SAGE Handbook of Electoral Behaviour

Chapter 19. Referendums

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Abstract

This chapter begins by defining referendums and analysing changes in their frequency over time. It then examines three questions relating to voting behaviour in referendums. First, how many people vote in referendums, who are they, and what determines such turnout? Second, how do citizens decide how to vote in referendums? Third, how does opinion change in the course of referendum campaigns? Drawing on the existing literature as well as original research, it argues that there is great variety across referendums in relation to all three questions: turnout is generally low compared to election turnout, but is occasionally very high; voting decisions are best understood through a mix of three models; and in most – but not all – referendums, opinion shifts over the course of the campaign towards the status quo. The chapter draws out implications for the place of referendums in democratic systems and considers avenues for future research.

When we think of elections – and, by extension, of electoral behaviour – we tend to think of votes to choose representatives. But elections can involve other sorts of choices too. In fact, contemporary politics involves two important classes of public election: representative elections on the one hand and policy elections – votes to choose specific policies – on the other. In order to avoid confusion, we typically refer to the second class of elections as referendums.

Thus, a referendum is a public vote on a specific policy question. As the first section of this chapter will show, such votes have become increasingly frequent features of politics in recent decades, raising important questions about their contributions to democracy as a whole. Supporters of greater use of referendums argue that they empower the people – the *demos* – and thereby advance the goal that policy should serve the interests and desires of the community as a whole, rather than those of a narrow elite. Opponents counter that referendums can very easily by hijacked by narrow interests or that most of us lack the time to work out which policy choices would best serve our goals and that we are much better off electing representatives to do that work for us (for overviews of such arguments, see, e.g., Butler and Ranney 1994b; Qvortrup 2005).

Resolving such debates requires us to explore a wide range of both normative and empirical questions, and it will be impossible to address all of these in this chapter. The chapter will not deal in detail, for example, with the substantial literature on the policy effects of referendums (e.g., Gerber 1996; Hug 2005, 2011). Nor will it look at referendums in non-democratic or weakly democratic contexts (e.g., Altman 2011: 88–109; Qvortrup 2014).

Rather, the chapter will focus on three questions that relate directly to the topic of voting behaviour – the three most important questions in empirical research on referendums. First, how many people vote in referendums, who are they, and what determines such turnout? Claims that direct democracy is superior to representative democracy are undermined if voters are less inclined to turn out for referendums than for representative elections or if the voters who do turn out are more skewed towards particular segments of the population. Second, how do citizens decide how to vote in referendums? Whether voters base their decisions on detailed knowledge of the issues or not – and whether this actually makes a difference – has constituted the hottest topic in referendum studies for some years. Third, how does opinion change in the course of referendum campaigns? For anyone interested in whether to call or demand a referendum or seeking to predict how a vote might go, this is a crucial matter.

The bulk of the chapter will address these three questions in turn. Before getting there, the first section will address some important definitional issues and set out patterns in the incidence of referendums over recent years.

Defining and Tracking Referendums

A referendum is defined here as any public vote on a specific policy question. That definition reflects usage around much of the world and also in much of the political science literature: Butler and Ranney, for example, the founding fathers of modern comparative referendum research, say “In a referendum, a mass electorate votes on some public issue.” (1994a: 1).

It should be noted that, in the United States and some other countries, this broad class of votes is normally subdivided and the term “referendum” reserved only for votes on matters already decided or chosen by the legislature. Votes on proposals nominated by voters are “initiatives”. Lupia and Matsusaka (2004: 465), for example, following this tradition, say, “The referendum is a process that

allows citizens to approve or reject laws or constitutional amendments proposed by the government", while "The initiative is a process that allows ordinary citizens to propose new laws or constitutional amendments by petition." They add, "The main difference between initiatives and referendums, therefore, is that citizens can write the former whereas only government officials can draft the latter." (Lupia and Matsusaka 2004: 465). Altman (2011: 10–12) goes further still, differentiating "referendums" from both "initiatives" and "plebiscites".

None of these definitional approaches is more right or more wrong than any other. The broadest definition of referendums is employed here partly because it is prevalent in comparative politics and partly because our focus here is not on how public votes on policy matters are initiated, but on how citizens decide whether and how to cast their ballot when the vote itself takes place. In that context, how the vote was initiated is a potential influence over voting behaviour that we might want to investigate, but there is no *a priori* reason to highlight it over a wide range of other potential factors.

Analysis of referendum voting behaviour is becoming increasingly important because referendums are increasingly common in contemporary democratic politics. Figure 1 shows data for three indicators of the frequency of referendums since the first modern referendums were held in the wake of the French Revolution in the 1790s. The top line shows the total number of questions asked in national referendums each decade. This shows the total number of issues put to a public vote. But it may be skewed by single referendum events in which large numbers of questions are asked: on 3 November 1985, for example, voters in the Northern Mariana Islands were asked forty-four separate questions, amounting to almost a quarter of all the referendum questions asked around the world that decade. The next line down therefore shows the number of distinct referendum ballots, where multiple questions asked in a single vote are treated as one ballot. Again, the overall picture here could be skewed by one country holding very large numbers of referendums: almost a quarter of the referendum ballots included in this analysis have been in Switzerland. The lowest line therefore shows the number of countries holding national referendums in each decade.

[Figure 1 about here]

As is apparent, the frequency and geographical spread of referendums have increased markedly over the decades. Indeed, more than half of all the questions ever asked in national referendums have been asked since 1990. A peak was reached during the 1990s, since when the frequency of referendums has slipped back again. Whether this slippage marks a long-term trend is, however, much too early to judge. In any case, the frequency and spread of referendums remain higher than in any decade before the 1990s.

The patterns in Figure 1 appear clear, but whether they show that referendums play a greater part in contemporary democratic politics than in the past might be questioned on two grounds. First, Figure 1 includes all referendums, but not all referendums occur in democracies. It is therefore important to check the figures for democracies alone. Second, a rise in the number of democratic referendums might just reflect a rise in the number of democracies, rather than a rise in the frequency with which referendums are used within democracies. Figure 2 presents evidence on these points. The lines show the raw numbers of national referendums in democratic contexts per decade since 1900. The bars show for each decade the number of referendums per year of democracy. Democracies are defined here as countries with a Polity score of 6 or more in any given

year in the Polity IV dataset (Center for Systemic Peace 2014).[1] Switzerland is excluded, as it has asked almost as many referendum questions as all other democracies combined.

[Figure 2 about here]

The lines show that the rise in the number of referendums is a feature of the democratic world as much as it is as the world as a whole. The bars confirm what we would expect: the rise in the number of referendums in democracies partly reflects the rise in the number of democracies, such that the frequency of referendums within democracies has not risen so dramatically. Nevertheless, the rate at which referendums are held within democracies was higher in the 1990s and 2000s than in any earlier period. Though there has been some dip in the first half of the 2010s, the rate remains higher than in most earlier decades, and the period is too short to draw firm conclusions from it. Overall, referendums evidently play a bigger role in contemporary democracies than they did in the past.

The United States is one of a very small group of established democracies never to have held a national referendum. State-level referendums (including initiatives) are, however, familiar in the politics of many states, and these too have become more frequent in recent years: data from the Initiative and Referendum Institute at the University of Southern California show that just over a third of the initiatives voted on since the first such ballot in Oregon in 1904 have taken place since 1990. Nevertheless, as Figure 3 shows, experience of direct policy votes has a deeper history in (some) US states than elsewhere in the world, a substantial earlier peak in the frequency of initiatives having occurred during the progressive era of democratic reform in the early twentieth century (Cronin 1989: 50–9).

[Figure 3 about here]

Who Turns Out in Referendums?

If we are interested in comparing the merits of representative and direct democracy, the first question to ask concerns turnout: does a larger proportion of the eligible electorate turn out to vote in representative elections or in referendums? If elections elicit higher turnout than referendums, that gives one reason to think representative democracy may produce outcomes that better reflect the will of the population as a whole, whereas higher turnout in referendums would suggest the opposite.

For most countries we can answer this question directly, as in most countries elections and referendums are generally held separately. In such cases, the pattern is generally that turnout is

[1] This is an imperfect measure, but it allows us to capture broad patterns over the long term. I adjust for one oddity in the dataset by including France between 1958 and 1968. The Polity IV dataset covers only countries with a current population over 500,000, so smaller democracies are excluded.

lower in referendums than in elections. But there are also exceptions: in some referendums, turnout is very high. LeDuc describes the pattern thus:

> Turnout tends to fluctuate more widely in referendums than it does in national elections. In general, it tends to be lower, but it can sometimes rise to much higher levels when a particular issue engages wide voter interest or when an intense campaign is waged by interest groups. (LeDuc 2007: 27)

The accuracy of this description is demonstrated by Table 1, which compares all national referendums held in stable democracies between 1990 and mid-2015 with national legislative elections held in the same countries over the same period. I define stable democracies here as countries that have been continuously rated as "Free" by Freedom House since 1991 (Freedom House 2015).[2] The analysis is restricted to countries with populations of at least 300,000. These criteria yield a population of forty-four countries in total. Eight of these – Belgium, Chile, Germany, Israel, Jamaica, Japan, Namibia, and the United States – have held no national referendums since 1990. Switzerland is excluded as previously, because the frequency of its referendums – 237 since 1990 (SUDD 2015) – renders it a unique case. That leaves thirty-five democracies that have held at least one referendum. In total across these countries, 263 referendum questions have been asked in 152 separate referendum ballots. In these same countries over the same period, 234 general parliamentary elections have taken place. Elections and referendums have almost always been separate: only on eighteen occasions have elections and referendums occurred concurrently.

[Table 1 about here]

As Table 1 shows, average turnout across this population of cases has been 74.5 per cent in elections but only 54.1 per cent in referendums. We might suspect that this pattern exists because referendums are more frequent in countries that typically see lower turnout: indeed, we might suspect that frequent referendums would *lead to* lower turnout through a "voter fatigue" effect (Franklin 2004: 98–9). But, while voter fatigue might indeed be a real phenomenon (e.g., Qvortrup 2005: 25–41), it does not account for lower referendum turnout, for that pattern is replicated within as well as across countries. Of the twenty-one countries for which we have turnout data from more than one referendum ballot, referendum turnout has been higher on average than election turnout in only one (Estonia).

Table 1 also confirms LeDuc's observation of higher fluctuation in referendum than in election turnout: across all the cases, standard deviation of turnout in referendums is 22.3, compared to just 13.2 in elections. Again, this pattern is replicated within as well as across cases: of the twenty-one countries with turnout data from more than one referendum ballot, turnout deviation in referendums exceeds that in elections in seventeen.

Finally, the last two columns in Table 1 illustrate a little of what these statistics mean in practice. As the combination of lower average and higher standard deviation would lead us to expect, the lowest turnout of the last quarter century has been recorded in a referendum rather than an election in most (twenty-six) of the countries. But the high standard deviation also means that, despite the low average, a significant minority of the countries – nine out of the thirty-five – have seen their highest

[2] I have allowed a slight allowance on this criterion in the cases of Estonia and Slovakia.

turnout over this period in a referendum. Indeed, in five countries, referendums account for the instances of both highest and lowest turnout.

Election and referendum turnout levels are harder to compare in the United States, because representative elections and ballots on policy matters almost always happen simultaneously. In fact, most of the literature relating to turnout in the United States has focused on the issue of whether the inclusion of policy questions on the ballot increases *electoral* turnout. The consensus that has emerged is that such questions do boost turnout – certainly in mid-term years (Schlozman and Yohai 2008) and probably to a degree also in presidential election years (Tolbert, Bowen, and Donovan 2009). That is hardly surprising: many issues are likely to attract some voters to the polls who would not bother to turn out if the choice was just one between party representatives. But this does not help us get at the issue of whether elections or referendums do the better job of eliciting the views of a larger segment of the population.

Some of the American literature does, however, address this issue by examining voting figures in relation to different choices on the same ballot paper. Magleby (1984: 83) defines "drop off" as "the proportion of voters who cast ballots but who do not vote in a particular candidate race or on a proposition". Comparing voting figures in three states between 1970 and 1992, he finds that drop-off is higher in propositions – what are here called referendums – than in any candidate elections. Whereas presidential elections show drop off rates of 2 or 3 per cent, those for propositions are 13 or 14 per cent (Magleby 1994: 247). It therefore appears that, as elsewhere, referendums in the United States attract fewer voters than do representative elections.

The reasons for these patterns – both globally and within the United States – appear clear: many referendums ask questions that large numbers of voters do not find very interesting, but a few referendums do powerfully capture the public imagination (cf. LeDuc 2007: 27). Several studies confirm that referendum turnout is closely related to the degree to which the issue on the agenda captures the public imagination as measured through campaign intensity (e.g., Kriesi 2007: 120–3; Hobolt 2009: 239).

We might additionally suppose that institutional features of referendums themselves would affect turnout. One aspect of institutional variation among referendums, as already noted, relates to their initiation: some policy votes are initiated by citizens through petition, while others are initiated by politicians. We might hypothesize that more citizens would be engaged by votes that have reached the ballot paper through popular demand than by votes dropped upon the electorate from on high by politicians. Indeed, Magleby finds exactly that pattern in his analysis of US state-level ballots: drop off is markedly lower among those propositions placed on the ballot by citizen initiative than among those put there by the state legislature (Magleby 1994: 247).

In the cross-national sample of referendums used here, however, the reverse is true: average turnout reaches 53.8 per cent among elite-initiated referendums, but only 43.6 per cent among citizen-initiated votes (a difference that is significant at the .001 level in a two-tailed t-test). Nevertheless, it appears likely that this reflects the character of the issues placed before voters in these referendums rather than the identify of their initiators: citizen-initiated referendums are likely more often to involve matters that are of great concern to some voters but that do not rank high on the wider political agenda.

Another formal distinction among referendums differentiates those with binding effect from those that are, at least in formal terms, only advisory (e.g., Bogdanor 1994: 25–33). It would be reasonable to hypothesize that turnout should be higher where a vote is binding and voters therefore know that

the result will make a difference. Again, however, the evidence confounds this expectation: turnout among non-binding referendums is around ten percentage points higher than that among bindingvotes (significant at the .01 level). This likely reflects the fact that whether a referendum is binding in formal legal terms often makes little difference to the degree to which it is binding politically (Hobolt 2009: 10).

So far this section has examined overall turnout rates. To understand the representativeness of the voting public, however, we need to know not just how many people vote, but also who they are: the degree to which they form a representative sample of the eligible electorate or not. In broad terms, turnout in referendums is related to the same demographic and political factors as is turnout in representative elections: citizens are more likely to vote if they are more educated, older, richer, and have higher levels of political knowledge and interest (Kriesi 2007: 127–36; LeDuc 2007: 27–8; Neijens *et al.* 2007: 155). What we need to know is whether referendum voting is *more* skewed towards these groups than election voting.

Some of the evidence from the United States suggests that it might not be, and that the opportunity to vote on specific issues attracts to the polls voters who are otherwise less likely to engage with electoral politics, such as independents (Donovan, Tolbert, and Smith 2009) and those who have received less formal education (Tolbert, Bowen, and Donovan 2009). But this tells us only about those voters who do turn out for (some) referendums but do not for elections, not those who do the opposite.

Magleby (1984: 106–18), drawing on evidence from California between 1972 and 1980, in fact finds that rates of drop off in referendums compared to elections are higher among voters with less education, on lower incomes, and in lower-skilled occupations, and among non-white voters and older voters. Thus, the unrepresentativeness of referendum voters relative to the population as a whole is in most respects greater than is the unrepresentativeness of election voters. Little further work has been done subsequently to explore this relationship further (though see Feig 2009, who shows that drop off in the US is higher among African American than white voters). Clearly, evidence from a wide range of settings would be desirable – this should be a priority for future research. On the basis of the evidence that we have at present, however, it appears that voters in referendums are typically less representative of the eligible electorate as a whole than are voters in elections.

Finally for this section, it should be noted that unrepresentative turnout is a matter of concern primarily when the referendum result has an effect. Some countries apply quorum rules, such that the result is invalidated if too few voters participate. In Italy, for example, 50 per cent turnout is required for the vote to count, while in Hungary, 25 per cent of eligible voters (as well as 50 per cent of actual voters) must support a measure before it is passed. Sixteen of the thirty-five countries in our sample that have held national referendums since 1990 have imposed quorum rules of some kind for at least some of these votes. Extrapolating effects of such rules from voting figures is difficult, as the rules change voters' incentives to turn out or abstain (Herrara and Mattozzi 2010). Simply on the basis of the votes cast, however, seventy referendums that would otherwise have passed have been rendered invalid by these rules – sixty of them in Italy, Lithuania, or Slovakia (on Italy, see Uleri 2002) – and a further nine have been made non-binding.

How Do Voters Decide?

The next issue to consider is how voters who do cast a ballot in a referendum decide which way to vote. Do they vote on the basis of an informed understanding of the specific issues raised by the referendum question? Or do they vote according to extraneous considerations or random selection or some other mechanism? More work has been poured into this set of questions than any other in the field of referendum studies. This matter has a crucial bearing not only on our positive understanding of how referendums work, but also on our normative judgements as to the value of referendums within the democratic process.

There are three principal models of the immediate factors that shape voters' referendum choices:

1. For the first, voters decide on the basis of their attitudes towards the specific issue that the referendum question asks about. Voters thus understand what the referendum is about and express their preferences on that issue (e.g., Siune and Svensson 1993).
2. On the second model, voters do not express views on the particular issue. Rather, they vote according to the positions taken by others – particularly parties and party leaders – within the debate. Such "cue-following" may take two main forms. First, voters who lack their own views on the subject of the referendum but are keen to make the "right" choices may use the cues offered by actors whom they trust as information "shortcuts" (Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Second, voters who care little about the referendum issue in itself may use the ballot as an opportunity to express their feelings on other matters – particularly their support for or opposition to the government in power. On this view, voters treat referendums as "second-order" contests (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Franklin, van der Eijk, and Marsh 1995; Garry, Marsh, and Sinnott 2005). Whichever of these routes voters follow, they vote in line with their preferences not on the particular issue, but on parties and politics more generally.
3. Finally, according to the third model, voters do not vote according to clear preferences at all. Many voters lack any clear indicator of why they should vote one way rather than another. If they nevertheless turn out at the ballot, they are likely, given our general tendency towards risk aversion, to cling to the security of the devil they know and therefore opt for the status quo (Bowler and Donovan 1998: 33–5; Mendelsohn and Parkin 2001: 11).

We may call these three models the *issue-based* voting model, the *cue-based* voting model, and the *anxiety-based* voting model. Certainly, other models have been suggested: Garry (2014), for example, explores the role of emotions beyond anxiety – specifically, anger. These three models have, nevertheless, dominated the literature.

In the past, this choice of models has sparked some heated debates among advocates of the competing perspectives. In a study of the Danish referendum on the Maastricht Treaty on European integration in 1992, for example, Siune and Svensson (1993) argued that the outcome had been determined overwhelming by Danes' attitudes specifically towards the treaty itself: particularly their fear it would lead to a "loss of sovereignty" (1993: 103). The authors contended that "Danish voters have made up their own minds on the balance between economic and political aspects of EC co-operation to such an extent that they behave more or Iess independently of the advice given by their own party" (Siune and Svensson 1993: 105). The following year, Franklin, Marsh, and Wlezien (1994) countered with a rival interpretation. Drawing on evidence from Maastricht referendums in Denmark, France, and Ireland, they concluded that "in none of these countries did the public make up its mind about the treaty based on its assessment of the treaty itself" (Franklin, Marsh, and Wlezien 1994: 118). Rather, they contended, these votes were referendums "on the performance of the national government" (Franklin, Marsh, and Wlezien 1994: 117). Franklin, van der Eijk, and

Marsh (1995) subsequently explored the same theme in further detail. This dispute continued to rumble on into the present century (e.g., Svensson 2002; Franklin 2002).

In reality, this debate was never as polarized as its rhetoric sometimes suggested. In their very first contribution, for example, Franklin, Marsh, and Wlezien (1994: 117) specified conditions in which they posited a referendum might be swung by cue-based considerations: "In domains of low salience, such as foreign policy, we might expect opinions to be coupled to those in domains of high salience, such as governments' handling of the economy." In subsequent writings, the authors on both sides have agreed, in essence, the same conclusion: if a referendum addresses a high-salience issue that engages voters' interest, issue-based voting will tend to dominate; if it focuses on a low-salience issue that voters do not clearly understand, other forms of voting will come to the fore (Franklin 2002; Svensson 2007).

A wide range of other authors have reached a similar, balanced view in relation not just to referendums on European integration (e.g., Garry, Marsh, and Sinnott 2005; Hobolt 2009), but also to votes on a variety of other issues, such as electoral reform in New Zealand (Lamare and Vowles 1996; Aimer and Miller 2002) and the United Kingdom (Whiteley *et al.* 2012) and issues of sovereignty and devolution in Canada (Clarke and Kornberg 1994) and the UK (Denver 2002). Bowler and Donovan (1998), similarly, find that a mixed model best accounts for voting in state-level initiatives in the United States. Most of the literature has focused on the choice between the issue-based and cue-based models of voting. But studies that explore the anxiety-based model also find similar patterns: voters who are less informed about the issues and less engaged by the referendum debate are more likely to support the status quo (e.g., Christin, Hug, and Sciarini 2002; Whiteley *et al.* 2012); equivalently, voting for the status quo is higher when more voters are undecided in the last pre-election poll (Bowler and Donovan 1998: 49).

We can therefore state with confidence that voters decide how to cast their ballots in referendums in a variety of ways: as the three models suggest, some develop views on the particular issue in hand, others follow cues, while others still, facing uncertainty, opt for the status quo. The prevalence of each of these forms of voting varies, most notably, in response to the saliency of the issue in the referendum question.

The battle of the models may thus have been resolved, but that does not mean all important questions relating to how voters decide have been answered. The most important outstanding issue is whether voters in referendums make well-informed decisions. One aspect of this question relates to whether voters who follow cues vote in the same way as voters who decide on the basis of the issue itself. Interest in this point stems from the idea that widespread cue-based voting might devalue referendum outcomes: it might cause those outcomes to be based on thinking that has nothing to do with the issue at stake in the referendum question. Franklin, van der Eijk, and Marsh (1995: 115), for example, remarked that "our findings call into question the entire rationale of referenda conducted in parliamentary democracies. If referendum results are so regularly coloured by the standing of the government that proposes them, then their use to ratify government policies will, in many cases, be little more than a gimmick that simply restates the approval of the government whose policies they are".

On the other hand, that cue-based voting should be less well grounded than issue-based voting is far from clear. Recall the point made earlier that cue-based voting is not necessary synonymous with second-order voting. Franklin, van der Eijk, and Marsh suppose in the passage just quoted that cue-based voters decide how to vote on the basis of entirely extraneous considerations. Equally, however, cue-based voters could regard a referendum question as of first-order importance and feel

that their surest route to the correct choice is to follow the advice of those with whom they generally agree on other matters. In that case, and if the cue-givers themselves give well informed cues, cue-followers can be expected to vote as if they were issue-followers.

A range of authors have investigated this point by comparing voting patterns among issue-based voters with those among cue-based voters. In the best known study, Lupia (1994) found that voters who lacked knowledge of the referendum issues were nevertheless able to vote as though they did possess such knowledge if they knew the positions of key actors. Bowler and Donovan (1998: 58–65) also found that voters were able to glean useful information from simple cues. On the other hand, analysing 136 referendums in Switzerland, Christin, Hug, and Sciarini (2002) were able to replicate this finding only in some cases – though they cautioned against placing too much confidence in their conclusion, emphasizing that it could reflect difficulties in measuring the key variables.

No matter how similar cue-based voters may be to issue-based voters, however, a further aspect of the question of whether referendum voters make well informed decisions needs also to be considered: namely, whether issue-based voters are themselves, on the whole, well informed. In a study of European integration referendums in four countries, for example, Glencross and Trechsel (2011) find that issue-based voting clearly predominates over cue-based voting. But they do not conclude that all is therefore well. Rather, they suggest that further research should analyse what voters' issue understandings are based on, particularly through examination of the content of referendum campaigns (Glencross and Trechsel 2011: 769). If voters' views are based on widespread misinformation, we will still have cause to worry. Lupia's classic study (1994) to some extent overcomes this difficulty by measuring voters' actual knowledge of the referendum topic. Even here, however, responses to a few simple survey questions do not necessarily indicate great depth of understanding.

In order to address this issue, a small number of systematic studies of referendum campaign content have now been conducted. On the whole, these do not give cause for optimism about the quality of information that voters are exposed to. Several studies of a referendum on electoral reform in Ontario in 2007 find that coverage in the print media was strongly biased towards one side of the debate (LeDuc 2009: 35; Pilon 2009: 8–9). LeDuc, indeed, describes the coverage as "hysterically negative" and as giving readers a misleading impression of how the reform proposals were devised and what they would contain (2009: 34–6). Pilon finds, in addition, that the newspapers typically made unsubstantiated claims, without providing evidence to back them up (2009: 10–11). Building on this, my own analysis of the electoral reform referendum in the UK in 2011 found again that coverage was weighted towards one side (particularly once the newspapers' differing circulation numbers were taken into account), that few claims were backed up by either evidence or logic, and that many claims were either straightforwardly wrong or plainly intended to mislead (Renwick and Lamb 2013).

All three of these campaign studies related to referendums on electoral reform – a topic that rarely fires the public imagination. We might expect a subject of greater public interest to spark better debate. More studies than we have at present would be needed to examine this proposition in detail: a wider range of campaign studies is an important area for future research. Again, however, those studies that exist do not give reason for optimism. De Vreese and Semetko find that coverage of the Danish referendum in 2000 on whether to join the euro was more negative about the Yes side than the No side in both public and private broadcast media (2004: 710) and that it focused more on campaign strategies and performance than on the issues (2002; cf. Cappella and Jamieson 1997).

Furthermore, there is also evidence that such media coverage affects public perceptions. De Vreese and Semetko (2002) find that exposure to strategic media coverage increased public "cynicism" about the campaign. And Vowles (2013: 259), drawing on panel surveys conducted early and late in the campaign for the UK's 2011 electoral reform referendum, found that voters became more likely to believe statements that were false and less likely to accept statements that were true.

Finally, a related strand of analysis examines the impact on referendum results of campaign spending: can referendum outcomes be swung by a few individuals or organizations with very deep pockets? A few early studies found little evidence of any such effect. Notably, Owens and Wade (1986: 688), drawing on detailed statistical modelling of propositions in California, found that "there is at best only a modest connection between campaign spending and the vote". But most analysts have concluded that campaign spending does have an important effect upon outcomes. Analysing evidence from the 1970s and 1980s, Cronin (1989: 123) concluded that the capacity of money to determine a referendum result should cause us serious concern: "Although money is not always a decisive factor, it is always an important one, and big money, well spent, can usually defeat ballot questions". Bowler and Donovan (1998) and Gerber (1999) reached nuanced conclusions: campaign spending effects are not always straightforward; but they are nevertheless widespread and important. Among the most recent studies, De Figuereido, Ji, and Kousser (2011) and Rogers and Middleton (2014) find consistent effects.

Thus, even where voters decide on the basis of issue knowledge, we cannot presume they will vote in a way that is consistent with their underlying interests and values. Of course, whether decision-making by referendum performs any better or worse in this regard than decision-making by elected representatives is a much wider question, and not one we can examine here.

How Does Opinion Change During Referendum Campaigns?

The final question that we explore here concerns opinion change over the course of referendum campaigns: How do voters' views shift as a referendum issue is discussed and voting day approaches?

We have already seen that there is considerable variation between referendums both in the degree to which they attract voters to the polls and in the ways voters decide how to cast their ballots. It is reasonable to expect that, where voters have existing strong views on the matter at stake in a referendum, their views are unlikely to change much over the course of a referendum campaign. By contrast, if the issue is one that most voters have not given serious thought, their initial responses to the pollsters might give little indication of how they will vote once the arguments have been aired and prominent actors have stated their positions. Thus, we should expect referendums to exhibit sharply varying levels of opinion volatility, with some showing high levels of opinion change, others not.

This expectation is clearly articulated by LeDuc. "Referendums on issues which have been debated extensively in political arenas *other* than that of the referendum campaign," he argues, "or in which there are strong linkages to the positions taken by political parties, generally display less campaign volatility" (LeDuc 2007: 31). By contrast:

> The most volatile referendum campaigns are likely to 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 and subject to change over the course of the campaign, as new information is gained or new events unfold. (LeDuc 2007: 41)

Elsewhere, LeDuc presents data from twenty-three referendums across a variety of democracies between 1980 and 1999, comparing opinion as expressed in polls taken before or early in the campaigns with final voting patterns (LeDuc 2002: 151–4). These cases indeed show substantial variation in the degree of opinion change: in three of these twenty-three referendums, support for the Yes option changed from the poll to the final result by fewer than 3 percentage points, while in two it changed by 40 percentage points or more. Most cases show marked change: as LeDuc remarks, "The average absolute shift of seventeen percentage points found for these twenty-three cases taken together is impressively high" (2002: 154).

But we can seek to go beyond the observation that opinion during referendum campaigns – especially those where prior views or cues are weak – is often volatile: we can strive to say something also about the direction in which opinion is likely to shift. The three models of referendum opinion formation outlined in the preceding section have varying implications as to the likely direction of change. The clearest implications are those of the third, anxiety-based model. Voters, on this model, tend to vote for the status quo because they are unsure of what change might bring. While, early in a campaign, they might find the idea of something new attractive, as the campaign proceeds and the real decision time approaches, they may begin to harbour doubts. Furthermore, campaigners are likely to exploit this: in particular, advocates of retaining the status quo are likely to talk up the risks and uncertainties associated with trying new arrangements that may be unfamiliar and untested. The third model thus predicts a clear tendency for opinion to shift in favour of the status quo.

By contrast, the first, issue-based model yields no expectation that opinion will tend to move systematically one way or the other. It posits that opinion change will be limited if voters already have clear views before the campaign begins. Even if their views develop over the course of the campaign, this model gives no *a priori* reason for changes to tend in one direction rather than the other.

For the second, cue-based model, finally, what matters is the clarity of the partisan and other cues that emerge over the course of the campaign, as well as whom these cues come from. If a prominent and popular actor comes out in favour of one side, this may shift opinion that way, whether that is for or against the status quo. In general terms, therefore, this model, like the first, yields no expectation as to the likely direction of change. As we saw in the previous section, however, the thought underlying this model is often based on the logic of second-order elections, and particularly the idea that voters tend to use referendums as opportunities to express their views on the government. If contemporary voters generally incline towards disgruntlement with incumbent governments, this may suggest, again, a tendency for opinion to shift away from voting Yes in government-initiated referendums.

These considerations suggest that, to the extent that anxiety-based voting is important in referendums, we should expect opinion to shift during campaigns towards the status quo. And to the extent that second-order cue-based voting is a factor, opinion should shift towards the status quo in government-initiated referendums, particularly if the government is old or unpopular.

Existing evidence suggests that, indeed, opinion does tend to shift against the status quo. Of the twenty-three referendums covered in LeDuc's study (2002), seventeen show a shift of opinion during the campaign away from a Yes vote. In my own recent work, I have updated LeDuc's analysis,

finding that opinion moved against change in twenty-three out of thirty-four cases. Furthermore, I noted that the size of shifts against reform is generally much greater than that of shifts in its favour (Renwick 2014).

Nevertheless, these studies are based on small and rather ad hoc case sets: much more detailed analysis is needed if we are to explore hypotheses in detail. Table 2 makes a step in that direction by including all of the referendums – thirty-seven in total – that have been held in Anglophone democracies (other than micro-states) since 1990. The sample here is small, but it has the advantage of including all of the nationwide referendums held in these countries over this period (except three for which was have found no polling data), rather than an ad hoc selection tending to favour the more prominent votes. The data in Table 2 relate to support for change from the status quo, which, in the great majority of cases (though not quite all), means support for a Yes vote. The first data column shows average support for change in polls conducted more than thirty days before the referendum itself. Subsequent columns show support for change in polls conducted no more than thirty days from the referendum and then in the referendum itself. The final three columns give the percentage point changes between these time periods.

[Table 2 about here]

Again, the direction of opinion change overwhelmingly favours the status quo – as the mean values in the bottom row of the table show. Twenty-eight of the thirty-seven cases show a fall in support for change over time (comparing either early polls with the result or, if early polls are unavailable, late polls with the result). Furthermore, as in the previous research, the shifts away from change tend to be much larger than those towards it: only three votes saw opinion move towards change by more than 5 percentage points, while twenty-four saw it shift the other way by that amount; indeed, in twenty-three of these cases, the move was at least twice that size.

The conclusion appears to be confirmed that opinion during referendum campaigns tends to shift towards the status quo. Quantitative analysis of factors underpinning this pattern would need a larger dataset. More qualitative observations can, nevertheless, be made at this stage.

First, though the number of citizen-initiated referendums in Table 2 – five – is small, it is notable that four of these are among the minority of referendums that saw no substantial shift of opinion towards the status quo. That might suggest that, where the referendum is not being promoted by the government, voters are less likely to turn against it. This fits with the idea that anti-government sentiment is generally an important driver of referendum voting: whether the government has initiated the referendum, opinion is more likely to shift towards the status quo. Still, we should be cautious, as there could also be other explanations. All of the citizen-initiated referendums in the sample come from one country (New Zealand), where particular dynamics may be at play.

Second, many of the remaining cases that do not show substantial erosion of support for change belong to the category of what I have called “reversion point reversal” (Renwick 2014). The reversion point of a referendum is the situation that prevails in the event of a No vote (Hobolt 2009: 45–6). Normally, the reversion point is the status quo. But reversion point reversal occurs when what is formally the change option comes to be seen as the option that will best preserve the status quo. That is, advocates of the change option may succeed in persuading voters that voting for this change will provide stability and security, whereas voting against the change will not maintain things

as they have been, but rather create great uncertainty. In Ireland's two repeat referendums on European integration, for example, campaigners suggested that a second vote against the treaties in question – Nice and Lisbon – would endanger Ireland's future relationship with the European Union (e.g., Garry 2013: 97). In the vote on the European Fiscal Compact in May 2012, fears over the consequences of rejecting the deal on offer helped to produce a rising (and majority) Yes vote first time round (Garry 2014: 242–3). The Irish vote in 1998 on the Good Friday Agreement on the future of Northern Ireland also falls, at least in part, into this category: whereas a Yes vote would have had few direct effects on most voters' everyday lives, a No vote would have left the peace process in great peril; voting Yes was therefore the safer option. This was, however, not just a result shaped by anxiety: support in the Republic for the peace settlement was always overwhelming among both politicians and the general public (Gilland 1999); the referendum was an opportunity to embrace the hopes of the future and shake off the fears of the past. In other cases – such as the referendums in New Zealand on smacking in 2009 and on electoral reform in 2011 – the change on offer was a reversion to a previous status quo (or a move in its direction), not to an unfamiliar new model.

Third, the second of the two referendums in which opinion moved sharply in favour of change – the New Zealand electoral reform referendum of 1992 – was highly unusual, in two respects. First, it was only the first step in a two-stage process: the effect of voting for change would be no more than that another referendum would be held a year later to make a final decision. Second, most politicians in both the government and the mainstream opposition were against change. In this context, the risks attached to voting against the status quo were low and an anti-politician bandwagon could build in favour of reform.

Though referendum voting is often volatile, therefore, it is not always entirely unpredictable: we understand much about whether and to what extent opinion is likely to shift in one direction or the other. Yet further study is needed to confirm and give greater nuance to these patterns.

Conclusions

This chapter has examined three questions about voting behaviour in referendums, relating to voter turnout, the determinants of vote choice, and opinion change during referendum campaigns. In all three areas, we have seen that referendum voting patterns are highly heterogeneous: turnout is generally lower than in elections, but occasionally is higher; voters' decisions as to how to vote can be influenced by at least three quite different sets of considerations; most referendums see declining – often, rapidly declining – support for change over the course of the campaign, but some do not. This variety reflects the fact that referendums are themselves diverse. The most important source of variation lies not in institutional differences such as who initiates the vote or whether that vote is formally binding – though such details may certainly matter – but rather in whether the referendum addresses an issue that engages voters' interest.

All this variety suggests a mixed answer also to the normative question of whether referendums have a desirable place in the democratic system. The issues considered here are clearly insufficient on their own to ground a full answer to that question: we would need also to consider, for example, the degree to which decision-making in a democracy should reflect simply the will of the majority and whether greater use of referendums undermines the representative institutions that necessarily also survive. The evidence explored here suggests, however, the conclusion that some referendums are better than others. Referendums on issues that voters have little interest in will struggle to yield reasoned decisions. But referendums on questions that do capture voters' imaginations may

provoke considered and inclusive debate that confers strong legitimacy upon the decisions that are reached.

Yet these conclusions must remain tentative, for our understanding of voting behaviour during referendums remains incomplete. Much research has been conducted, but each of the sections of this chapter points to areas in which further work would be desirable. On patterns in the frequency of referendums, it will be important as time goes by to investigate whether the recent fall in numbers is just a passing blip or suggests that the 1990s surge was largely a short-term consequence of widespread democratizations and other constitutional upheavals. On turnout, we still lack detailed comparative work on whether referendum voters are more or less representative of the eligible electorate as a whole than are election voters, and how this varies depending on the issues in hand. As to how voters make up their minds, more research is needed to gauge discourse quality during referendum campaigns and compare this with the quality of discourse surrounding other decision-making processes. Finally, in relation to opinion change during referendums, we know there is a tendency to shift towards the status quo, but that there are also many exceptions; more research is needed to help us understand which are the referendums likely to exhibit which patterns.

Referendums are much more varied than representative elections. That makes them harder for politicians to use as tools of policy-making, and also harder for political scientists to research. But it also means that opportunities abound for further work aimed at deepening our understanding of why particular referendums take the form they do and what implications this has for their likely effects upon policy outcomes and democracy.

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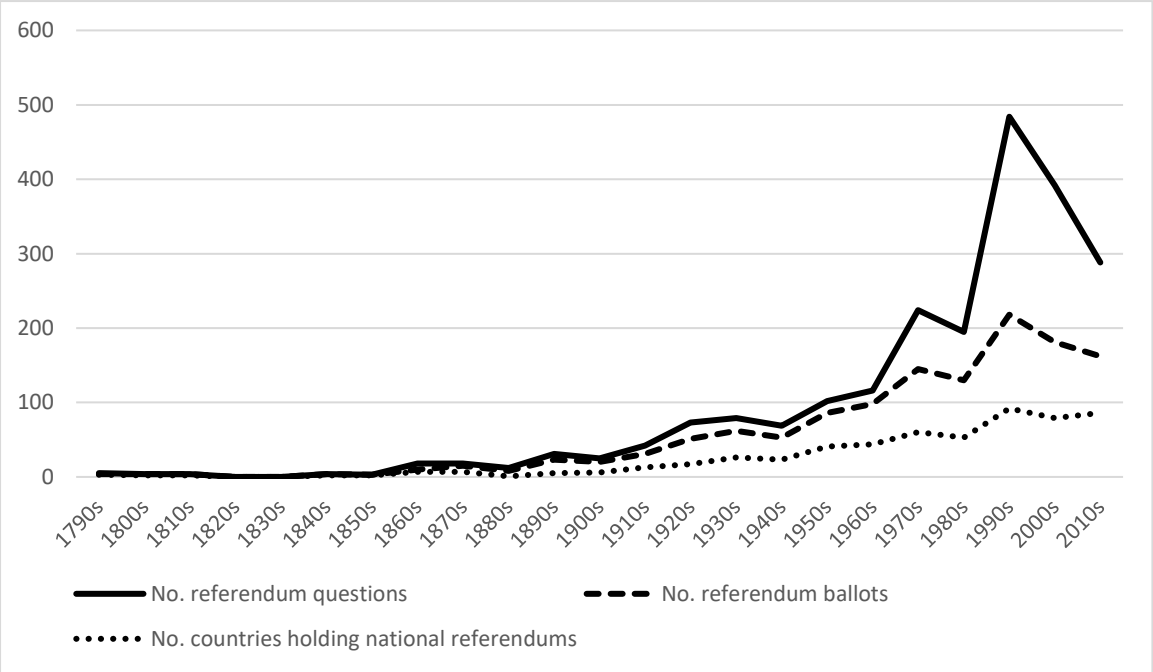
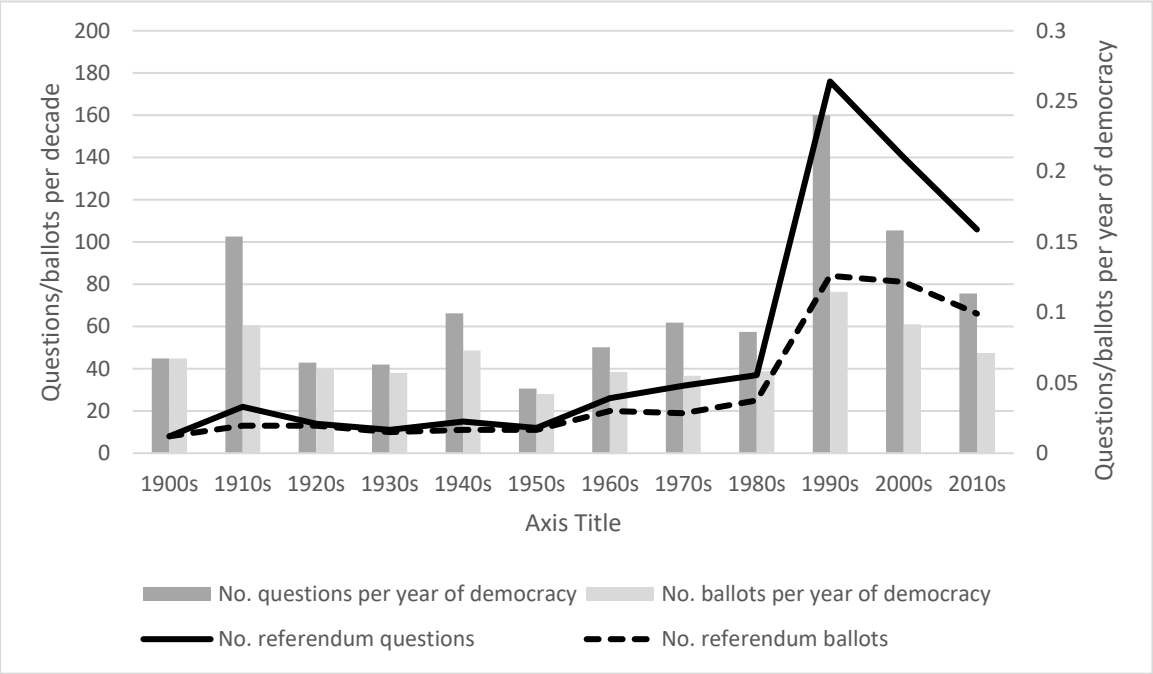
Figure 24.1. Frequency of National Referendums, by decade



Note: Figures given for the 2010s are the figures from 2010 to 2014 multiplied by 2.

Source: Author's calculations using data in SUDD (2015).

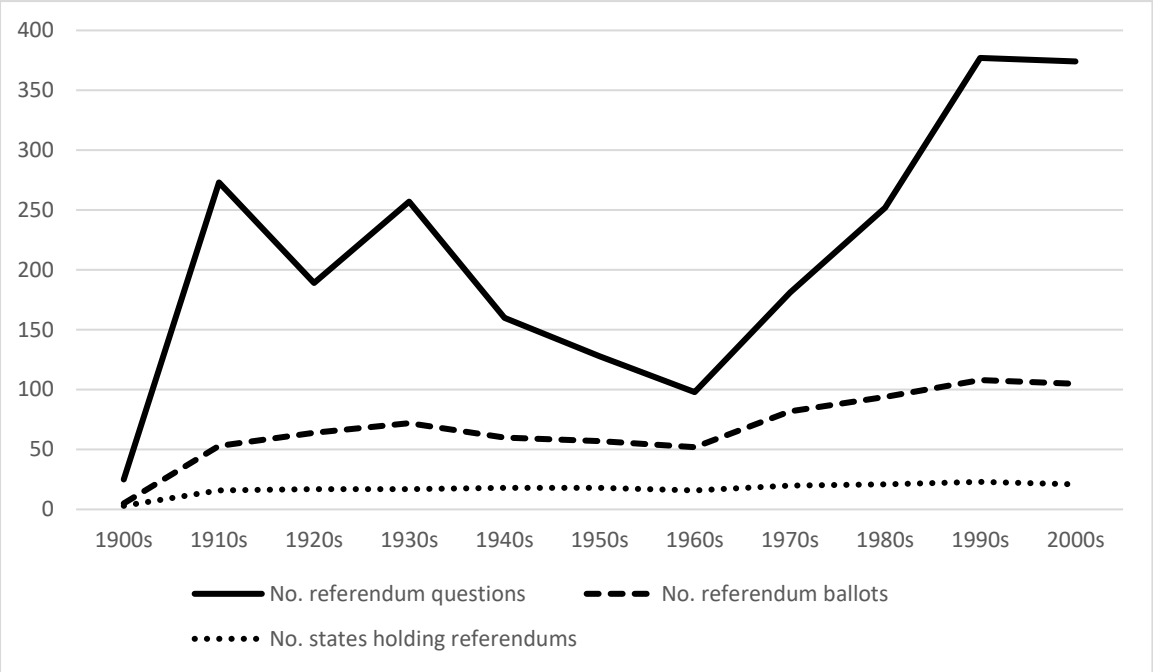
Figure 24.2. Frequency of National Referendums in Democracies, by decade



Notes: Democracies are defined as countries with a Polity IV score on the Polity variable of 6 or more (Center for Systemic Peace 2014). Switzerland is excluded. Figures given for referendum numbers in the 2010s are the figures from 2010 to 2014 multiplied by 2.

Source: Author's calculations using data in SUDD (2015).

Figure 24.3. Frequency of State-Level Citizen-Initiated Referendums in the United States, by decade



Note: Data cover citizen-initiated referendums (initiatives) only.

Source: Author's calculations using data in IRI (2015).

Table 24.1. Turnout in Elections and Referendums in Democratic Countries since 1990

Country	Number of			Average turnout in		Standard deviation of		Highest turnout in referendum?	Lowest turnout in referendum?
	elections	referendum questions	referendum ballots	elections (%)	referendums (%)	election turnout	referendum turnout		
Australia	9	2	1	94.7	95.1	0.9	-		
Austria	8	2	2	81.4	67.4	3.7	15.0		Yes
Bahamas*	5	7	2	91.3	45.0	0.8	-		Yes
Belize	5	1	1	78.9	46.6	6.0	-		Yes
Botswana	5	11	2	78.3	10.8	3.3	5.9		Yes
Bulgaria	8	1	1	63.1	20.2	10.8	-		Yes
Canada	7	1	1	63.5	74.7	3.5	-	Yes	
Costa Rica	7	1	1	72.0	59.2	6.1	-		Yes
Cyprus	5	1	1	88.8	89.2	5.3	-		
Czech Rep.	8	1	1	72.0	55.2	12.6	-		Yes
Denmark	7	6	6	85.6	74.6	1.6	12.9		Yes
Estonia	8	4	3	65.0	71.3	6.3	8.3	Yes	
Finland	7	1	1	66.9	70.8	1.3	-	Yes	
France	5	3	3	62.5	56.4	5.2	18.5	Yes	Yes
Greece	8	1	1	72.8	62.5	6.4	-		
Hungary	7	8	5	65.0	39.4	4.3	13.5		Yes
Iceland	7	8	3	85.3	62.1	2.2	11.0		Yes
Ireland	5	26	19	66.8	51.1	2.5	10.5		Yes
Italy	7	53	13	82.5	43.7	3.7	16.1		Yes
Latvia	9	10	9	70.0	50.9	9.9	23.5		Yes
Lithuania	6	21	11	55.6	54.8	9.5	19.1	Yes	Yes
Luxembourg	5	4	2	89.7	88.7	2.0	1.7		
Malta	6	3	3	95.1	79.1	1.5	8.4		Yes
Netherlands	7	1	1	77.3	63.3	2.7	-		Yes
New Zealand	9	12	9	81.3	65.7	4.5	18.7		Yes
Norway	6	1	1	77.0	89.0	1.1	-	Yes	
Poland	7	7	3	47.5	44.7	4.3	10.9	Yes	Yes
Portugal	7	3	3	62.9	41.2	3.4	6.9		Yes

Romania	6	7	6	59.5	48.5	14.8	12.3		Yes
Slovakia	8	18	8	72.9	28.2	13.9	13.4		Yes
Slovenia	7	22	16	67.3	37.8	10.0	18.4	Yes	Yes
Spain	6	1	1	74.0	41.8	3.7	-		Yes
Sweden	7	2	2	83.9	82.9	2.5	0.4		
United Kingdom	5	1	1	67.2	42.2	6.8	-		Yes
Uruguay	5	12	9	90.5	88.0	0.9	3.2	Yes	Yes
Total	234	263	152	74.5	54.1	13.2	22.3	No	Yes

*Turnout for one of the two Bahamian referendum ballots is unavailable.

Note: Average referendum turnout and the standard deviation in referendum turnout are calculated across separate referendum ballots. Where several questions were asked in one ballot, average turnout across these ballots is used.

Sources: Author's calculations based on election data in International IDEA (2015) and referendum data in SUDD (2015).

Table 24.2. Opinion Change during Referendum Campaigns

Country	Date	Topic	Support for change in…			Change between…		
			Early polls*	Late polls**	Actual result	Early and late polls	Late polls and result	Early polls and result
Australia	06/11/1999	Republic	58	45	45	-13	0	-13
Australia	06/11/1999	Constitutional preamble	56	44	39	-12	-5	-17
Canada	26/10/1992	Federal reform	66	46	45	-19	-1	-21
Ireland	18/06/1992	EU treaty (Maastricht)	84	68	69	-15	1	-15
Ireland	25/11/1992	Abortion/contraception (info)	76	79	60	3	-19	-16
Ireland	25/11/1992	Abortion (travel overseas)	76	74	62	-2	-12	-14
Ireland	25/11/1992	Abortion (suicide risk)	60	52	35	-8	-17	-25
Ireland	24/11/1995	Divorce	67	55	50	-13	-4	-17
Ireland	28/11/1996	Bail (refusal)	89	n/a	75			-14
Ireland	30/10/1997	Cabinet confidentiality	n/a	77	53		-25	
Ireland	22/05/1998	Good Friday Agreement	79	93	94	14	2	16
Ireland	22/05/1998	EU treaty (Amsterdam)	81	76	62	-6	-14	-20
Ireland	07/06/2001	EU treaty (Nice)	n/a	66	46		-20	
Ireland	07/06/2001	International Criminal Court	n/a	84	64		-20	
Ireland	07/06/2001	Death penalty (abolition)	n/a	64	62		-2	
Ireland	06/03/2002	Abortion (protection of life)	53	53	50	0	-3	-4
Ireland	19/10/2002	EU treaty (Nice)	58	61	63	3	2	5
Ireland	11/06/2004	Citizenship extension	74	71	79	-3	8	6
Ireland	12/06/2008	EU treaty (Lisbon)	64	55	47	-9	-8	-18
Ireland	02/10/2009	EU treaty (Lisbon)	67	70	67	3	-3	0
Ireland	27/10/2011	Parliamentary committees	n/a	81	47		-35	
Ireland	27/10/2011	Judges' salaries	97	93	80	-4	-13	-17
Ireland	31/05/2012	EU treaty (Fiscal Compact)	56	60	60	4	0	4
Ireland	10/11/2012	Children's rights	n/a	95	58		-37	
Ireland	04/10/2013	Court of Appeal	n/a	77	65		-12	
Ireland	04/10/2013	Senate abolition	61	61	48	0	-13	-13
Ireland	22/05/2015	Presidency minimum age	42	31	27	-11	-4	-15
Ireland	22/05/2015	Same-sex marriage	79	73	62	-6	-11	-17
New Zealand	19/09/1992	Electoral reform	69	n/a	85			16
New Zealand	06/11/1993	Electoral reform	63	n/a	54			-9
New Zealand	26/09/1997	Pensions	26	13	8	-12	-5	-17
New Zealand	27/11/1999	Criminal law reform	n/a	89	92		3	
New Zealand	27/11/1999	Size of parliament	n/a	80	81		1	
New Zealand	21/08/2009	Smacking	12	14	12	2	-1	1
New Zealand	26/11/2011	Electoral reform	44	42	42	-2	1	-2
New Zealand	13/12/2013	Privatization	33	n/a	32			-1
UK	05/05/2011	Electoral reform	50	42	32	-8	-10	-18
Mean			**62**	**57**	**52**	**-5**	**-8**	**-9**

* Polls conducted more than 30 days before the referendum ** Polls conducted 30 or fewer days before the referendum

Notes: Where polling fieldwork spanned several days, the middle of this range is used as the poll date. Mean values of support for change in the final row are calculated only across those cases for

which polling data are available in both the early and late periods. Mean values of change between periods are calculated across all the cases for which the comparison can be made.

Sources: Collated by the author from numerous sources. Details available upon request.