

# HOW PARTIES AFFECT VOTE CHOICE IN EUROPEAN INTEGRATION REFERENDUMS

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## ABSTRACT

Direct democracy allows citizens to undercut the will of their elected representatives. Yet, while the electorate has the final say in referendums, political parties are in a privileged position to influence voters' perceptions of the issue on the ballot. By developing a model on voting behaviour in referendums, this article examines how and to what extent parties can influence referendum outcomes. It argues that as pivotal information providers in referendum campaigns, political parties can influence the framing of and uncertainty associated with the ballot proposal and thus, in turn, affect the voting behaviour. These propositions are evaluated empirically in a 'controlled comparison' of the two Danish referendums on the Maastricht Treaty, as these cases allow us to examine how changes in party strategies affect changes in referendum outcomes.

**KEY WORDS** ■ campaign effects ■ European integration ■ issue framing ■ referendums ■ voting behaviour

## Introduction

In the referendums on the European Constitution held in 2005, a sizeable majority of the French and Dutch electorates voted No, despite a broad consensus among mainstream parties in favour of the Constitutional Treaty. This is not the first time that the public has disregarded the consensus among national parties and rejected an EU treaty. The Danish rejection of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and the Irish No to the Nice Treaty in 2001 dealt a serious blow to the European political establishment, even though both decisions were overturned in subsequent referendums. This article examines how – and to what extent – parties can influence vote choices in

referendums. To evaluate the influence of political parties in direct democracy, it is important to understand the decision-making processes of voters. While there is an extensive literature on voting behaviour in elections, there are very few general theories of how voters behave in direct democracy. Referendums present voters with a different choice than elections. No political parties or candidate names appear on the ballot, and voters must choose among alternatives that are often unfamiliar. However, this does not imply that the information and endorsements provided by political parties are irrelevant to the outcome. If voters know little about the specific ballot proposal, it is mainly the information made available to them by parties and other information providers over the course of a campaign that provides the basis for their opinion on the ballot question. Campaigns thus play a very important role in referendums, and examining how different party strategies can make a difference to the vote choice is therefore crucial if we are to understand the outcomes (de Vreese and Semetko, 2004; LeDuc, 2002). To examine how parties can influence the vote choice in referendums, the article develops a comprehensive, spatial model of how voters choose in referendums. On the basis of this theoretical model, it derives several hypotheses which are evaluated empirically in a 'controlled comparison' of the two Danish referendums on the Maastricht Treaty. This analysis thus focuses specifically on referendums on European integration, yet it could be extended to understand how political parties can influence referendum outcomes more generally.

### How Do Voters Make Up Their Minds in Referendums?

Understanding how voters make up their minds in referendums is pivotal if we are to examine the question of how parties can influence referendum outcomes. Most studies examining the interplay between elites and voters in referendum campaigns have focused on a single case and very few have been guided by a theoretical model of voting behaviour (see Hug (2002) and Hobolt (2006) for an overview). Exceptions to this lack of theorizing in the specialized EU referendum literature are the formal models developed by Schneider and Weitsman (1996) and Hug (2002). Schneider and Weitsman's agenda-setting model depicts referendums as possible 'punishment traps' where voters punish the incumbent government for poor economic performance. Hug (2002) extends this model to account for effect of institutional provisions (see also Hug and Sciarini (2000)). He argues that punishment strategies are more likely to occur when governments employ referendums in an attempt to shore up support and when the outcome is legally non-binding. Both models provide important insights into when and why voters use their vote to signal their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the national government. However, they tell us little about the reasons why voters may be inclined to vote for or against the issue at stake, irrespective

of their views on the government. The assumption is that the treaty is either 'good' or 'bad' for the voter and that voters prefer a good treaty to the status quo, but these models do not fully explore the considerations that may affect a voter's utility for a particular proposal. While there are numerous theories of why voters may prefer a certain candidate or party, we lack a theoretical framework that explains why voters choose to favour a ballot proposal in a referendum on European integration. To fill this gap in the literature, this article develops a theoretical model explaining the individual voter's utility for a referendum proposal on European integration and the effect of elite strategies. A useful starting point for understanding voting behaviour in referendums is the proximity model, originally developed in the context of a two-party system, where voters are assumed to vote for the candidate that has issue positions closest to their own ideal point (Alvarez, 1997; Downs, 1957; Enelow and Hinich, 1984). In the existing literature, this theory has rarely been explicitly applied to direct democracy, but it can render some important insights into voting in referendums.

#### *A Proximity Model of Referendum Voting*

Just as in a two-party election, referendums allow citizens to make a binary choice between two alternatives; the proposal described on the ballot,  $x$ , and the policy entailed by a No-vote, the reversion point  $r$ . We use the example of a referendum on the ratification of an EU treaty throughout this article to illustrate the more general theoretical propositions. In this example, all the rational voter needs to do is to find out whether the ratification of the treaty is better or worse than the failure to ratify the treaty. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

In Figure 1, the ballot issue,  $x$ , is the ratification of a treaty and the continuum represents a range of policy options from less European integration (e.g. exit from the European Union) to more European integration (e.g. the United States of Europe). A rational voter with single-peaked symmetric preferences and a most preferred point  $I$  at 0 would vote in favour of the proposal as this is closer to her ideal point than the reversion point  $r$  (albeit further away than status quo  $q$ ). The utility of the ballot proposal ( $x$ ) can be expressed as:

$$U_{ix} = c_{ix} - (P_{ix} - I_i)^2 \quad (1)$$

where each voter's evaluation of the ballot proposition's  $x$  utility depends upon the squared distance between the ballot position as perceived by the voter,  $P_{ix}$ , and the voter  $i$ 's own ideal point  $I_i$  on a single issue dimension. The term represents all the considerations involved in the voter's overall evaluation of  $x$  other than those pertaining to the specific issue dimension included in the model (see Alvarez, 1997; Bartels, 1986). In the context of EU referendums, this term captures considerations about domestic political

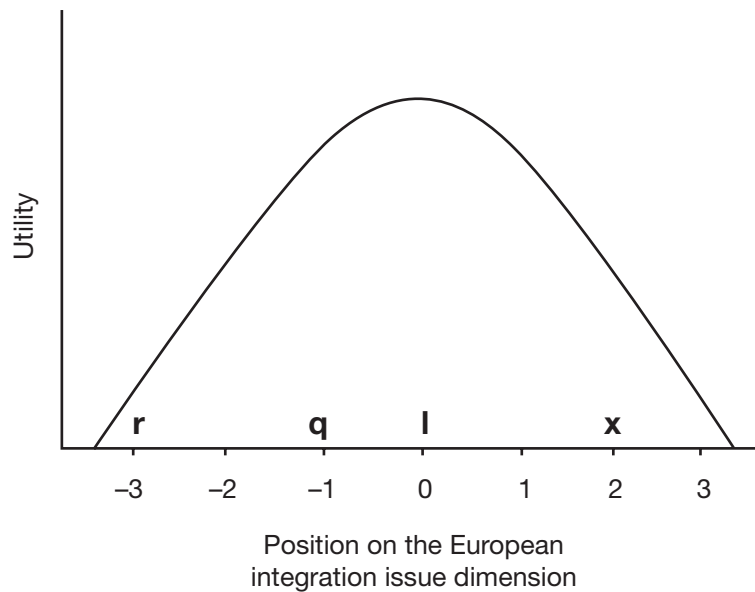


Figure 1. Spatial representation of voter choice in EU referendums

matters ('second order' factors) – the greater the impact of such considerations, the smaller the influence of the issue proximity calculus.

This proximity model represents the utility of the ballot proposal to the voter. But in order to choose in a referendum the voter must decide between the proposal and the reversion point: 'the outcome to occur if the proposal offered by the agenda setter is defeated' (Banks, 1990: 446). As illustrated in Figure 1, the policy entailed by a No-vote in referendums ( $r$ ) does not necessarily equal the status quo ( $q$ ), since voters cannot be certain that a vote against the proposal will simply lead to a continuation of the pre-existing status quo.<sup>1</sup> As an example, a rejection of a treaty may carry a specific penalty for the country that fails to ratify, such as exit from the Union. This has important implications for the potential influence of political elites, as they can shape not only the interpretation of the ballot proposal, but also the understanding of where the reversion point is located. In the formal literature, several studies have emphasized the importance of the reversion point to outcomes in referendums. Romer and Rosenthal (1979) have developed a monopoly agenda-setter model of referendums in which the outcome depends not only on the proposal offered by the setter, but also on the institutionally defined reversion point. Banks (1990, 1993) has extended this model to incorporate asymmetric information, arguing that the setters (e.g. the governing parties) have an informational advantage, since they know the reversion point, whereas voters lack information and will try to infer from a given proposal exactly what the true reversion level is, and then respond accordingly (Banks, 1993). An important insight

that can be drawn from these formal models is that voters have limited information about the location of the reversion point, and their knowledge and certainty about the location of the reversion points depend on the information and cues provided by political elites. This in turn will affect the overall utility of the referendum proposal to the voter. Before we discuss how elites may use this asymmetry of information strategically, we need to consider the issue of voter uncertainty in referendums in more detail.

### *Uncertainty and Voting in Referendums*

The simple proximity model of voting in referendums assumes that voters know the exact location of the two alternatives as well as their own ideal point. However, voters will often be uncertain about these positions and several scholars have thus extended the familiar spatial model to incorporate uncertainty by representing positions as probability distributions over a policy dimension rather than single points (see Alvarez, 1997; Bartels, 1986; Enelow and Hinich, 1981). Incorporating voter uncertainty into our model of referendum behaviour is equally sensible. By defining  $P_{ix}$  of Equation 1 as a random variable composed of a central point, and a distribution of points around the mean, a variance, we can reflect the variation that is due to differences in uncertainty about the ballot position – the smaller the distribution around the mean, the more certain the voter is about the position of the ballot proposal. Taking into account voter uncertainty means that  $P_{ix}$  is expressed as the sum of the estimated position of the ballot  $p_x$ , and the variance in the voter's perception of this position  $\sigma_{ix}^2$ . As we think of  $P_{ix}$  as a probability distribution rather than single points, we need to recast the model as the expected utility of voting for proposal  $x$ :

$$E[U_{ix}] = E[c_{ix} - (P_{ix} - I_i)^2] \quad (2)$$

After a few minor steps,<sup>2</sup> this equation can be recast as:

$$E[U_{ix}] = c_{ix} - (p_x - I_i)^2 - \sigma_{ix}^2 \quad (3)$$

where  $\sigma_{ix}^2$  is the voter's variance in perceptions of the position of the ballot proposal, i.e. voter uncertainty. It is clear from Equation 3 that the expected utility of voting for proposal  $x$  depends not only on the (squared) distance between the expected positions of the candidate and the voter's own ideal point, but also on the degree of voter uncertainty,  $\sigma_{ix}^2$ . The implication of this model is that voters' utility of voting for the proposal is reduced when they know little about the position. This assumes that voters are risk averse, which seems a reasonable assumption in the context of referendums. Empirical evidence from psychological studies has suggested that people tend to have a particular aversion to losses that makes them risk averse in their evaluations of questions such as candidate choices (Kahneman and

Tversky, 1979, 1984), and Alvarez (1997: 33) has found strong empirical support for this in the context of American elections.

In sum, this model proposes that vote choices depend on at least two key factors: the relative proximity of the proposal and the reversion point to the voter's ideal point and the certainty of the voter's perception of these positions. Greater proximity leads to greater utility, whereas greater uncertainty reduces expected utility. But if voters decide on the basis of their issue preferences, as proposed by this model, how can parties influence the outcome of a referendum?

### How Parties Make a Difference in Referendum Campaigns

The literature on voting in elections and referendums has shown that voters rely on cues and heuristics to overcome their information shortfalls (Downs, 1957; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998). As Lau and Redlawsk (2001: 953) have pointed out, elite endorsements have an obvious heuristic value as 'all that is necessary is to learn the candidate endorsed by a group and one's own attitude toward the group, and an obvious cognitively-efficient inference can be made' (see also Sniderman et al., 1991). In European referendums, the endorsements of political parties are arguably the most visible elite cues. Political contestation in Europe is primarily framed by political parties, and we would thus expect party labels to carry extraordinary weight also in the context of referendums. Kriesi (2005: 139) has referred to the partisan heuristic 'the quintessential shortcut in direct democratic votes'. An analysis of media coverage<sup>3</sup> during the Maastricht referendum campaigns corroborates this statement: party endorsements received far more attention than the endorsements provided by interest organizations, NGOs and public personas. The findings illustrate the referendum was mainly framed as a contest between political parties: almost three-quarters of the news that refers to particular elite actors mentions political parties and their representatives.

Relying on the party endorsements of the preferred party is thus an obvious choice for most voters, since voters are generally aware of their own proximity to the party. Sniderman (2000) and others have referred to this as the 'likeability heuristic', implying that voters infer their own position on the basis of whether it is endorsed by a group they like or dislike. By structuring the 'choice set' for citizens, parties may allow voters to make choices approximately coherently, despite their informational shortfalls (Sniderman, 2000). Obviously, the party endorsement heuristic will work less effectively in situations where a voter likes two groups with divergent views or where the same position is taken by liked as well as disliked groups. Moreover, messages by political parties are only effective to the extent that they are disseminated via the media. The media, and other campaign actors, may

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reinforce (or counter) the framing by political parties (see de Vreese (2006)). Since political parties play a pivotal role in framing the alternatives, it is important to understand the nature and processing of these party cues. On the basis of the theoretical framework, we can formulate some more specific hypotheses of how parties can affect the vote choices in referendums. Following the reasoning of the theoretical model, the information supplied by political parties is likely to influence referendum outcomes in three ways. First, the recommendation of parties may have a direct effect on the vote choices of party supporters, since party endorsements can be used as a substitute for detailed information about the proposal. Second, the framing of the position of the two alternatives by parties will influence the utility calculation of voters. Third, the quantity and nature of the information disseminated about the ballot issue will influence the certainty of voters.

Party endorsements may have a direct impact on people's vote choices. We know from the literature on elections that partisanship, that is stable and enduring affective attachments to a particular party, works as a significant predictor of voting behaviour (Campbell et al., 1960; Butler and Stokes, 1969). Equally, in referendums we would expect many party supporters to use the recommendations of their preferred party as a 'cue' on the utility of either alternative. In other words, just like party identification predisposes voters to choose a particular party in an election, it may also induce party identifiers to follow the recommendations of this party in a referendum. As Zaller has argued, when political elites disagree, people tend to listen to the elites sharing their ideological predispositions (Zaller, 1992). This may be referred to as the partisanship hypothesis:

**HYPOTHESIS 1:** In referendums, voters are likely to follow to the vote recommendation of the party that they identify with, all other things being equal.

In the event that all parties present a united front in favour of a proposal, that is if voters are presented with a one-sided information flow, we would expect a 'positive' outcome. In most cases, however, parties and other campaign organizations are disseminating competing messages to voters. Voters are expected to be more receptive to the cues of their preferred party, yet as they are asked to decide on an issue and not a party we also expect them to resist messages that are incompatible with their issue-specific predispositions (Zaller, 1992). Following the proximity model of voting, we anticipate voters to follow a party endorsement only if this is perceived to be compatible with their preferences concerning the issue at stake; that is the relative utility of the two alternatives on a specific issue dimension. The influence of parties in referendums may therefore primarily be *indirect*, since the information (cues) provided by parties shapes the 'utility calculation' of voters. If parties manage to present the ballot proposal so that it appears close to the median voter preferences, they are more likely to achieve their desired outcome, since voters will opt for a choice that they perceive to be

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close to their own ideal point. Issue framing during the campaign, that is the 'emphasis in salience of different aspects of a topic' (de Vreese, 2002: 27), can thus be crucial in determining the outcome. Since the issues voted on in referendums are often relatively unfamiliar to voters, the choice set tends to be framed mainly during the campaign period itself. A point that is often overlooked in the literature on referendums is that successful issue framing concerns not only the interpretation of the ballot proposal, but also the framing of the 'reversion point'. Since the vote choice depends on the *relative* utility of the ballot proposal, parties in favour of the ballot proposal may advance their cause by presenting the reversion point in a manner that it appears as far away from the median voter's ideal point. The issue framing strategy will, of course, only be successful in conjunction with an effective agenda-setting strategy. A political party needs to dominate the campaign (in particular the media coverage) with its particular 'interpretation' of the two alternatives in order for this framing to have an impact on vote choices. We can thus formulate the issue framing hypothesis:

HYPOTHESIS 2: Voters are more likely to vote in favour of the proposal if the political parties present the proposal as located close to the median voter position and the reversion point as located on the extreme.

The final point concerns voter uncertainty. According to our model of voting behaviour, greater uncertainty will reduce the overall utility of the proposal to the voter. A successful Yes-campaign should therefore not only aim to persuade a majority of voters that the ballot proposal is close to their bliss point, but should also provide sufficient persuasive information to make these voters feel that they can confidently rely on this evaluation when they make their final vote choice. In the context of referendums, voters are often asked to decide on unfamiliar topics where they have limited knowledge of issue positions. Political elites can use these considerations strategically, not only to frame the position about the alternative choices, but also the uncertainty about these positions. Conversely, a lacklustre or ambiguous campaign by parties may have the unintended consequence of increasing the uncertainty associated with the ballot proposal and thereby reducing its utility. The voter uncertainty hypotheses can thus be formulated as follows:

HYPOTHESIS 3: The more certain voters are about the position of a ballot proposal relative to their uncertainty about the position of the reversion point, the more likely they are to vote in favour of the ballot proposal, all other things being equal.

This discussion has thus highlighted the way in which political parties can use information supply strategically and how this is likely to affect voting behaviour in referendums, through partisanship, issue framing and uncertainty effects. These propositions are evaluated empirically in the remainder of the article.



### The Danish Referendums on the Maastricht Treaty

Evaluating the impact of party strategies on opinion formation in referendum campaigns requires a combination of methods. Large N statistical analyses of survey data are often poorly equipped to assess the complex interactions between parties and voters, but they provide valuable information on patterns of voting behaviour. Hence, this article presents an analysis of two referendum campaigns that combines statistical analysis of survey data with an in-depth case study of campaign strategies as expressed in the media as well as in interviews with some of the key party actors.<sup>4</sup> The two Danish referendums on the Maastricht Treaty have been chosen as an example of a 'controlled comparison' case, given that the proposal was rejected by the electorate in the first referendum, but accepted in the second. A focused and structured comparison of these cases allows this article to isolate causal mechanisms that led to a change in behaviour (George and Bennett, 2005; King et al., 1994). Moreover, the Danish Maastricht referendums are an apposite case for examining referendum behaviour, because they provide a critical test of our examination of the impact of party strategies. European integration has been more politicized in Denmark than in most other countries (Franklin, 2002; Hobolt, 2005), and we would thus expect voters to be more certain of their own issue preferences and more resistant to endorsements and campaign strategies by parties. In other words, if we find that parties have an impact in these referendums, we would expect an even greater effect in other referendums held in low-salience and low-information environments.

This empirical section proceeds as follows. After a brief introduction of the cases, it presents a statistical analysis of the patterns of voting behaviour to test the impact of party endorsements on vote choices. Second, a detailed case study of the two referendums examines how differences in the information disseminated by political parties influenced the behaviour of citizens.

#### *Voting Behaviour in the Two Danish Maastricht Referendums*

The marginal Danish No of 50.7 percent to the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 came as a shock to the European political establishment. Even though the Treaty was ratified in a second referendum a year later by 57 percent of voters, many commentators see this popular rejection as marking the end of the 'permissive consensus' on Europe. The Maastricht Treaty proposal was backed by a broad spectrum of parties in the Danish Parliament, nearly all interest organizations and every major newspaper, yet a provision in the Danish Constitution made its ratification subject to popular approval.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to the strong and resourceful Yes-side, the No-side was small and lacking in funds. In Parliament, only the small Socialist People's Party and the far-right Progress Party voted against the Maastricht Treaty. Moreover,

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**Table 1.** Attitudes towards European integration (percentage in favour)

	May 1992	June 1992	May 1993	Sept 2000
Common Market	59	74	71	65
EMU	46	53	43	48
Common foreign policy	39	38	38	41
Common defence policy	37	30	35	46
Single currency	35	34	23	50
United States of Europe	23	19	21	16
European citizenship	15	–	14	13

Sources: Folkeafstemningen om Maastrichtaftalen (1992), Folkeafstemningen om Edinburg-haftalen (1993) and Euro-afstemningen (2000). See Appendix.

there were several extra-parliamentary groups, notably the People's Movement Against the EC, advocating a No-vote. Despite the apparent weakness of the No-side, the referendum campaign became an uphill struggle for the Yes-side, not least because of the public scepticism towards the elements of further integration contained in the Treaty.

The results in Table 1 show that while there was a majority in favour of the common market both before and after the Maastricht referendums, most Danes were opposed to further integration in areas such as foreign policy, defence and a single currency. This suggests that the Treaty may well have been quite far removed from most voters' ideal point, and the defeat of the proposal should not have come as a surprise. But how can we explain the change in behaviour of a sizeable proportion of the electorate in the second referendum in 1993? Did political parties play a role in changing the minds of these voters? These questions are examined in the remainder of this article.

### *Analysing the Impact of Party Endorsements*

According to the theoretical model, voters will vote in favour of the ballot proposal if it is closer to her 'ideal point' than the alternative. Voters may use party endorsements to infer the relative position of the proposal and the reversion point, and hence we would expect that voters will follow the recommendation of their preferred party, as long as these are not perceived to be incompatible with their attitudes towards the issue at stake (Hypothesis 1). While we thus regard party endorsements as a significant predictor of vote choice, we expect this effect to be weaker than voter preferences towards the issue at stake (the 'ideal point'). To test effect of party cues on vote choices, we estimate logistic regression models of voting behaviour using post-referendum survey data from the two Maastricht referendums. This allows us to examine the direct effect of party endorsements while controlling for the effect of other factors. The dependent variable in the model is the Yes/No vote in the referendum. Our main independent variable is party endorsement, which is measured by recoding the question on party

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support into a 5-point scale of each party's referendum recommendation. By creating a scale, rather than a dichotomous Yes/No party variable, this enables us to differentiate between parties that are united in the support of (or opposition to) the referendum and parties that are split on the issue and consequently send mixed cues to their supporters.<sup>6</sup> We would also expect a party's ability to convince its own supporters to be stronger when it is united on the issue than when it is internally divided. The other key independent variable is the individual voter's attitudes towards the EU; that is a proxy measurement of the voter's 'ideal point' on the dimension of European integration (see Figure 1). The EU attitude variable is created by constructing a 10-point attitude scale based on the summated rating model, which assumes that people respond to separate specific EU attitude and policy questions<sup>7</sup> on the basis of their underlying attitudes toward European integration (DeVellis, 1991; Jacoby, 2000: 764). This assumption of unidimensionality has been corroborated by a variety of analyses, including multidimensional scaling, Mokken scaling and principal component analysis.<sup>8</sup> Reliability analyses and inter-item analyses also confirm that the attitude scales are highly reliable and internally consistent (Cronbach's alpha of over 0.89). In addition, the model includes control variables of attitudes towards the political system more generally (government satisfaction, trust in politicians<sup>9</sup>) and socio-demographic characteristics of the voter (region, education, gender and age). The results are given in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that, as expected, both EU preferences and party recommendations have a significant impact on vote choices in the two referendums. Moreover, trust in politicians and the government also appears to

Table 2. Predicting the Yes vote in the Danish Maastricht referendums

<i>Independent variables</i>	<i>Denmark:</i>	<i>Denmark:</i>
	<i>Maastricht</i>	<i>Maastricht</i>
	1992	1993
	<i>Logit (S.E.)</i>	<i>Logit (S.E.)</i>
EU attitudes ('ideal point')	0.37** (0.03)	0.69** (0.05)
Party recommendation	0.72** (0.11)	0.76** (0.15)
Government satisfaction	0.31** (0.07)	–
Trust in politicians	0.73** (0.18)	0.37* (0.17)
Region (urban)	0.11 (0.04)	–0.08 (0.38)
Education	–0.18 (0.15)	0.01 (0.15)
Gender (female)	0.11 (0.24)	0.28 (0.23)
Age	–0.02 (0.04)	0.08* (0.04)
Constant	–9.60** (1.02)	–9.74** (0.96)
McFadden R squared	0.45	0.49
N	692	907

\*\*Significant at 0.01; \*significant at 0.05.

Sources: Folkeafstemningen om Maastrichtaftalen (1992), Folkeafstemningen om Edinburgh-aftalen (1993). See Appendix.

have a significant impact on vote choices, whereas the socio-demographic variables are insignificant (with the exception of age in 1993). In support of Hypothesis 1, the party endorsement variable clearly has a positive effect on the vote choice, indicating that voters are receptive to the recommendations of their preferred party. Yet, it also shows that party recommendations are not the only significant factor: attitudes appear equally important, as we would have expected on the basis of the spatial model presented. Logit coefficients, however, are not easily interpretable. Hence, to get a better indication of the substantive effects of the independent variables, statistical simulation is used to demonstrate how the referendum vote would change as the value of the independent variable changes *ceteris paribus*. Both partisanship and EU attitudes have been changed by 0.5 standard deviation (keeping all other variables at their mean) to ensure comparability across the two samples and variables.

The predicted probabilities given in Table 3 show that party endorsements have a quite considerable effect on vote choices in both referendums. On a 5-point scale, a 0.5 point move towards a pro-EU stance (either by voters changing party or by a party changing position) would have implied a 9 percentage points increase in the Yes-vote in 1992 and an 11 percent increase in 1993. This effect is thus sufficiently large to ensure that if the Yes-parties had been either more convincing or more numerous in the 1992 campaign, the Maastricht Treaty is likely to have been accepted the first time. As we can see, there is a small increase in the effect of party endorsements between the two referendums. Analysing the data in more detail reveals that this is mainly the effect of the consistent Yes-parties' ability to convince more of their own supporters in 1993, in particular the Social Democrats (see Table 6). Notably, the reported first differences in Table 3 demonstrate that the effect of changes in EU preferences is more than twice the size of the partisanship effect in both referendums. This is illustrated in Figure 2, which plots the predicted probability of voting Yes for supporters

**Table 3.** Simulated effect on Yes vote given changes in attitudes and partisanship

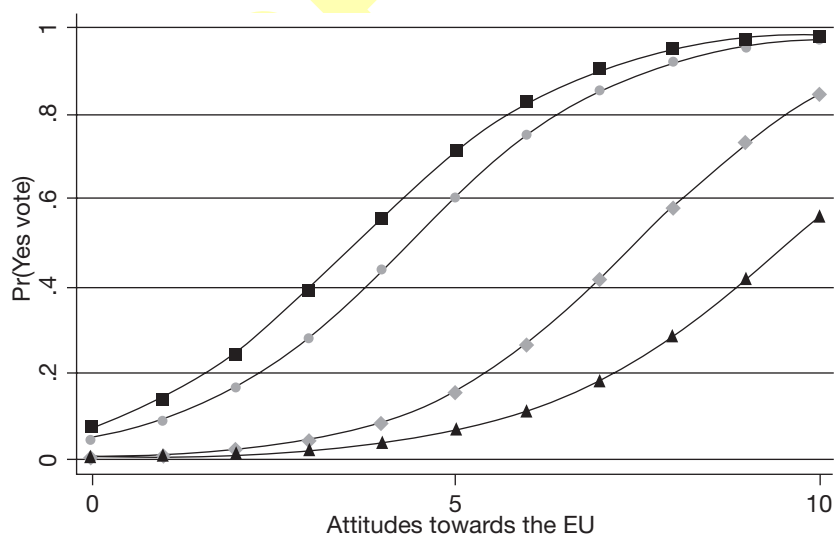
<i>Independent variables</i>	<i>Maastricht 1992</i>		<i>Maastricht 1993</i>	
	<i>% impact</i>	<i>Change in Yes vote</i>	<i>% impact</i>	<i>Change in Yes vote</i>
EU attitudes	21	50 to 71% (68–74%)	27	59 to 86% (82–89%)
Partisanship	9	50 to 59% (57–62%)	11	59 to 69% (66–72%)

*Note:* The predicted probabilities of a change in Yes-vote is calculated by simulating a 0.5 standard deviation change in the EU attitude variable and the change in the party endorsement variable, keeping all the other independent variables at their mean.

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of Yes- and No-parties with different ‘ideal points’ on the EU dimension (using pooled data of both referendum surveys).

Figure 2 supports the partisanship hypothesis, but it also highlights the extent to which the party effect is conditioned by issue preferences in referendums. A voter with a score at the lower end of the 10-point attitude scale is unlikely to vote Yes, even if she supports a party that favours the proposal. It is also interesting to note the shift in effect between the two referendums. The effect of supporting a party that endorses the proposal (‘Yes-party’) is stronger in the second campaign. This has little impact for voters on the extreme of the EU attitudes spectrum. But, for voters in the centre, this difference in effect is decisive for their vote choice. If we imagine a potential ‘switcher’ with an attitude score of 4 (sceptical, but not anti-European) who supports a Yes-party, in the 1992 referendum she would have been most likely to reject the proposal (0.44 probability of a Yes-vote), whereas in 1993 she would have been more likely to accept the proposal (0.56 probability). Equally, we find that supporters of No-parties were more likely to vote No in the second referendum, all other things being equal.<sup>10</sup> These results imply that the ‘framing’ of the choice set was different in the two referendums, given that voters with identical ideal points and party loyalties were making different choices. To examine whether political parties influenced this difference in perceptions of the ballot proposal, as proposed in the theoretical section, the next section presents a more detailed case study analysis of the messages provided by parties in the two referendum campaigns and the responses of voters.



**Figure 2.** The impact of attitudes and partisanship on the Yes vote. (● 1992: supporter of Yes party; ◆ 1992: supporter of No party; ■ 1993: supporter of Yes party; ▲ 1993: supporter of No party)

### The First Maastricht Referendum

Before the first Maastricht campaign began, more than 40 percent of voters were undecided about how to vote. This suggests that the campaign played an important role in shaping the opinion of a large proportion of voters. But why did the Danish establishment not succeed in convincing a majority of the voters during the campaign? Several explanations have been advanced in the literature, but three key factors can be isolated. First, the Yes-side appeared weak and divided during the campaign. Second, the referendum agenda was dominated by the issue of political integration, rather than the economic aspects of the integration project. Third, the campaign did not highlight the consequences of a No-vote.

Although the Maastricht Treaty received an overwhelming endorsement by Parliament, the Yes-side was neither strong nor united during the referendum campaign. The Social Democrats were preoccupied with a leadership battle between its Chairman, Svend Auken, and his deputy, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, which weakened the capacity of the party to campaign effectively during the campaign<sup>11</sup> (Nielsen, 1993). Moreover, instead of presenting a united front, the government and the Social Democrats were openly bickering throughout the campaign.<sup>12</sup> The large number of Social Democrat voters who deserted the party line in the 1992 referendum (see Table 6), compared with the two previous Danish referendums on the EU where a majority had followed the party's recommendation,<sup>13</sup> suggests that the party's weak campaign effort may have increased uncertainty among voters (see Hypothesis 3). Another important factor was the agenda-setting and issue framing during the campaign. A media analysis of the Danish referendum campaign reveals that the issues related to political union dominated the campaign.<sup>14</sup> As illustrated in Table 1, the political aspects of the integration project were far more unpopular with the Danish voters than economic integration, and by focusing voters' minds on political integration, the campaign made the ballot proposal appear far removed from most people's 'ideal point' of European integration. Closely related to this is the third key factor: the interpretation of the 'reversion point'. A combination of 'soft' campaigning by the Yes-side that attempted to avoid 'scaremongering' tactics and a new strategy adopted by the No-side moved the reversion point closer to the median voter. The No-side successfully targeted wavering voters who were in favour of membership of the EC but were sceptical of more integration (Nielsen, 1993; Worre, 1992). The campaign message was thus framed as a vote for the EC but against the Union.<sup>15</sup> The leader of the Socialist People's Party, Holger K. Nielsen, has described his party's strategy in similar terms:

We clearly said during the campaign that if people voted no, Denmark would stay in the EU. That was how we got a No. We were very moderate, and people could feel certain that nothing would happen to Denmark, if we said No. Had we made it a question of Yes or No to the EC, then it would have been a clear Yes.<sup>16</sup>

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The Yes-side also contributed to the perception that ‘nothing would happen’ in the case of a No-vote. The Prime Minister, Poul Schlüter, told the press that Danes would get a ‘second chance’ if they voted No, and the leader of the opposition, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, stated that Denmark could work to get a special agreement ‘to participate in the EC plus the best parts of the Maastricht Treaty.’<sup>17</sup> A poll prior to the referendum showed that only 13 percent of voters believed that a No would lead to a Danish exit from the EC (Nielsen, 1993: 43).

As proposed in Hypothesis 2, voters are less likely to vote in favour of the ballot proposal if it is perceived to be further way from their ideal point than it is from the reversion point. Moreover, if voters feel more uncertain about the consequences of the proposal, compared with the consequences of the reversion point, this will also make them more likely to vote against the proposal (Hypothesis 3). In short, by reassuring voters that a ‘No’ would have minimal consequences, the Yes-side made it more likely that a larger proportion of voters would reject the proposal. Opinion polls from the campaign suggest that these considerations did play a part in shaping vote choices: whereas only 35 percent of those who intended to vote Yes believed that there could be a renegotiation of the Treaty, 62 percent of naysayers thought this to be possible. Equally, 75 percent of intended Yes-voters believed a No-vote would mean loss of Danish influence in the EC, compared with 56 percent of intended No-voters (Nielsen, 1993: 43). The post-referendum survey data suggest the main reasons for voting No related to voters’ scepticism towards further political integration, as illustrated in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Reasons for voting Yes and No in the 1992 Danish referendum

	%
Reasons to vote Yes	
Denmark needs the EC	44
Economic advantages of membership	19
We should remain members of the EC	13
Employment	10
Influence in Europe	9
Reasons to vote No	
Surrender of sovereignty	43
The federal (‘union’) idea	14
No common defence policy	13
EC should not determine Danish law	11
Danish identity	11

*Source:* Folkeafstemningen om Maastrichtaftalen (1992). See Appendix.

*Note:* Respondents could give multiple answers to this question item. The list of reasons is not exhaustive and the figures indicate the percentage of Yes/No-voters mentioning the specific reason.

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If attitudes towards the integration project were the decisive factor in the referendum, however, why did a sizeable proportion of the electorate take a different stance in 1993? The next section examines whether a change in party strategies contributed to the change in behaviour of some voters in the 1993 referendum.

### No to the Union, but Yes to Europe

Given the failure of the government to secure a ratification of the Treaty in 1992, a 'National Compromise' was agreed by all parties except the Progress Party, which laid down four exemptions from full Danish participation in the EU in the areas of defence policy, the single currency, union citizenship and justice and police affairs (Folketinget, 1992). This was adopted as a 'decision' by the other EU member states at the Edinburgh summit in December 1992, and thus became known as the 'Edinburgh Agreement'.<sup>18</sup> The crucial question was whether the mainstream political parties could frame this proposal in a way that would be acceptable to a majority of voters in a second referendum to be held on 18 May 1993. The campaign leading up to the second Maastricht referendum was headed by a new minority government consisting of the Social Democrats and the Social Liberals.<sup>19</sup> The Yes-side was strengthened in the second referendum by the support of the Socialist People's Party and the small Christian People's Party.<sup>20</sup> The strategy of the Yes-side was to argue that the Edinburgh Agreement differed substantially from the proposal presented in 1992, and the shift in position of the Socialist People's Party lent credibility to this strategy. Furthermore, the Yes-side clearly emphasized that a second No would have serious consequences for Denmark, since it was unrealistic to expect that the other EC members would offer any further concessions.<sup>21</sup> In other words, the Yes-side's strategy was to move the perception of the new ballot proposal as well as the reversion point. The main argument put forward by the No-side was that the electorate was essentially being asked to vote on the same thing twice. In addition to the far-right Progress Party, the No-campaign was run by the People's Movement against the EC, and a splinter group, the June Movement. But the Yes-side was far ahead in the opinion polls from the outset. On 18 May 1993, 56.7 percent of the Danish electorate gave their Yes to the Maastricht Treaty. Turnout had increased from 83 percent in the first Maastricht referendum to 87 percent.

A number of studies have attempted to explain the change in behaviour of voters in the two Maastricht referendums. The most prominent explanation in the literature is the 'second-order election' theory, which emphasizes that people vote on the basis of domestic political concerns such as satisfaction with the government (see, for example, Franklin et al., 1995; Schneider and Weitsman, 1996). Following this, the two different outcomes



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in the Danish Maastricht referendums have been interpreted as a result of the change of government between the two referendums:

[I]t is surely of the utmost significance that during the period since the first referendum an unpopular government . . . had been replaced by a much more popular government that was apparently able to prevent an equivalent erosion of support. (Franklin et al., 1994: 120)

However, these studies seem to overstate the unpopularity of the government in 1992, given that the Gallup surveys show that the government had increased its electoral support from 31.8 percent (in 1990 election) to 34–35 percent in the Spring of 1992. In contrast, the support for the Social Democrats decreased in the months leading up to the second Maastricht referendum: in January 1993, 37 percent of voters intended to vote for the Social Democrats, but this had decreased to 34 percent by May 1993.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, it seems equally plausible that the Edinburgh Agreement in conjunction with the new party strategies led to a change in the perception of the ballot proposal for a pivotal group of voters. Since we do not have panel data, we unfortunately cannot determine more precisely what made certain voters change their minds. But we can come closer to an answer by examining the attitudes of the group of respondents who voted Yes in 1993 and reported a No-vote in 1992 (the ‘switchers’).

Table 5 gives the key characteristics (mean values) of five groups of voters: those who abstained, those who voted No in both referendums, those who switched to No and to Yes in 1993, and those who voted Yes in both referendums. The results illustrate that a key factor differentiating these groups is their attitude towards European integration. Whereas the 1993 No-voters are clearly eurosceptic and the consistent Yes-voters are somewhat pro-integration, the ‘switch-to-Yes’ group is almost exactly in the middle of the EU attitude scale between those groups. It is also noteworthy that people who switched to Yes were exposed to more campaign information and were more likely to support a party that recommended a Yes, compared with

Table 5. Who switched?

<i>Mean values for each group of voters</i>	<i>Switched</i>				
	<i>Abstain</i>	<i>No-No</i>	<i>to No</i>	<i>to Yes</i>	<i>Yes-Yes</i>
Attitudes to political integration (0–10 scale, 10 = pro-integration)	3.3	1.7	2.0	3.8	5.6
Party endorsement (0/1, 1 = yes endorsement)	1.0	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.9
Trust in politicians (0–3 scale, 3 = high trust)	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.2	2.3
Campaign exposure (0–10, 10 = high exposure)	3.3	5.1	3.2	5.2	6.0
N	43	346	29	134	398

*Source:* Folkeafstemningen om Edinburghaftalen (1993). See Appendix.

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people who voted No in the 1993 referendum. In contrast, there is no statistically significant difference between the groups when it comes to trust in politicians. This comparison across groups suggests that attitudes towards the EU played the most significant role for the 'switchers', which corroborates the results presented in Table 2. But this still does not fully answer the question of *why* people decided to change their vote based on these attitudes.

The argument put forward in this article is that voters were faced with a different choice in the second referendum due to the change in the framing of the choice shaped by political parties. Not only did the presentation of the ballot proposal change, due partly to the exemptions laid down in the Edinburgh Agreement, but the reversion point also changed, because the potential consequences of a second vote were presented as more severe. In the second campaign, the Yes-side strategically abandoned the 'softly-softly' approach and forcefully argued that Denmark could not expect any further concessions from the EC and that a second No would carry a high price tag for Denmark (see Laursen, 1994; Worre, 1995). This strategy appears to have been successful given that the proportion of people who believed that Denmark would have to exit the EC after a No doubled between the two referendums (Nielsen, 1993). If we recall Figure 1, we can imagine that the ballot proposal moved closer to the position of the 'switchers', whereas the reversal point moved further away from the switchers. Furthermore, the shift of the Socialist People's Party and the Christian People's Party offered highly visible and reliable cues to the voters that the positions of the two alternatives had indeed changed. Table 6 gives the percentage of the Yes-vote by party preference. It illustrates that the Socialist People's Party had little success in persuading its voters to adopt a new stance. But this is hardly surprising given that these voters are located at the very eurosceptical end of the integration dimension. As shown in Figure 2, a small shift in the proposal and the reversion point would not be sufficient to change the behaviour of these voters. On the other hand, the cue sent by the Socialist People's Party may have been sufficient to move some of the voters situated

Table 6. Yes-vote by party preference in the two Maastricht referendums

	1992	1993
Socialist People's Party	10	19
Social Democrats	35	48
Social Liberals	68	61
Centre Democrats	70	62
Christian People's Party	8*	13*
Conservatives	74	80
Liberals	87	84
Progress Party	43	32

Note: Party preference is based on vote in 1990 election. \*N < 20.

Sources: Folkeafstemningen om Maastrichtaftalen (1992), Folkeafstemningen om Edinburgh-aftalen (1993). See Appendix.

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close to the centre on the European dimension. Support among Social Democrat voters, who are normally more eurosceptical than their party, increased from 35 to 48 percent between the two referendums. Support also went up among Conservative and Christian Democrat voters, whereas it was in fact slightly reduced among Liberal and Social Liberal voters, as well as among supporters of the only remaining No-party, the Progress Party.

In sum, the evidence of the statistical analysis as well as of the case studies suggests that the change in strategies adopted by the mainstream parties played an important part in persuading voters to change their vote from No to Yes between the two referendums. Not only did two small parties change their position, but, more importantly, the Yes-parties framed the vote choice very differently in the second campaign. Of course, this change in 'issue framing' was more successful because the context of the referendum had changed, but nevertheless the case study suggests that the parties played an important part in bringing about a different result.

### Conclusion

The problem in a referendum is that you can ask the right question, but people answer other questions.<sup>23</sup>

– Dick Roche, Irish Minister of Europe

Occasionally, voters answer ballot questions in referendums in ways that both shock and dismay political parties. However, this does not imply that parties are powerless in the referendum process. As this article has suggested, political parties have considerable power to influence the way in which the referendum choice is perceived by voters. The statistical analyses of voting behaviour in the two Danish Maastricht referendums have shown that the party endorsements matter, even when we control for issue-specific preferences. However, these analyses have also demonstrated that people's EU preferences are a stronger predictor of vote behaviour and that many voters 'defect' from the party line. In other words, partisan loyalties may not be sufficient to persuade voters to vote in a certain way. This evidence indicates that the influence of parties may be primarily indirect. As pivotal information provides, parties can frame of the meaning of the choice that voters face in referendums. Building on a spatial model of voting behaviour, this article has suggested that parties can convince voters to vote in favour of (or against) a ballot proposal by framing the proposal as close to the ideal point of the median voter and the reversion point as more extreme. The two Danish Maastricht referendums examined in this article illustrate the importance of issue framing. The Danish case was presented as a 'critical case' because Danish voters have comparatively well-informed and stable opinions about European integration, and hence we would expect voters to be resistant to partisan cues (Franklin, 2002). The analyses suggested that the effect of party cues were more significant in the second Maastricht

campaign compared with the first. A plausible interpretation of the change in outcome between the two campaigns thus suggests that the Yes-parties managed to provide a different ‘framing’ of the choice (aided by the Edinburgh Agreement) in the second referendum, which was closer to the ‘bliss point’ of a critical proportion of voters. Although further comparative work is needed to substantiate these propositions, the findings give insights into the role of parties in referendums. They have shown that campaigns matter in referendums and that parties not only have the power to ask the question that voters have to answer, but also to guide their understanding of that question during the campaign. Moreover, the evidence suggests that voters take cues from the parties they support when asked to vote on a policy issue, but that issue preferences condition the extent to which parties can persuade their own supporters to follow the party line. Hence, to understand the effect of parties on vote choice in referendums, we not only need information on the party recommendations, but also on the way in which cues are disseminated by the media, and importantly how receptive voters are to the elite cues and the media framing. Parties can influence outcomes in direct democracy, but, as in elections, the final say rests with the electorate.

### Appendix: Data Sources

The analyses presented in this article are based on data from the surveys referenced below. I am grateful to the Danish Data Archive for making the surveys available. Responsibility for the analyses and interpretations presented in this article rests solely with the author.

*Folkeafstemningen om Maastrichtaftalen, 1992* (1999) Primary Investigators: Karen Siune, Ole Tonsgaard, Palle Svensson. DDA-1743, 1st edn. Odense: Danish Data Archive.

*Folkeafstemningen om Edinburghaftalen, 18. maj 1993* (2000) Primary Investigators: Karen Siune, Ole Tonsgaard, Palle Svensson. DDA-1783, 1st edn. Odense: Danish Data Archive.

*Euro-afstemningen 2000* (2000) DDA-4013, 1st edn. Odense: Danish Data Archive.

### Notes

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- 1 The reversion point,  $r$ , can either be located further away from ballot proposal  $x$  than status quo  $q$ , as illustrated in Figure 1, or it may be located in between  $q$  and  $x$ .

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- 2 We can expand Equation 2, so that,  $E[U_{ix}] = E[c_{ix} - (P_{ix}^2 - 2P_{ix}I_i + I_i^2)]$ . To simplify this model, we move the expectations operator through to the right-hand side of the equation, meaning that,  $E[c_{ix}] = c_{ix}$ ;  $E[P_{ix}^2] = p_x^2 + \sigma_{ix}^2$ ;  $E[2P_{ix}I_i] = 2p_xI_i$ ;  $E[I_i^2] = I_i^2$ . This yields,  $E[U_{ix}] = c_{ix} - p_x^2 - \sigma_{ix}^2 + 2p_xI_i - I_i^2$ , which can then be simplified as specified in Equation 3.
- 3 To examine elite cues in the Danish Maastricht referendums, I content-analysed the Danish quality newspapers *Berlingske Tidende* and *Politiken* in the three months leading up to the referendums. In each daily issue, all articles relating to the EU were coded in terms of frequency (how many), salience (front page or not), content (20 categories including 'referendum') and main actors portrayed in the article (who?).
- 4 Interviews were conducted with politicians involved in the two campaigns, including Jens-Peter Bonde, Hans Engell, Steen Gade, Ole Krarup, Holger K. Nielsen and Niels Helveg Petersen.
- 5 According to Article 20 of the Danish Constitution, transfer of sovereignty to international authorities which is not passed by a five-sixths majority in Parliament shall be subject to a referendum. Since the parliamentary majority ratifying the Maastricht Treaty fell just short of five-sixths, the government was required to call a binding referendum.
- 6 This party scale has been created on the basis of party documents as well as information gathered in elite interviews with politicians. A score of five points was given to parties united against the referendum proposal and one point to parties united in favour, whereas Yes-parties with a significant group of dissenters were given two points and neutral parties three points.
- 7 Examples of attitude questions include: 'Do you think [your country] should unite fully with the European Union or protect its independence from the European Union?'; 'Do you think the movement towards the unification of Europe should be speeded up, slowed down, or continued as it is at present?'; 'Are you for or against the proposal that defence and security policy becomes a part of the policy areas decided jointly in the European Union?'. Twenty question items were used to generate these scales.
- 8 In a principal component analysis of these items, the standardized eigenvalues of these second and third factor components were significantly smaller than the first eigenvalue (and below 1), thus suggesting that they contribute little to the explanation of variance in the variables and can be ignored.
- 9 The indicators of satisfaction with the government's performance and trust in politicians are measured as a single-item Likert scale (4-point scale).
- 10 Only the Progress Party and other small parties on the fringes recommended a No-vote in the second Maastricht referendum.
- 11 In an interview with the author, the former Foreign Minister, Niels Helveg Petersen, noted that: 'The Yes-side made many mistakes during the campaign. It was the Yes-side that lost, not the No-side that won. The Yes-side was divided. Uffe [Ellemann-Jensen] made the mistake of provoking the Social Democrats by promoting WEU and defence policy. It weakened us that the main players appeared to be in disagreement.'
- 12 For example, *Politiken* ran the following front-page story on 25 May 1992: 'Social Democrats and Liberals are Fighting: They are discussing who should take the responsibility for a Danish No. The Liberals are blaming the Social Democrats for not doing enough campaigning for the Yes-side'.

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- 13 A majority of social democrats (81 percent) followed the recommendation of their party and voted against the SEA in 1986, just like a majority, albeit small (55 percent), had followed the party line in 1972 and voted in favour of accession (see Svensson, 2002).
- 14 See footnote 3. This finding can also be found in Siune et al. (1992). They find that 'political union' is the most frequently mentioned theme in the media's coverage of the EU. In the newspaper, 18 percent of all stories mention political union, while 37 percent of television programmes are on this topic. In comparison, economic cooperation is mentioned in only 9 percent of newspaper stories and in 6 percent of television programmes (Siune et al., 1992: 42–3).
- 15 Interviews with Jens Peter Bonde, Ole Krarup, Holger K. Nielsen and Søren Espersen, December 2003 and January 2004.
- 16 Interview with Holger K. Nielsen, December 2003.
- 17 *Politiken*, 'Nyrup: Danish Special Agreement with the EC. The Social Democrat leaders prepare for a no to the Union', 26 May 1992.
- 18 The European Council agreed to attach a 'Protocol' to the Maastricht Treaty with 'opt-outs' relating exclusively to Denmark; consequently, the Maastricht Treaty itself was not changed.
- 19 The previous government had been forced to resign in January 1993 after publication of the 'Tamil report' on the Minister of Justice's handling of asylum applications from refugees from Sri Lanka (Siune et al., 1994). Some studies have claimed that the Tamil affair significantly affected the popularity of the government during the 1992 campaign (Schneider and Weitsman, 1996: 596); yet, an analysis of the news coverage reveals that this did not become an issue until *after* the first Maastricht referendum, and hence the outcome of the referendum is unlikely to have been a reaction to the Tamil affair.
- 20 The leadership of the small Christian People's Party were in favour of recommending a Yes in 1992, yet the Party Congress decided in a very close vote to recommend a No. In 1993, the Party recommended a Yes to the Edinburgh Agreement.
- 21 Interview with Niels Helveg Petersen, January 2004.
- 22 Based on monthly survey results from Gallup/*Berlingske Tidende*. I thank Robert Klemmensen for making these survey data available to me.
- 23 Interview with Dick Roche, June 2003.

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