

Referendums on Membership and European Integration 1972–2015

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Abstract

There are many myths about referendums. The most common one is that voters are inherently sceptical and tend to vote no when given the opportunity. This article analyses some of the commonly held ‘truths’ about referendums on EU matters. Based on a statistical analysis of all forty-three EU-related referendums since 1972, it shows that governments tend to lose referendums if they have been in office for a long time, that emotive words on the ballot paper are correlated with a high yes vote and that a high turnout is correlated with a vote against European integration, but campaign spending is inconsequential. Based solely on statistical evidence from the previous forty-three referendums, the opponents of EU membership will win the Brexit referendum.

Keywords: Brexit referendum, referendums, European Union, Brexit, EU referendums

IN THE WAKE of the French and the Dutch voters’ rejection of the European Constitution, José Manuel Barroso, then President of the European Commission, denounced referendums as ‘undermin[ing] the Europe we are trying to build’ by ‘simplifying important and complex subjects’. He was not alone in reaching this conclusion. Margot Wallström, vice-president of the Commission, observed in her blog that the European Constitution was a ‘complex issue to vote on’, and that voters would always use ‘a referendum to answer a question that was not put to them’.²

But before reaching the conclusion that voters are ill-equipped to make decisions, it seems sensible to go back to square one and determine once and for all how eurosceptic the voters actually are—or, rather, are not. There are several myths. As this article will show, some of these are ill-founded and based on little evidence. In fact, the majority of votes have resulted in a yes, distrust is *not* correlated with no votes and the richer side *does not* always win.

The myth of the many no votes

The politicians seeking to establish ‘an ever closer Union’ have rarely shown enthusiasm for referendums. Jean Monnet, the founding father of the EU, bluntly stated in his autobiography that it would be ‘wrong to consult the people of Europe about the structure of a Community of which they had not had practical experience’.³

As Table 1 shows, there have been forty-three referendums on the EU (or the EEC, as it was called before 1992). Perhaps surprisingly, most of these votes have led to *endorsements* of membership of the EU or *more* integration. No votes in EU referendums are rare.

Ten referendums—or 23 per cent—have resulted in defeat (all of them in Western Europe). Moreover, a relatively clear majority has generally been recorded in referendums on the EU. On average 61 per cent have voted for transfer of sovereignty or more integration, though we saw a marginally greater number of rejections after the 1990s when European integration began to move into controversial areas such as common currency and immigration. It might be speculated that the overall changes in the global political climate after the fall of communism had an effect on support for European integration.

Correction added on 29th January 2016 after initial online publication on 18th January 2016. Table 1 has been amended.

Table 1: Referendums on EU/EEC membership and integration 1972–2015

Country	Year	Yes	Turnout	Issue
Norway	1972	46.5	79	Membership
Denmark	1972	63.3	90	Membership
France	1972	68	60	Approve applicants (T)
Ireland	1972	81	83	Membership
United Kingdom	1975	67	64	Renegotiation
Greenland	1982	47	73	Leave the EEC
Denmark	1986	56	75	Single European Act
Ireland	1987	70	44	Single European Act
Denmark	1992	49	83	Maastricht Treaty
France	1992	51	69	Maastricht Treaty
Ireland	1992	69	44	Maastricht Treaty
Denmark	1993	56	86	Maastricht Treaty
Norway	1994	47	89	Membership
Sweden	1994	52	82	Membership
Finland	1994	56	70	Membership
Austria	1994	66	82	Membership
Denmark	1998	55	76	Amsterdam Treaty
Ireland	1998	62	56	Amsterdam Treaty
Denmark	2000	46	87	Single currency
Ireland	2001	46	35	Nice Treaty
Ireland	2002	63	49	Nice Treaty
Malta	2003	53	90	Membership
Sweden	2003	55	82	Single currency
Poland	2003	59	77	Membership
Slovenia	2003	60	90	Membership
Estonia	2003	67	64	Membership
Czech Republic	2003	77	55	Membership
Hungary	2003	84	46	Membership
Lithuania	2003	91	63	Membership
Romania	2003	91	55	Membership
Slovakia	2003	92	52	Membership
Latvia	2004	67	71	Membership
Netherlands	2005	38	63	European Constitution
France	2005	45	69	European Constitution
Luxembourg	2005	56	90	European Constitution
Spain	2005	77	42	European Constitution
Ireland	2008	47	53	Lisbon Treaty
Ireland	2009	67	59	Lisbon Treaty
Ireland	2012	60	39	Financial Compact (T)
Croatia	2012	66	43	Membership
Denmark	2014	62	55	Patent Court (T)
Denmark	2015	42	75	Police co-operation
Greece	2015	43	62	Bailout

Sources: www.idea.org, www.c2d.ch and Matt Qvortrup, *Referendums Around the World*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2015

Average yes percentage (all EU):

Percentage yes votes (all EU): 77%

Average yes percentage (Western Europe: N:34) 56%

Percentage yes outcomes (Western Europe): 69%

Average yes percentage (Eastern Europe: N:10): 75%

Percentage yes outcomes (Eastern Europe): 100%

Yes percentage: non-technical referendums (N:41): 61%

Yes percentage: technical referendums (N:3): 63%

Yes percentage: accession referendums (N:18) 68%

Yes percentage before 1990: 63%

Yes percentage after 1990: 60%

Notwithstanding French scepticism vis-à-vis American dominance in Europe, the EEC (as the EU was called before the Maastricht Treaty) was often portrayed as a club of market-democracies, which were in opposition to the planned economies under Soviet control. However, with communism gone as a potent threat, this argument for closer integration disappeared. The fall of communism thus removed the security case for supporting treaty changes and can—in part—be seen as one of the reasons for the marginally increased opposition to the EU after 1990.

Of course, one runs the risk of not comparing like with like. It is often observed, or asserted, that referendums on accession tend to win enthusiastic approval (see Table 1)—with the exception of Norway, where two votes in, respectively, 1972 and 1994 resulted in rejection.⁴ And there is also a sense that this tendency was more pronounced in Eastern Europe.

There is a slight tendency for countries in Western Europe to be less keen on membership than their Eastern European neighbours. For example, when the former communist countries the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Slovakia, Poland, Romania, Hungary, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania voted on membership in 2003, average support was 74 per cent. By contrast, when Malta voted in the same year, only 53 per cent supported membership. It seems that the former communist countries voted yes to signify a 'return to Europe' and that the vote for the EU was as much a vote for severing ties to the communist past as it was an endorsement of further European integration.

It is difficult to underestimate this cause. That the countries in the East wanted to anchor themselves in the West was a powerful psychological factor. Yet support for EEC membership in the 1972 referendums in Norway, Ireland and Denmark was at a respectable average of 68 per cent. So there are examples of even Western European countries that embraced membership with high levels of support. However, that these referendums—as noted—took place during the Cold War is perhaps not inconsequential. Indeed, in Denmark in 1972 the government emphasised that a vote for membership was a vote for the Western alliance. That support for membership was considerably lower two decades later when Austria, Finland, Sweden

and Norway held referendums on membership in 1994—that is, after the threat from the East was perceived to have disappeared—is perhaps telling.

The myth of 'if in doubt vote no'

In 1972 Sinn Féin, an Irish party opposing EEC membership, published a poster with the simple text 'if in doubt vote no'. The Irish voters were not convinced: 83 per cent voted to join the EEC. But the assertion that voters grow increasingly sceptical over the course of a campaign has persisted.

Based on the 'if in doubt vote no' thesis, one would perhaps have expected that most voters would turn more unconvinced over the course of a campaign. This tendency is not universal; in fact, the opposite might be the case. True, in Denmark (1992) and in France (2005), the yes sides squandered double-digit leads in the polls and went down to defeats. The same was true in the case of the Irish 'no' to the Nice Treaty in 2001. However, there is a slightly greater number of examples of campaigns during which the no side has haemorrhaged support rather than the opposite. For example, in the Irish referendum on the European Fiscal Compact (2012) and in the Danish referendum on the Unified Patent Court in 2014, the yes sides gained momentum during the respective campaigns. Similarly, in the Danish referendum on the Amsterdam Treaty in 1998 and in the Finnish referendum on membership in 1994, the no sides lost support throughout the campaign, and the yes sides gained ground.

In the cases for which we have credible polling data, the no side lost support in ten out of sixteen cases. On average the no side lost 13 per cent of its initial lead in these referendums. By contrast, the support lost for the yes sides was on average nine per cent. The evidence from these referendums also shows that the 'don't knows' were split evenly between 'yes' and 'no'.

But not everything can be subjected to statistical analysis. The observant reader will, no doubt, have noted that the aforementioned Danish vote on the Patent Court and the European Fiscal Compact vote in Ireland involved very technical issues. Could it be that voters are more likely to accept technical changes? Perhaps so for the Danish referen-

dum, but it is less clear in the Irish case. Although the vote on the Fiscal Compact was of a technical nature, one should not forget the context within which it took place. The Thirtieth Amendment of the Constitution—to give the referendum its proper name—was integrally connected with unpopular austerity measures being imposed as part of Ireland’s access to financial support from the EU. The issue was not entirely technical. Yet the voters supported the proposed changes to EU fiscal rules notwithstanding general discontent with austerity policies. Despite the resentment towards austerity policies pursued by the Fine Gael/Labour coalition government, 60 per cent of the Irish voters approved the transfer of sovereignty. Their propensity to support uncontroversial matters perhaps indicates that voters do not blindly reject all changes.

The myth of growing euroscepticism

Compared to the enthusiasm of the early referendums and the comfortable majorities in the Irish, Danish and British referendums in the 1970s, the no votes in the 1990s and 2000s

seem to suggest that voters have become more hesitant as time has passed. This would imply a negative correlation between yes votes and time; euroscepticism increases as the years go by. There is, to be sure, a correlation of $R = -.41$ between yes vote and time, but it is not significant by any measure; the margin of error is 79 per cent! So, statistically speaking, the voters have not become significantly sceptical as time has gone by—although, as noted above, there was a slight fall of 3 per cent in support for the EU after 1990.

But other factors are revealing. Simply eyeballing the graph in Figure 1, we can observe a tendency for a low yes vote to be correlated with a high turnout. Statistically this tendency is confirmed: $R = -.43$ (significant at the 0.01 level). The more people participate, the greater the probability that the opponents of the EU will win; in other words, a high turnout is bad news for those who favour EU membership or further European integration.

The wording of the question and other factors

One of the most persistent claims in referendums is that the wording of the question can

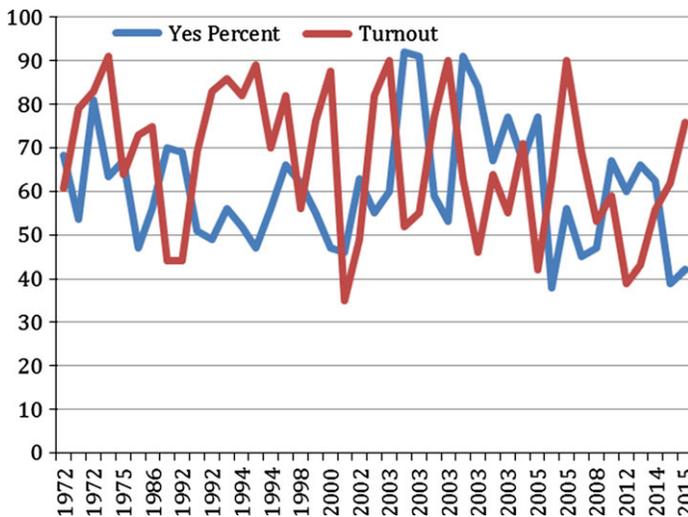


Figure 1: Yes percentage and turnout in EU/EEC referendums 1972–2015.

Sources: Based on A. T. Jenssen, P. Pesonen and M. Gilljam, eds, *To Join or Not to Join: Three Nordic Referendums on Membership in the European Union*, Scandinavian University Press North America, 1998; A. Widfeldt, 'Elite collusion and public deance: Sweden’s euro referendum in 2003', *West European Politics*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2004, pp. 503–17; M. Qvortrup, ed., *Referendums Around the World: The Continued Growth of Direct Democracy*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2014.

be a decisive factor. While others have found it difficult to verify this claim more generally, there is a strong indication that the presence of emotive words such as ‘agree’ or ‘approve’ can have an effect on the outcome of EU referendums. If we correlate the presence of emotive words on the ballot with the yes vote we find a correlation coefficient of $R = .47$ (significant at the 0.01 level). Rhetorical questions—and the psychological effect of posing the right question—cannot be discounted.

But the different factors cannot be isolated, and the outcome of an EU referendum is a function of many different variables. Some of these are shown in Table 2.

The regression analysis in Table 2 allows us to see the numerical effect of different independent variables on the probability of a yes vote. The variables are standardised so that the higher the number, the greater the importance of the measure. A positive value shows that the factor increases the likelihood of a yes vote; negative coefficients show a diminution. Table 2 shows that the presence of emotive words on the ballot paper has a strong and statistically significant positive effect on the ‘yes’ percentage. But as the table also shows, other factors too are statistically significant.

Based solely on this statistical analysis, we would expect the current government to lose the referendum by 4 per cent.⁵ Of course, this analysis is subject to caveats and unique factors cannot be discounted, but proponents

of British EU membership cannot afford to be complacent.

The myth of elite consensus

Consensus among all the main political parties is often believed to be an important factor in referendums.⁶ Voters are seemingly willing to trust the recommendations of the parties they vote for in parliamentary elections. This may well be true for referendums more generally. Indeed, in a doctoral thesis, the Austrian political scientist Stefan Vospernik found that elite consensus was correlated with yes votes.⁷ We do not find the same tendency in EU referendums. As referendums in Ireland (2001 and 2008) and the Netherlands (2005) have shown, elite consensus is not a guarantee of victory in EU referendums, and statistically these examples are not exceptions.

Years in office

Another factor associated with the outcome of referendums is the number of years the government has been in office. A new government often enjoys a honeymoon period, and it is more likely to win a referendum on an EU matter during this period. The logic is straightforward and inspired by the American political scientist V. O. Key’s observation that ‘to govern is to antagonize’.⁸ The general validity of the hypothesis was contested in an analysis of the 2003 accession referendums by Aleks Szczerbiak and Paul Taggart, who were ‘dubious whether the proposition [was] generalizable across all cases’, although they conceded that it ‘was certainly true for the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Slovakia’.⁹ When considered across all the cases there is, as Table 2 shows, a statistical tendency that governments that have been in office for a long time *tend* to lose EU referendums.

Trust and turnout

Another often cited—but rarely substantiated—assertion is that referendums allow the voters to send a signal that they distrust the government. Using *World Value Survey* data (which is only available from 1980 onwards), we can correlate yes percentage

Table 2: Effects of different factors on referendum outcome

Emotive words	.473***
Government years in office:	−.301**
Turnout:	−.309**
Elite consensus:	.182
Trust in government	.034

Note OLS-Regression: Entries are standardized beta-coefficients *** Significant at 0.01, ** Significant at 0.05, *Significant at 0.1 (N:43, R-Squared: .50). Dependent variable Yes percentage.

Based on A. T. Jenssen, P. Pesonen and M. Gilljam, eds, *To Join or Not to Join: Three Nordic Referendums on Membership in the European Union*, Oslo, Scandinavian University Press North America, 1998; A. Widfeldt, ‘Elite collusion and public defiance: Sweden’s euro referendum in 2003’, *West European Politics*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2004, pp. 503–17; M. Qvortrup, ed., *Referendums Around the World: The Continued Growth of Direct Democracy*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2014.

with trust in government. The evidence from forty referendums held since 1980 suggests a near non-existent correlation between trust in politicians and an affirmative outcome of $R = -.04$ (with a margin of error of close to 80 per cent). If anything, distrust in politicians is associated with a *high* yes vote in the EU. For example, in Romania in 2003, 90 per cent supported a constitutional change that would enable the country to become a member of the EU at a time when a mere 20 per cent trusted the government.

The myth that the richer side always wins

That the rich can effectively sway the result of a referendum if they use their superior funds is often seen as a given. And it is not surprising that the most frequently heard criticism of referendums is the role that big money plays. As a result of this concern, some jurisdictions have introduced spending limits in referendum campaigns for fear that the richer side could 'buy' the vote. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 sets tight limits on how much money the respective campaigns are allowed to spend. Sections 117–118 of the Act provide that:

- Political parties may spend money in proportion to their percentage of votes in the last general election.
- For other permitted participants the limit is £0.5 million.
- Individuals may not spend more than £10,000.
- Designated umbrella organisations may spend a total of £5 million.

There is no shortage of examples of referendums characterised by almost absurd disparities in campaign spending, notably the referendums in Eastern Europe in 2003, in which the European Commission often lavishly sponsored 'information campaigns'.¹⁰ Similar campaigns have been fought with similar disparities—and similar outcomes—in Western Europe, most notably in Austria in 1994. However, it is noteworthy that countries with impeccable reputations for fairness and high levels of electoral integrity such as

Denmark and Norway have *no* limits on campaign spending.¹¹ Despite this, these two countries have been prone to vote no (twice in Norway, in 1972 and 1994, and three times in Denmark, in 1992, 2000 and 2015), although the no sides were outspent in all the contests. France likewise allows limitless campaign spending, and yet the French voted 'no' in 2005 and came within a whisker of rejecting the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 despite the proponents of Maastricht spending more money.

This discussion, it could be argued, assumes that the big money will always be backing a 'yes' vote. This has traditionally been the case. However, the UK Brexit referendum might be different, as many well-funded groups have emerged. Whether a disparity in favour of opponents of the EU will make a difference is an interesting question.

In other jurisdictions, most notably American states, it used to be conventional wisdom that it was impossible to win a referendum through massive campaign spending.¹² However, subsequent research based on 'television advertising for or against California ballot measures from 2000 to 2004 ... [showed] that supporting and opposing interest groups' campaigning ha[d] a quantitatively important and statistically significant influence on ballot measure outcomes'.¹³ These findings, however, cannot be directly translated to the European context. In California there are dozens of referendums on the ballot every electoral cycle. None of the European states allow the use of televised commercials to the degree known in America, and perhaps as importantly, referendums are much rarer in the EU countries. In the European referendums investigated to date, there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that money makes a difference.¹⁴ Yet the perception of one-sided campaign spending might create resentment, and this might fuel a feeling that the result was illegitimate. This feeling should not be underestimated in a closely fought campaign on a controversial issue, and could have implications for the legitimacy of the political system in the aftermath of a referendum.

The myth of the media?

Traditionally, political scientists have been somewhat sceptical as to the effect of media

endorsements. The conventional wisdom has been that the media are rarely successful in telling voters what to think, but that they may be successful in telling voters what to think about. This may be true of elections and other referendums, but it is not unequivocally true for referendums on the EU. While it is difficult to carry out a statistical study of the effects of the mass media on referendum results, many case studies point to an effect. Writing about the Netherlands, scholars have found that exposure to tabloid coverage in referendums can have an effect on the outcome.¹⁵ The same finding has been reported in an analysis of Irish referendums.

Conclusion

If one were to trust the headlines, the European public is generally opposed to 'Brussels', but this euroscepticism is not uniformly reflected in the outcome of the referendums on EU-related matters. On average the percentage voting *Yes, Oui, Ja, Si*, etc. has been 77 per cent. Even when we exclude the referendums on accession held in Eastern Europe in 2003, we find that the vast majority of referendums have resulted in yes votes: so far so good for proponents of the EU.

But other tendencies are more disturbing for EU enthusiasts. Many think that—in the end—the Brexit referendum will be won by massive campaign spending on the part of economically strong groups with an interest in staying in the EU. Not so. Despite misgivings about one-sided campaign spending, there is little evidence that money can effectively 'buy' the outcome of a EU referendum. Countries with no limits on campaign spending have often seen well-funded campaigns go down to defeat. Many contend that elite consensus is almost a guarantee of success and that the defeat in the Dutch referendum 2005 and the Danish referendum in 2000 are exceptions to the rule, but there is no indication of this statistically.

One assertion is substantiated: the importance of the wording of the question. There is a significant correlation between a high yes vote and the use of affirmative words such as 'agree' and 'approve' in the ballot

question. But with a neutral question in the forthcoming referendum, this possible advantage has been lost for the proponents of UK membership. Voters will be asked: "Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union? Yes/No'.

These factors, and other tendencies such as the government's tenure and the likelihood of a high turnout, suggest that the opponents of the EU have a structural advantage. Indeed, the calculations based on the statistical model in this article suggest that, *ceteris paribus*, those in favour of staying in the EU will lose the forthcoming referendum.

But the problem is that Britain is a rather deviant case. Normally a referendum is lost if the same government has been in office for a long time—but the current Conservative administration is not the same as the previous Conservative–Liberal Democrat government, so the usual logic may not apply here. Whether the pattern identified in other referendums on EU membership and integration applies to Britain is an open question, but both sides ignore them at their peril.

Notes

- 1 The author is grateful for help, data and suggestions from Ece Atikcan (Laval University), Mikael Gilliam (University of Gothenburg), Laurence Morel (University of Lille), Gillian Peele (University of Oxford) and Tor Bjørklund (University of Oslo). The usual caveat applies.
- 2 Barosso and Wallström quoted in *New Statesman*, 13 June 2005, www.newstatesman.com/node/162241 (accessed 7 January 2016).
- 3 J. Monnet, *Memoires*, New York, Doubleday, 1978, p. 367.
- 4 E. Ö. Atikcan, *Framing the European Union: The Power of Political Arguments in Shaping European Integration*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- 5 The regression equation with the best fit is $Yes = 74 + 13.3EmotiveWord - 0.25Turnout - 1.4Years\ in\ Office$. Calculation based on a 70 per cent turnout. A higher turnout will, all other things being equal, lead to a bigger defeat for the government.
- 6 The main parties are defined as those who poll more than 5 per cent in parliamentary elections.
- 7 S. Vospernik, *Modelle der direkten Demokratie*, Baden-Baden, Nomos Verlag, 2014.

- 8 V. O. Key, *The Responsible Electorate*, Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966, p. 30.
- 9 A. Szcerbiak and P. Taggart, *EU Enlargement and Referendums*, London, Routledge, 2013, p. 16.
- 10 A. Krasovec and D. Lajh, 'The Slovenian EU accession referendum: a cat-and-mouse game', in Szcerbiak and Taggart, *EU Enlargement and Referendums*, p. 53.
- 11 Personal information, Professor Tor Bjørklund, University of Oslo, 8 December 2015.
- 12 E. R. Gerber, *The Populist Paradox: Interest Group Influence and the Promise of Direct Democracy*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1999.
- 13 T. Stratmann, 'Is spending more potent for or against a proposition? Evidence from ballot measures', *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2006, p. 788.
- 14 Atikcan, *Framing the European Union*.
- 15 A. R. Schuck and C. H. De Vreese, 'Public support for referendums: the role of the media', *West European Politics*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2011, pp. 181–207.