taxes, and establish relations abroad – in other words, sovereignty – and at the same time, to maintain with Canada an economic association including a common currency. No change in political status resulting from these negotiations will be effected without approval by the people through another referendum. On these terms, do you agree to give the Government of Quebec the mandate to negotiate the proposed agreement between Quebec and Canada?'
4. The response categories found in the surveys do not always coincide perfectly with the labels employed in Table 1. In the CREST surveys in Scotland and Wales, for example, the categories were: 'before the general election' (i.e., 1 May 1997); 'between the general election and the referendum'; 'in the month before'; 'in the week before'. The category 'when the referendum was called' was not used in the SOFRES or the Nordic countries surveys, but the other categories utilized in those instances were similar to those shown in the Table.
5. A number of different surveys are utilized in this analysis, not all of which contain exactly the same variables. Where possible, I have used thermometer-type and/or interval-scale measures of attitudes toward political parties and issues, and standard left-right self placement indices. Party identification is used in the bivariate analyses and, where not available (as in *Eurobarometer 38*), I substitute past vote or vote intention. Surveys employed in this analysis are: the 1980 Canadian National Election Study, the 1992 Carleton Referendum Study, the 1995 Carleton ISSP Survey, the 1993 Canadian National Election Study, the 1994 Comparative Nordic Referendums Study, *Eurobarometer 38* (September/October 1992), the 1999 Australian Constitutional Referendum Study and polls conducted by the Market Research Bureau of Ireland. I am grateful to the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), Carleton University, the University of Toronto Data Library, Trinity College (Dublin), Norwegian Social Science Data Services and the Australian National University Social Science Data Archive for making these studies available for secondary analysis. Neither the archives nor the principal investigators of these studies are responsible for the analyses and interpretations presented here. Data shown in Table 2 are for the two or three largest parties in each country. A more detailed presentation of these results, including adherents of other parties, may be found in LeDuc (2000b).
6. In the 1976 provincial election, in which the *Parti québécois* first came to power, the old *Union nationale* party won 18 per cent of the vote and 11 seats in the National Assembly, finishing third behind the Liberals. By the time of the next (1981) election, this party had all but disappeared. In that election, the Liberals and *Parti québécois* combined won over 95 per cent of the total vote and no other party obtained a seat.

7. Compared, for example, to a figure of 0.78 obtained in a comparable analysis of voting behaviour in the 1993 federal election (Clarke et al. 1996).
8. Measures employed are 11-point 'sympathy scales' on which respondents were asked to locate their feelings toward each of the political parties and the European Union. The percentage of self-declared supporters of each of the parties who voted YES in the referendum is also shown in Table 2.
9. Data are from *Eurobarometer 38*. This survey does not contain either interval-scale 'party feeling' measures or a traditional party identification item. Party support here is measured by reported vote in the previous national election. Respondent self-placement on a 10-point 'left/right' scale is, however, available and the correlations with this item are also shown in Table 3.

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