

REFERENDUM OUTCOMES AND TRUST IN GOVERNMENT:  
PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR EUROPE IN THE WAKE OF MAASTRICHT

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## ABSTRACT

The referenda conducted in France and Denmark in 1992 to ratify the Maastricht Treaty are often seen as giving evidence of 'true' attitudes towards Europe. In this paper we dispute this assumption, presenting evidence that shows referenda in Parliamentary systems with disciplined party governments to be subject to what we call a 'lockstep' phenomenon in which referendum outcomes become tied to the popularity of the government in power, even if the ostensible subject of the referendum has little to do with the reasons for government popularity (or lack of popularity). In the case of the Maastricht referenda in France and Denmark, the apparent unpopularity of the European project in fact appears to have been nothing of the kind, but instead to have reflected the unpopularity of ruling parties in both countries. A referendum conducted at about the same time in Ireland, where the government was more popular, achieved a handsome majority, as did the referendum conducted a year later in Denmark after a more popular government had taken office. The mechanisms involved are elucidated by means of survey data.

## INTRODUCTION

The referenda conducted in France and Denmark in 1992 to ratify the Treaty of European Union are often seen as giving evidence of the 'true' attitudes of voters in these countries towards Europe - attitudes apparently at odds with those obtained in opinion polls over the previous two decades which indicated considerable public support for the European project (see below).<sup>1</sup> Desmond Dinan, for example, has stated that

The Danish referendum ... brought home the extent of popular alienation from Brussels... As ... the distinction between domestic affairs and Community affairs disappears, the public wants greater openness and involvement in Community decision-making.<sup>2</sup>

Butler and Ranney have pointed out that it is not uncommon for referenda to produce results apparently at odds with the findings of polls taken in the months before a referendum.<sup>3</sup> The rationale for assuming that referenda give a true picture while opinion polls do not, when elaborated at all, appears to be based on the notion that opinion polls relate to a sort of fuzzy idea (in 1992 an 'idea of Europe') while referenda have to do with concrete steps needed for the idea to take on reality. According to this view, voters who in 1992 might have been favorably disposed towards the idea of Europe might nevertheless balk at the specific steps embodied in the Maastricht Treaty.

But this is not the only possible interpretation to place on the results of the Maastricht referenda in Denmark and France. Another possibility is that voters were not in fact giving vent to feelings about Europe but rather were rendering a verdict on the general performance of their governments. According to this argument, referenda conducted in the context of national party politics, with the government of the day urging ratification of a treaty they have themselves negotiated, will inevitably be contaminated by popular feelings about the government. Popular governments will get votes in favor of referenda that they propose. Unpopular governments will be slapped on the wrist.

In this paper we sift the evidence that might help us to distinguish between these two contrasting views of the meaning to be attached to the Maastricht referenda. We start by elaborating the case for treating the Maastricht referenda as definitive, but then proceed at much greater length to set out the evidence that supports the alternative view: first that deriving from a review of other referenda in Europe and elsewhere, and then evidence derived from a more careful perusal of the Maastricht results.

#### MAASTRICHT AS REALITY CHECK

The view has long been held that public opinion on Europe was favorable towards European integration but did not see the issue as salient. Arguably the consensus consisted largely of acquiescence on the part of those who took no great interest in European affairs and who had no real opinions on the subject of European Unification. Lindberg and Scheingold had suggested in 1970 that the 'permissive consensus' that has long characterized opinion on European integration might not withstand a major increase in the scope or capacity of the community.<sup>4</sup> This was echoed by Shepherd in a review of U. K. public opinion on the E. C. He warned that 'conflict arising from positive integration could culminate in a crisis over political sovereignty'.<sup>5</sup>

Several points can be made about European unification in general and the Maastricht Treaty in particular which might provide an account of why public opinion apparently turned away from the idea of greater integration.<sup>6</sup> First of all, from the time of the Treaty of Rome European governments have moved forward with integration by treating 'Europe' as an aspect of foreign policy, to be made by national political leaders negotiating with one another behind closed doors with the support of disciplined Parliamentary parties that would ratify the resulting deals. Public opinion was hardly involved. It could be argued that what happened with the Maastricht Treaty was that publicity arising from the various referendum campaigns led people to realize that the European Project was developing in ways they had not been aware of, and, in many cases, were not prepared to support.

A second point is that governments have paradoxically contributed to their difficulty in 'selling' the European project by perpetuating the illusion of national sovereignty down the years. Governing parties have often tried to present themselves both as bringing home the bacon from the European cornucopia at the same time as defending the national interest against incursions from Brussels. The irony, however, is that in maintaining the illusion of national sovereignty beyond the point at which the truth could be hidden from voters, politicians in European countries may have come to appear impotent to affect the course of events in Brussels. Observing this, many voters may have drawn the natural conclusion that if Brussels is out of control then their country had better cut itself loose from Brussels. At the same time, because national parliamentary debate was often by-passed, opposition politicians - even those who agreed about the benefits of European unity - were given an incentive to take advantage of the disaffection of voters regarding Europe.

A third point is that integration, which initially involved the 'negative' activities of removing tangible barriers to trade, has now become more 'positive', involving the construction of joint policies in ever more salient areas. The Maastricht Treaty contained a number of specific commitments to such policies, which would lead both to a larger and a more visible role for European policy making as these policies came to have an increasingly visible impact on everyday life. Whilst people could accept and even support the vague ideal of European Union, the concrete realities will have provoked opposition. Some will have been against the idea of a single currency, some against the idea of a central bank, some against a unitary defense policy, and so on. Of course different groups will also have been in favor of different components. In such a situation, politicians seeking agreement will carry out a log-rolling exercise, and develop a package which offsets the components groups do not like with others that they do like. This is how the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty were constructed, but the log-rolling all occurred at an elite level between groups that could understand how to balance costs against benefits.<sup>7</sup> Presenting such a solution for mass consumption is a different matter altogether. At a popular level it may well be that putting the elements of a package together

involves the risk of losing support for the package as a whole. In this way, permissive consensus might give way to squabbling divisiveness.

When the implications of the Maastricht proposals became evident during the public debate over the Treaty, many individuals may have decided that enough was enough. Arguably then, by the time of the Maastricht treaty, permissive consensus had reached its limits, and the support registered in opinion polls for further integration was more apparent than real. Hence the size of anti-Maastricht votes in France and Denmark.

If this were indeed what happened during the run-up to the Maastricht referenda, it would be an interesting example of popular attitudes on a complex topic adapting to changes in real world circumstances, and might testify to a greater sophistication in public opinion than many have found there.<sup>8</sup> Some recent studies have certainly suggested that the 'minimalist' view of the quality of public opinion is overdrawn and that public opinion can change in quite rational ways as circumstances change.<sup>9</sup>

But is this the proper interpretation to place on the outcomes of the Maastricht referenda? Two points are glossed over in the above account. Both are obvious but easily overlooked. The first is that, for all the talk of opposition to the European idea, while the Danes voted narrowly to reject the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, referendum votes were carried in France and Ireland in the same year, and, a year later (following amendments to the Treaty) in Denmark too. The second even more obvious point is that these votes were not the first to be held in Europe. Referenda, and elections of all kinds, have been going on for a long time and have been the object of extensive academic study. The finding that emerged from the first such studies and which has been echoed by most of the others to varying degrees,<sup>10</sup> is that votes should not be taken at face value. Voters for a party do not necessarily support (or even know) what that party stands for, and the choice between Yes or No in a referendum may be made on the basis of many factors other than the substantive issue on the ballot paper.

## MAASTRICHT AS IRRELEVANCE

As long ago as 1971, Ronald Inglehart suggested that while the sorts of questions asked about integration tapped deep-seated political values and orientations, any particular question, as put in a referendum, could and quite probably would be influenced also by short term considerations.<sup>11</sup> Arguably, the voting in these referenda might be better understood as a response to the immediate circumstances of the situation rather than as a manifestation of deep-seated views on European Union. Drawing on the experience of earlier referenda, the alternative view of the Maastricht experience that we want to put forward follows Inglehart in stressing the party political context of the vote.

It is clear from a number of studies that although referenda might be thought to allow for the unadulterated expression of the popular will, in practice they are prone, like elections, to the influence of political intermediaries.<sup>12</sup> A significant intermediary is party, and most studies have testified to the importance of party allegiance as a factor in people's choice in a referenda. The point emerges from the studies in various compendia about referendums.<sup>13</sup> Pierce and Valen expressed the point firmly in their comparative study of referenda in Britain and Norway on EC membership in the 1970s.<sup>14</sup>

Our findings about the centrality of partisanship, when taken in conjunction with the regularity with which that same factor shows up in other referendum studies, indicates that partisan attachments are almost surely the primary factor in referendum voting. Partisan identification plays the same primary role in referenda that it does in general elections.

One of the striking features of the 1992 referenda on Maastricht, of course, was the fact that in all countries most parties called for a Yes vote. Nevertheless the votes were close in France and Denmark. However, in many cases parties were in reality divided; and as Pierce et al. also point out: 'when parties divide, so do their followers'.<sup>15</sup> Parties have a strong

impact only when they are united.

Our major point in the present article is that partisan attachments in Parliamentary systems are inextricably entwined with government popularity, so that the outcome of a referendum has to be seen in connection with the position taken by the government. Particularly when public opinion is ill-informed and convictions are shallow, opinions can switch easily under the influence of salient factors. In a parliamentary regime nothing is more salient to voters than the standing of the government, and any government proposal is colored by this fact. Once again, various studies testify to this, although less explicitly than is the case with respect to party allegiance.

While in the two countries which have most experience of referenda - Switzerland and the U. S. A. - referenda are generally proposed by citizens rather than governments (there are some exceptions to this in Switzerland), in most countries it is governments who are most clearly identified with the decision to hold a referendum and governments who almost invariably call for a 'yes' vote. As a consequence, the government is perhaps the real object of many referenda and whilst a popular government might expect to see its referendum proposals approved, an unpopular government will often see such proposals turned down.

These two factors - party allegiance and incumbent popularity - might be expected to interact. Government parties have an added incentive to preserve unity in a referendum campaign to the extent that the credibility of the government is at stake. Opposition parties on the other hand may be cross-pressured between their feelings on the issue itself and their understandable desire to embarrass the government.

#### GOVERNMENT STANDING AND REFERENDUM OUTCOMES

In this section we will give several examples of referenda where we can

document the contaminating influence of government standing. These were chosen purely on the basis of easy access to survey data that could be analyzed by us (or in one case had already been analyzed elsewhere) to determine the relationship between referendum outcomes, the popular standing of governments that proposed them, and party preferences.

The first example shows the impact of party preference and is particularly interesting because it is the only one for which we have been able to obtain panel data from two surveys, one conducted at the start of a referendum campaign and one immediately following the vote. In 1979 the British Labour government under James Callaghan redeemed a campaign promise by proposing a referendum to the Scottish people that would determine whether a Scottish Parliament would be established in Edinburgh with legislative powers devolved from Westminster. As a sop to opponents within his party, however, Callaghan had permitted a clause in the referendum legislation to state that the result would not be considered binding unless at least 40 per cent of registered voters were in favor. Faced with this high hurdle, the referendum failed, but the interesting thing from our perspective is not whether it passed or failed, but the manner in which opinion regarding the referendum evolved during the six-week campaign that led up to it. By chance in this instance we have the advantage of a panel study in which 200 respondents chosen to be representative of the electorate of Glasgow were interviewed six weeks before the referendum and again immediately after the referendum had taken place.

**Table 1** Effects of party and initial referendum position on final referendum vote,\* Glasgow 1979 (N=113)

VARIABLE	B	BETA	SIGF
Party preferred	0.346	0.356	.000
Initial referendum position	0.309	0.278	.002
(CONSTANT)	0.072		.238
Variance explained	0.281		

\* Referendum positions 1 = Yes, 0 = No; Party preferred 1 = Labour, Liberal, SNP; 0 = Conservative

At the start of the campaign the Glaswegians were 3 to 2 in favor of devolution for Scotland, with a moderate connection to party preference ( $r=.386$ ). Six weeks later the balance had shifted radically towards a dead heat, and the correlation with party preference had increased ( $r=.464$ ). As shown in Table 1, a regression analysis of referendum vote which tries to predict it from initial position on the referendum and party preference finds that initial position contributes less than party preference to the final position taken by voters. Evidently what had happened in the intervening six weeks is that the parties had made known their positions on devolution, and many voters had subordinated their own judgments to those of the parties they supported. The result was a referendum outcome that presaged the results of the General Election called a few weeks later. Even in Scotland, the unpopularity of the Labour Government of James Callaghan overwhelmed voters' support for devolution.

Adding up in different ways the terms of the equation whose components are given in Table 1 enables us to model the referendum votes of different types of voter. Those who were initially opposed and preferred the Tories were extremely unlikely to vote for the referendum (only 7% did so if the unreliable constant term is to be believed). Those who were initially in favor and supported Labour, Liberal or Scottish National Party eventually voted 72 per cent (almost 2:1) for devolution (the sum of all the coefficients in the B column). Those initially in favor who preferred the Conservatives were 35 per cent less likely to vote for devolution than those who preferred any of the other parties. In other analyses of the same data we find that those who switched from a pro-devolution to an anti-devolution stance had reasons for their vote other than their party preference, but since these reasons changed over the six-week campaign it seems likely that the reasons they gave for voting the way they did were the consequences of their partisanship rather than the cause.

The second example that shows the impact of party and government standing is from the Canadian 1992 referendum on the future of Quebec. In that case, we have evidence that those who voted against the referendum did so over-

whelmingly because they opposed the Conservative government that had proposed it.<sup>16</sup> What the multivariate analyses show is that, net of party identification (together with opinions about various provisions of the referendum, region and other demographic variables, and measures of national community and regime support) levels of support for the federal Conservative government (as measured by the average thermometer scores for the party and prime minister) had sizable and significant effects on referendum voting. Those supporting the government were more likely to vote yes. Government support, in turn, was strongly affected by voters' perceptions of national and personal economic conditions. A number of counterfactual scenarios indicated that, if the referendum had been held in a more favorable economic climate (with consequentially more support for the government proposing it), it likely would have passed in every region but Quebec.<sup>17</sup>

The third example is of the British 1975 referendum over the renegotiated terms of entry to the EC and again shows the combined impact of party and government. The importance of this example is not that the government got a majority for staying in the EEC at a time when it stood high in the polls, but the fact that it managed to pull so many of those who had previously been anti-EEC into the 'yes' camp. This feature of the referendum outcome was noted by commentators at the time, who saw it as being due to a 'leadership effect'. Humphrey Taylor of Gallup Polls pointed out that 'the major public figures advocating EEC membership are relatively popular while those advocating leaving the EEC are relatively unpopular.'<sup>18</sup> The line-up of voters is, however, quite surprising, since it was the Tories who had originally negotiated British entry to the EC, and the Labour party that had been most skeptical of entry. Opinion polls taken at the time of the October 1974 General Election show Labour supporters to have been most skeptical of the EC with only 43 per cent believing Britain should stay in, and Tory supporters most united in support (76 per cent thought Britain should stay); yet opinion polls at the time of the referendum eight months later show that Labour supporters had been won around, with 58 per cent voting to stay in.<sup>19</sup> Sarlvik et al's analysis of the survey evidence from the time concluded that voters had changed their views on the EEC in accordance with changes in the positions of their preferred parties and that this

shift was particularly decisive 'among voters whose party was in power'.<sup>20</sup> This is not particularly surprising, with the government of the day being a popular Labour government that claimed to have negotiated improved terms for Britain; but it is another instance that supports our general argument.<sup>21</sup>

The last example comes from the Irish divorce referendum of 1986. This was a very bitterly fought referendum, called in April and conducted in June. Fine Gael and Labour were in government, and the government was very unpopular. Only 25% were satisfied with it in June. Fianna Fail (unofficially) campaigned for a no, and the PDs (who had yet to fight an election) were lukewarm (though ideologically should have been in favor). Fine Gael was also increasingly divided. Only Labour mounted a solid campaign for a Yes. Comparing April and June it is clear that the swings against the referendum were strongest amongst the opposition parties; but, tellingly, the swings were virtually the same both for PD supporters (whose party mounted a lackluster campaign) and supporters of Fianna Fail (whose party was much more determined in its campaigning). So we must ask whether these swings were so much due to the efforts of the campaigners as to the unpopularity of the government at a time when government popularity became linked to the divorce issue. Four months later, opinion among supporters of these two parties had bounced back more than half way to where it had been at the start of the referendum campaign, as though the uncoupling of the issue from party politics enabled people's true opinions to surface once again.<sup>22</sup>

**Table 2** Support for the 1986 Irish divorce referendum by party and month of survey

	Feb	Apr	June	Oct
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Opposition parties				
Fianna Fail	43%	49%	30%	40%
PD	62	68	50	60
Government parties				
Fine Gael	51	66	47	58
Lab	53	54	55	58
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Source: Polls by Market Research Bureau of Ireland (MRBI) reproduced in Irish Political Studies Vol 2 (1987).

These examples illustrate the way parties have a critical impact on referendum behavior. If the evolution of opinion that we observe in Scotland over the course of the referendum campaign also occurred in other cases and accounts for the findings we have reported, this would suggest that when governing parties propose a referendum in countries in which party government is the norm, a sort of 'lockstep' phenomenon comes into play in which voters tend (even on important matters) to see the referendum in terms of the standing of the party or parties that propose it, not the other way around.

The referendum lockstep seems to us to be a special case of a much more general phenomenon. As proposed by Reif and Schmitt and later by Reif writing alone,<sup>23</sup> the outcomes of elections depend greatly on the context in which they are held. What Reif calls 'first order' elections to the national parliament in European countries take precedence, and the standing of the parties in this primary arena are likely to color and even determine results in other less salient arenas, such as European elections and local elections. What we are suggesting in this paper is that referenda proposed by governments in Parliamentary regimes should be viewed as special cases of second order national elections in which the results should not necessarily be taken at face value because allowance must be made for the standing of governments in the first order arena. If this is the case with referenda in Canada, Britain and Ireland, then why not in France and Denmark?

#### THE MAASTRICHT REFERENDA AS PARTY VOTES

Unfortunately, in the case of the referenda conducted in 1992 as part of the ratification process for the Treaty of European Union, we have not been able to obtain panel panel data of the Glasgow type. In France and Ireland it does not exist; in Denmark the owners have not been willing to share it with us. However, published materials from Danish surveys raise real questions about whether Danes were voting about Europe rather than about domestic politics. Siune and Svensson report that those who were better informed about Europe were no more likely to bring their votes on the treaty into

conformity with their attitudes than those who were less well informed.<sup>24</sup> This suggests that attitudes to Europe reflected domestic partisan preferences in Denmark rather than the other way around.<sup>25</sup>

**Table 3** Referendum support by government support in Denmark, France and Ireland

		Approved of Government	Disapproved of Government
DENMARK 1992*	YES %	84	32
	NO %	16	68
	N	468	889
FRANCE 1992**	YES %	79	35
	NO %	21	65
	N	930	1801
IRELAND 1992***	YES %	82	43
	NO %	18	57
	N	391	346
DENMARK 1993*	YES %	57	65
	NO %	43	35
	N	381	917

SOURCES: MRBI June 15th; SOFRES Exit poll; Danish post-referendum study.

\* Supporter of governing party; \*\* Approved of Mitterrand;  
\*\*\* Approved government performance.

Moreover, the fact that we have published results from three countries on four occasions when the referendum fared very differently permits us to conduct something of a critical test of the proposition that referendum results follow government support. Table 3 demonstrates quite clearly that the referenda in Denmark, France and Ireland in 1992 turned out to a great extent to reflect the popularity of the government (or perhaps of the leader of that government). The table shows voting intention or reported vote in the referenda according to whether or not respondents thought their government was doing a good job. There is a striking similarity in the association between the two variables in the different countries. Even in Denmark, the overwhelming majority of those who approved of the government's

performance in 1992 voted 'yes'.

For the 1992 referenda the percentages are the same to within 5 per cent in the other two countries. Amongst those unhappy with the performance of the government, a majority voted 'no', again with remarkable similarities between the percentages in each country. What was very different in the three countries was the degree of approval of the government in the first place. In Ireland, a new cabinet under a new prime minister was still enjoying a honeymoon of sorts with over half of all voters willing to make approving rather than disapproving noises about it to pollsters. Not so in France where, despite shuffling his pack of prime ministers, Mitterrand had been very unpopular for some years. At the time of the French referendum, two out of three voters with an opinion disapproved of his performance. The Danish government too, with a relatively small parliamentary base, was out of public favor. When governments said 'trust us, and vote "yes"' it is not surprising that the referenda ran into difficulties in France and Denmark.<sup>26</sup>

The evidence from the 1993 Danish referendum shown in Table 3 at first glance seems to disprove our contention. In 1993 the Yes vote was actually higher amongst supporters of the opposition parties than amongst supporters of the government party. We have to remember, however, that the Maastricht Treaty had been negotiated by leaders of two parties which, by 1993, had become part of the opposition, giving those leaders especial (and unusual among opposition leaders) credibility in calling for a 'yes'. What is interesting is the changes in the positions of the supporters of the various parties between the two referenda. These are shown in Table 4 below. Some of these figures must be treated with caution because they are based on quite small survey numbers - less than 100 each for the Radicals, Christian People's Party and the Progress Party. Nevertheless, the largest increase in the Yes vote comes among the well-represented Social Democrats. In 1992 the party was out of government and, despite advocating a Yes, mobilized only one in three of its supporters behind that recommendation. In 1993, now in government, it mobilized almost 3 out of every five. No other party showed anything like this sort of ability to shift its supporters from one camp to the other, not even the Socialist People's Party which had actually

changed its recommendation from No to Yes. It is true that the Danes had obtained concessions in the application of the treaty to Denmark, but one post referendum poll reported that of those Danes who voted in May 1993, only 17 per cent knew about the Edinburgh 'concessions' and only 2 per cent could name the four opt-out clauses.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the Progress Party (which campaigned consistently for a No) actually proved to be more successful in 1993, despite the concessions, than in 1992.

**Table 4** A comparison of voting in the the 1992 and 1993 Danish referenda by party

	%Yes 1992	%Yes 1993
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Govt parties 1992		
Liberals	89	89
Conservatives	79	86
Govt party 1993		
Social Democrats	33	57
Opposition 1992/1993		
Radicals	64	69
Christian People's Party	55	48
Socialist People's Party	11	21
Progress Party	33	16
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Sources: 1992 figures from Lars Bille, 'Denmark' in European Journal of Political Research Vol. 24, No. 4 (1993), pp. 411-418. 1993 figures supplied by Torben Worre.

A more persuasive explanation can be based on the movement into government of the party of a significant proportion of 1992 No voters, the Social Democrats. The new government was then apparently able to translate its support into votes for the treaty. At the same time, supporters of the right wing Progress Party may have been even less sympathetic to the new Socialist government than they had been to the previous Liberal/Conservative coalition, explaining the halving of support for the treaty among this party's voters.

**Table 5** Development of opinion regarding Europe and the Maastricht treaty, autumn 1991 to summer 1992

	Autumn '91			Spring '92			Summer '92		
	Pro	Con	DK/NA	Pro	Con	DK/NA	Pro	Con	DK/NA
-----									
DENMARK									
EC Support*	52%	15%	32%	50%	18%	33%	56%	12%	32%
Maastricht**				41	27	32	42	39	19
Referendum							49	51	--
FRANCE									
EC Support *	59	4	37	55	8	37	55	9	37
Maastricht**				48	13	39	43	42	15
Referendum							51	49	--
IRELAND									
EC Support *	66	2	32	67	2	31	62	4	34
Maastricht**				61	6	32	56	28	16
Referendum							69	31	--
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\* Typology derived from 'EC membership a good thing' and 'for/against efforts to unify Western Europe' in EB36, EB37 and EB38 (N=1,000, approximately, in each survey for each country).

\*\* For or against ratifying Maastricht treaty EB37 and eve of referendum polls. May 31st Gallup poll in Denmark (n=1,801); Aug 21st 27 Aug-1 Sept IFOP/l'Express in France (n=1962); June 15th MRBI/Irish Times poll in Ireland (n=1,000).

Though we lack panel data to support our contention that voters will have been pulled into line behind their parties, circumstantial evidence is supplied by the way in which opinions changed in all three countries during the run-up to the 1992 referenda, as shown in Table 5. There we see that the rate of EC support (top row for each country) remained remarkably constant over the period surrounding the Maastricht referenda. Opinions about the referendum itself, however (when these were first solicited in the Spring of 1992), diverged from these long-term support scores in much the same way in each country, with smaller majorities in favor of Maastricht than were willing to give their support to the concept of European unity. In all three countries, however, the balance of support for the Treaty of Union then worsened considerably, though with a majority in favor still remaining at the time of the referenda themselves. When it came to the

actual votes, in Denmark, opinion swung against the treaty, in France it remained essentially unchanged while in Ireland it swung back even further in favor of the treaty. The implication is that in Denmark and in Ireland government (un)popularity had an effect on the vote even beyond the effect it had already had on opinion about the treaty.

## CONCLUSIONS

Referenda are primarily devices for legitimating or refusing legitimation for policy or constitutional changes. Seen as such, there is no problem about the Maastricht referenda of 1992. In two countries the treaty of European Union was legitimated by the process (although not by a very wide margin in France) while in another country legitimation was withheld, only to be granted one year later. If the referenda are seen purely as means of settling political questions these implications of the Maastricht referenda are inescapable. In this context it does not matter whether people were voting on the ostensible subject at issue or were simply displaying the extent to which they trusted the government which was asking for their support. It is when commentators try to read more into the outcome of a referendum than the simple fact of legitimation or otherwise that problems arise. Trying to infer opinions about Europe from referendum votes implies that the referenda turned on opinions about Europe when it is by no means clear that they did. The fact that people's behavior may be at odds with their attitudes is a truism that goes back to the dawn of empirical social science.<sup>28</sup>

The implication of referendum votes for the standing of the European project is hard to interpret. We would not want to suggest that votes on the Treaty of European Union in France and Denmark in 1992 were meaningless, but neither were they what they seemed. Table 5 makes it clear that there was never an actual majority against the treaty in either of these countries, much less a swing against the idea of a united Europe, whatever the referendum results. On the other hand, those results certainly do tell us something about the shallowness of opinions that shift so rapidly in

response to party cues.

Indeed, it may even be quite dangerous to subject complex matters to a referendum because the very fact that media and politicians are paying attention to the result gives to voters an opportunity to 'vote with the boot', indicating by their vote in an area to which politicians seem attached but about which they themselves are much less concerned what their assessment of those politicians is.<sup>29</sup> This is illustrated by the fact that Mitterrand was unable to prop up his unpopular government on the coattails of a popular issue - the thinly disguised agenda when he called for an unnecessary (from a constitutional perspective) referendum. On the contrary, the legitimacy of the Treaty of Union was put into question purely as a result of government unpopularity. In Denmark the consequence was even worse, since the government was led to re-negotiate a treaty that would probably have been perfectly acceptable to the Danish people had it been proposed by a different government.

These findings raise the concern that, by giving too much credence to referenda about the future of Europe, politicians and commentators could in the wrong circumstances wreck the whole European project - particularly if an unpopular government employs the device to free itself from the consequences of intra-party dissent as John Major threatens to do in Britain.

More generally, our findings throw into question the entire rationale of referenda conducted in Parliamentary democracies. If referendum results are so regularly colored 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. As Smith has pointed out, a government will normally only initiate a referendum when it expects the outcome to be beneficial to it.<sup>30</sup> However, in cases where a government is unpopular, but has no real choice about holding one, a referendum can tie that government's hands. In preventing the enactment of major policy and constitutional changes by governments that lack electoral support, this brake on government

freedom of action may be good for democracy. Moreover, as long as referenda serve to confer a special legitimacy on government actions they may prove useful (as long as governments that call them make sure they are in good standing at the time). However, regarding the result as anything more than a reflection of government support can be dangerous.

Certainly there is little indication in our findings that referendum outcomes should be regarded as necessarily bringing the independent judgment of the electorate to bear on issues of constitutional and political importance. That they do so on some occasions seems undeniable. That they do so at all times seems manifestly impossible. That they did so in regard to the Maastricht referenda seems highly unlikely.

## NOTES

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3. David Butler and Austen Ranney (eds.), Referendums: A Comparative Study of Practice and Theory (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1980), p. 21.
4. L. Lindberg and S. Scheingold, Europe's Would-be Polity (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 277.
5. R. J. Shepherd, Public opinion and European integration (Farnborough Saxon House, 1975), p. 198.
6. The argument in this section is developed at more length in Mark N. Franklin, Michael Marsh and Lauren McLaren, 'Uncorking the Bottle: Popular Opposition to European Unification in the Wake of Maastricht' Journal of Common Market Studies, Vol. 32, No. 4 (1994), pp. 455-472.
7. W. Sandholtz and J. Zysman, '1992: Recasting the European Bargain', World Politics, Vol. 42, No. 1 (1989), pp. 95-128; F. Laursen and S. Vanhoonacke (eds.), The Intergovernmental Conference on Political Union: Institutional Reforms, New Policies, and International Identity of the European Community (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: M. Nijhoff Publishers, 1992).
8. The classic is Philip Converse, 'The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics', in David Apter (ed.) Ideology and Discontent (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1964).
9. P. Sniderman, R. Brody, P. Tetlock et al., Reasoning and Choice: Exploration in Political Psychology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Cf. M. Peffley, and J. Hurwitz, 'International Events and

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10. Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet, The People's Choice; How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1944); Bernard R. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld and William N. McPhee, Voting; a Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954). Cf. Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller and Donald Stokes (1960) The American Voter (New York: Wiley, 1960); David Butler and Donald Stokes, Political Change in Britain (2nd ed. London: Macmillan) 1974.
  11. Ronald Inglehart, 'Public Opinion and European Integration' in Lindberg and Scheingold, European Integration.
  12. Speaking to French voters in 1961, De Gaulle said: 'I need to know how things stand in your hearts and minds. And therefore I appeal to you, over the heads of the intermediaries... The question is one between each man and women amongst you, and myself'. Vincent Wright, 'France' in Butler and Ranney Referendums Around the World, pp. 139-168.
  13. See for example Butler and Ranney, Referendums; Austin Ranney (ed.), The Referendum Device (Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1981); Butler and Ranney, Referendums Around the World; the special issue of the European Journal of Political Research, 1976; and papers presented at an workshop on referenda at the Joint Sessions Workshops of the European Consortium for Political Research, 1994.
  14. Roy Pierce and Henry Valen, 'Referendum voting behavior' American Journal of Political Science, Vol. 27, No. 1 (1983), p. 61.
  15. Pierce and Valen, 'Referendum Voting Behavior', p. 61.
  16. Harold Clarke and Alan Kornberg 'The Politics and Economics of Constitutional Choice: Voting in Canada's 1992 National Referendum' Journal of Politics Vol. 56 (1994), pp. 940-962.
  17. Clarke and Kornberg, 'Voting in Canada's Referendum', pp. 957-958.
  18. David Butler and Ewe Kitzinger, The 1975 Referendum (London: Macmillan, 1976), p. 280.
  19. British Election Study, October 1974; British EEC Referendum Study,

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20. Bo Sarlvik et al., 'Britain's Membership of the EEC' European Journal of Political Research, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1976), p. 112.
  21. In some ways this is similar to what happened in the Spanish case documented by C. Boix and J. Alt in 'Partisan Voting in the Spanish 1986 NATO Referendum', Electoral Studies Vol. 10 (1991), pp. 18-32. What is interesting in that case is that the socialist party, in power, reversed its traditional antipathy to NATO and succeeded in taking its supporters with it just as Labour did in Britain in 1975. It is hard to imagine the same thing occurring with a party in opposition.
  22. The swings seen in the government camp among Fine Gael supporters are harder to explain, but our theory says nothing about what is to be expected of supporters of a government party that itself is lukewarm about its own referendum.
  23. Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt, 'Nine Second Order National Elections: A Conceptual Framework For The Analysis Of European Election Results' European Journal of Political Research Vol 8, No. 1 (1980) pp. 3-44; Karlheinz Reif 1984. 'National Electoral Cycles and European Elections', Electoral Studies Vol. 3, No. 3 (1984), pp. 244-255; Karlheinz Reif, 'Ten Second-Order Elections', in Karlheinz Reif (ed.), Ten European Election (Aldershot: Gower, 1985), pp. 1-36.
  24. Karen Siune and Palle Svensson, 'The Danes and the Maastricht Treaty: The Danish EC Referendum of June 1992', Electoral Studies Vol. 12, No. 2 (1993), pp. 99-111.
  25. Cf. Mark Franklin, Michael Marsh and Christopher Wlezien, 'Attitudes to Europe and Referendum Votes: A Response to Siune and Svensson', Electoral Studies Vol. 13 (1994), pp. 117-121.
  26. In the Swiss referendum on the European Economic Space in 1993, amongst those having trust in government the yes vote was 70 per cent whilst amongst those mistrusting government it was 27 per cent. The best predictors for the vote were apparently party and trust in government. See Hanspeter KRIESI, Claude LONGCHAMP, Florence PASSY, Pascal SCIARINI, 'Analyse der Eidgenössischen Abstimmung vom 6. Dezember 1992', Geneve: VOX-analysen No. 47 (1993).
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28. See, for example, R. Merton, 'Fact and Factitiousness in Ethic Opinionnaires', American Sociological review Vol. 5, (1940), pp. 13-27.
29. Cees Van der Eijk, Mark Franklin and Erik Oppenhuis, 'Consulting the Oracle: Consequences of Treating European Elections as 'Markers' of Domestic Political Developments'. Paper presented at the ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, Madrid, April 1994; Cees van der Eijk, Mark Franklin et al., Choosing Europe: The European Electorate and National Politics in the Face of Union (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, forthcoming 1995).
30. Gordon Smith, 'The functional properties of the referendum' European Journal of Political Research Vol. 4, No. 1 (1976), pp. 1-23.

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