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978-1-107-11517-0 - Framing the European Union: The Power of Political Arguments in Shaping European Integration

Ece Özlem Atikcan

Excerpt

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## 1 The referendum conundrum

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European integration is based on a difficult search for compromise among the member states, civil servants, ministers, Members of the European Parliament, a process that goes on for years and years. This complexity is very heavy, very difficult to explain to people. But it is really very simple to talk them into voting No. That is why I am convinced that referendum is the last instrument you should use.<sup>1</sup>

– Ben Fayot

European integration is not an easy phenomenon to describe. European Union (EU) treaties are hundreds of pages long, and the decision-making process involves multiple legislative procedures and multiple institutions. Besides being unfamiliar with the Union's technical terminology, European citizens lack direct interaction with the Union in their daily lives. National politicians therefore serve as mediators and have an important role in helping the citizens make sense of European integration. Yet explaining why a seemingly minor technical institutional reform is actually a large step forward is not a simple task. Not every political argument is equally effective. An argument that simply claims the EU destroys national identity is very likely to prevail over one that emphasizes the benefits of extended qualified majority voting via the new procedure of double-majority in the EU Council.

This problem manifests itself clearly during EU referendum campaigns and has significant implications as referendum results guide the future of European integration. Since the Second World War, European integration has been the most frequent subject matter for referendums.<sup>2</sup> Table 1.1 lists all 56 of the EU referendums to date.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Member of the Luxembourgish Parliament, and the President of the Parliamentary Group of the Luxembourg Social Democrats (LSAP). Interview, 14 November 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Claes de Vreese, "Why European Citizens Will Reject the European Constitution," *Harvard University Minda de Gunzburg Centre for European Studies Working Paper* 116 (2004); Carlos Closa, "Why Convene Referendums? Explaining Choices in EU Constitutional Politics," *Journal of European Public Policy* 14, no. 8 (2007).

<sup>3</sup> European Election Database available at: [www.nsd.uib.no/european\\_election\\_database/index.html](http://www.nsd.uib.no/european_election_database/index.html). Center for Research on Direct Democracy available at: [www.c2d.ch/index.php](http://www.c2d.ch/index.php). Election Guide available at: [www.electionguide.org](http://www.electionguide.org)

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Table 1.1. *List of referendums on questions related to European integration*

Year	Country	Subject	Yes (%)	Turnout (%)
1972	Denmark	Accession to the European Communities	63.3	90.1
	France	Enlargement of the European Communities	68.3	60.3
	Ireland	Accession to the European Communities	83.1	70.9
	<b>Norway</b>	<b>Accession to the European Communities</b>	<b>46.5</b>	<b>79.2</b>
	Switzerland	Free Trade Agreement	72.5	52.9
1975	United Kingdom	Continued membership of the European Communities	67.2	64.0
1982	<b>Greenland</b>	<b>Continued membership of the European Communities</b>	<b>47.0</b>	<b>75.4</b>
1986	Denmark	Single European Act	56.2	75.4
1987	Ireland	Single European Act	69.9	44.1
1989	Italy	European Constitution	88.1	80.7
1992	<b>Denmark</b>	<b>Maastricht Treaty</b>	<b>49.3</b>	<b>83.1</b>
	France	Maastricht Treaty	51.1	69.7
	Ireland	Maastricht Treaty	68.7	57.3
	Liechtenstein	Accession to the European Economic Area	55.8	87.0
	<b>Switzerland</b>	<b>Accession to the European Economic Area</b>	<b>49.7</b>	<b>78.7</b>
1993	Denmark	Maastricht Treaty	56.7	86.5
1994	Åland Islands	Accession to the European Union	73.6	49.1
	Austria	Accession to the European Union	66.6	82.4
	Finland	Accession to the European Union	56.9	70.8
	<b>Norway</b>	<b>Accession to the European Union</b>	<b>47.8</b>	<b>89.0</b>
	Sweden	Accession to the European Union	52.7	83.3
1995	Liechtenstein	Accession to the European Economic Area	55.9	82.0
1997	<b>Switzerland</b>	<b>Accession to the European Union</b>	<b>25.9</b>	<b>35.4</b>
1998	Denmark	Treaty of Amsterdam	55.1	76.2
	Ireland	Treaty of Amsterdam	61.7	56.3
2000	<b>Denmark</b>	<b>Economic and Monetary Union</b>	<b>46.8</b>	<b>87.6</b>
	Switzerland	Bilateral Treaty with the European Union	67.2	48.3
2001	<b>Ireland</b>	<b>Treaty of Nice</b>	<b>46.1</b>	<b>34.8</b>
	<b>Switzerland</b>	<b>Accession to the European Union</b>	<b>23.2</b>	<b>55.0</b>
2002	Ireland	Treaty of Nice	62.9	49.5

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Table 1.1 (*cont.*)

Year	Country	Subject	Yes (%)	Turnout (%)
2003	Czech Republic	Accession to the European Union	77.3	55.2
	Estonia	Accession to the European Union	66.8	64.1
	Hungary	Accession to the European Union	83.8	45.6
	Latvia	Accession to the European Union	67.5	73.1
	Lithuania	Accession to the European Union	91.1	63.4
	Malta	Accession to the European Union	53.7	90.9
	Poland	Accession to the European Union	77.5	58.9
	Romania	Accession to the European Union	91.1	55.7
	Slovakia	Accession to the European Union	93.7	52.1
	Slovenia	Accession to the European Union	89.6	60.4
2005	<b>Sweden</b>	<b>Economic and Monetary Union</b>	<b>42.9</b>	<b>82.6</b>
	<b>France</b>	<b>European Constitution</b>	<b>45.3</b>	<b>69.3</b>
	Luxembourg	European Constitution	56.5	90.4
	<b>Netherlands</b>	<b>European Constitution</b>	<b>38.5</b>	<b>62.8</b>
	Spain	European Constitution	76.7	42.3
	Switzerland	Schengen Agreement	54.6	56.6
	Switzerland	Free Movement of Persons	56.0	54.3
2006	Switzerland	Cooperation with the Countries of Eastern Europe	53.4	45.0
2008	<b>Ireland</b>	<b>Lisbon Treaty</b>	<b>46.6</b>	<b>53.1</b>
2009	Ireland	Lisbon Treaty	67.1	59.0
	Switzerland	Free Movement of Persons	59.6	51.4
	Switzerland	Biometric Passports (required by Schengen Agreement)	50.1	38.8
2012	Croatia	Accession to the European Union	66.3	43.5
	Ireland	European Fiscal Compact	60.3	50.6
2013	San Marino	Accession to the European Union	50.3	43.4
2014	Switzerland	Immigration	50.3	56.0

Note: Rejections in bold.

Source: European Election Database, Center for Research on Direct Democracy, Election Guide.

Most of these referendum proposals led to heated political debates. In 1992, the No campaigners argued that the Maastricht Treaty, the treaty that established the “Union,” would be the end of national independence in a new United States of Europe, lead to loss of control over the economy, increase unemployment and cutbacks, jeopardize women’s rights, harm agriculture, cause an environmental crisis, bring in European police forces, and overrule national currency and citizenship. A few years later, in 1994, the Norwegian No campaigners fought EU membership

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contending that it would mean losing sovereignty and control of economic resources such as the fish and the oil. In 2001, the Irish campaigners suggested that with the Nice Treaty Ireland would lose power, freedom, and money in a European “super-state.” The treaty was blamed for setting the stage for a European army, threatening Irish prosperity, favoring abortion, bringing on uncontrollable immigration, and establishing “Fortress Europe” in an explicit parallel to the Berlin Wall. The referendums on the euro were no different. In 2000, the Danish No campaign warned the public about the EU’s federalist ambitions, called to protect “crown and country,” and presented the euro as a threat to the Danish welfare system and living standards. In 2003, Sweden witnessed a similar picture when Swedish No campaigners insisted that the currency would stifle growth and lead to unemployment and erosion of their generous welfare state. The Yes side’s arguments were rarely as memorable or emotional as those of the No side.

This book tackles this largely ignored problem and demonstrates how political language affects public opinion toward European integration. I focus on six EU referendum votes – the votes of Spain, France, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg on the European Constitutional Treaty (TCE) in 2005, and that of Ireland on the Lisbon Treaty in 2008 and 2009. These treaties were quite significant for the EU. In a major step forward in the integration process, the Union prepared its first Constitution in 2004. The process that drafted it was as innovative as the idea of a constitution itself. Instead of using the traditional inter-governmental method of negotiation behind closed doors, the Union established a Convention on the Future of Europe under the leadership of Valéry Giscard d’Estaing. For the first time in the EU’s history, a broad range of actors including governments and national parliaments of the member and candidate states, the European Parliament, the European Commission, and even a European Youth Convention came together to debate and draft the Constitution. This new system of treaty-making was in line with the “Declaration on the Future of the Union” of the Nice Treaty, which had openly called for improving democratic legitimacy and transparency. The goal was to allow a “listening phase to identify the expectations and needs of member states and Europe’s citizens.”<sup>4</sup> After 16 months of deliberation, 1,812 contributions from members to the Presidium, and 692,250 visits to the Convention’s

<sup>4</sup> Wilhelm Lehmann, “The Treaty of Nice and the Convention on the Future of Europe” (European Parliament, 2011).

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website, the draft of the Constitutional Treaty was presented to the European Council.<sup>5</sup>

Four countries decided to leave the decision to their public in order to further enhance the Union's legitimacy, but the results drove Europe into a crisis. Referendums in Spain and Luxembourg approved the Constitution, whereas the ones in France and the Netherlands rejected it. This outcome was particularly shocking given the emphasis of the Convention on citizen input. In response, the EU declared a "period of reflection" to reconnect its citizens with the European project. The result was the Lisbon Treaty, which removed the contested word "constitution" but contained the same real substance. This time only the Irish public was asked to vote on it. Interestingly, they first rejected but then approved the Lisbon Treaty within a year.

The variation in the results is puzzling because in all six instances, polls show that the voting publics favored the referendum proposals before the referendum campaigns began.<sup>6</sup> However, this initially positive public opinion melted away in three of the six cases – the French, the Dutch, and the first Irish referendums – culminating in rejections. In Luxembourg as well, the negative vote reached 43%. Why did this occur in some referendum votes but not in others? These shifts in public opinion put the future of European integration at stake, for better or for worse. The outcomes also do not appear to have been a function of varying levels of Euroscepticism, which is limited to the periphery of the party system. While far-left and far-right parties are both Eurosceptic, parties in the middle, including most social democratic, Christian democratic, liberal, and conservative parties, are generally much more supportive of European integration.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, this was roughly the case in all five countries. Parties in the pro-integration ideological core supported the reform

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> The question of whether the EU is perceived and debated similarly in various EU member states is a relatively new research field. So far, empirical research has shown that public actors "frame" or represent the EU in very similar ways across Western Europe, the exception being the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, to deal with the differences among member states, I discuss the key background factors concerning EU politics in each case chapter. See Juan Diez Medrano and Emily Gray, "Framing the European Union in National Public Spheres," in *The Making of a European Public Sphere*, ed. Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Paul Taggart, "A Touchstone of Dissent: Euroscepticism in Contemporary Western European Party Systems," *European Journal of Political Research* 33, no. 3 (1998); Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, and Carole Wilson, "Does Left/Right Structure Party Positions on European Integration?" *Comparative Political Studies* 35, no. 8 (2002); Gary Marks et al., "Party Competition and European Integration in the East and West: Different Structure, Same Causality," *Comparative Political Studies* 39, no. 2 (2006).

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treaties regardless of whether they were in or out of government.<sup>8</sup> Party opposition to both treaties was concentrated among the nationalist and far right, the far left, and smaller protest parties.

Another similarity was the sociodemographic profile of the Yes and No voters in each case. There is strong evidence that citizens' support for the Union varies with occupation-based economic interests.<sup>9</sup> In all six referendums, such patterns were visible in the sociodemographics of the vote.<sup>10</sup> Whereas the Yes vote was prevalent among the self-employed, the No vote was mainly to be found among manual workers. Similarly, voters with less education sided with the No faction. The distribution of these characteristics is more or less the same in all five countries.<sup>11</sup>

Given that all six cases started with a favorable public opinion toward the treaties and that the sociodemographics of the vote and political party preferences were similar in all, why did the French, Dutch, and first Irish referendums reject the proposals, while the others did not? Moreover, why did the Luxembourgish case differ remarkably from the other two positive cases? Even though Luxembourg approved the referendum, the No vote intentions went from a very low initial level to a significant

<sup>8</sup> Ben Crum, "Party Stances in the Referendums on the EU Constitution: Causes and Consequences of Competition and Collusion," *European Union Politics* 8, no. 1 (2007): 19. There were exceptions. In the French case, French center-left was de facto divided, as some members of the Socialist Party and the Greens have joined the No camp. However, this does not reflect a shift to Euroscepticism on the part of these parties given their official pro-TCE campaign. Similarly, in Ireland, the Greens were divided but did not run an official No campaign, as a majority of its members were in favor. I discuss these divisions in the individual case chapters.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Gabel and Harvey Palmer, "Understanding Variation in Public Support for European Integration," *European Journal of Political Research* 27, no. 1 (1995); Matthew Gabel, "Economic Integration and Mass Politics: Market Liberalization and Public Attitudes in the European Union," *American Journal of Political Science* 42, no. 3 (1998).

<sup>10</sup> Eurobarometer, "The European Constitution: Post-referendum Survey in Luxembourg," (European Commission: Brussels, 2005), 9; idem., "Post-referendum Survey in Ireland," *European Commission: Brussels* (2008); idem., "Lisbon Treaty Post-referendum Survey Ireland 2009," *European Commission: Brussels* (2009).

<sup>11</sup> The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) education and labor force statistics show that all five countries have similar figures. Available at: <http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx>. The other variables presented as determinants of individual-level support for the Union (but not voting behavior per se) are national economic performance through indicators such as unemployment and inflation, or perception of threats posed by other cultures, and negative attitudes toward immigration. The five countries do indeed hold different values on these variables. However, these values were at these same levels when the early public opinion polls showed positive attitudes toward the treaties in all five countries. They should therefore be assessed in relation to campaigns. See Richard Eichenberg and Russell Dalton, "Europeans and the European Community: The Dynamics of Public Support for European Integration," *International Organization* 47, no. 4 (1993); Lauren McLaren, "Public Support for the European Union: Cost/Benefit Analysis or Perceived Cultural Threat?" *The Journal of Politics* 64, no. 2 (2002).

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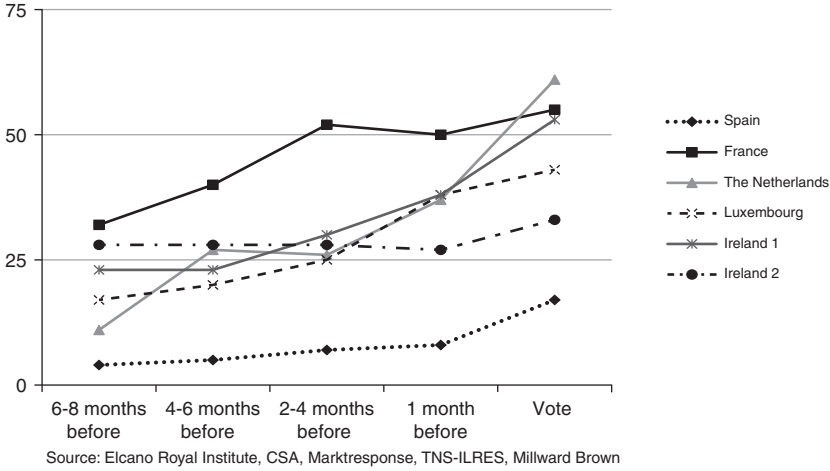


Figure 1.1. Evolution of No vote intentions over time.

43%, in clear contrast with the Spanish and second Irish referendums. Figure 1.1 demonstrates the puzzle. Put differently, why was the public's initial positive attitude toward these treaties sustained in some and not the others?

I argue that the key to the puzzle lies in political campaigns. Political actors' campaign argumentation strategies can, at least temporarily, reverse public opinion enough to affect referendum outcomes. Most studies blame the failed referendums on voters' reactions to unpopular domestic governments. But, in fact, such dissatisfaction pre-dated the early, uniformly positive public opinion polls on the referendum proposals. People were initially in favor of the reform treaties despite their relative levels of discontent with their own governments. Existing theories overlook how domestic political actors presented the EU to their public within the referendum debates. What were the specific arguments for and against the reform treaties? Politicians do not discuss political issues objectively. They present issues in particular ways and mobilize voters by encouraging them to think along particular lines. This is called a framing effect, and campaign framing matters. Research shows that certain arguments are stronger than others: Vivid, concrete, image-provoking, emotionally compelling frames that contain negative information are expected to be more successful in affecting individuals' opinions. Moreover, using such arguments is particularly beneficial for the No side in a referendum campaign because they only need to raise credible doubts, play on existing fears, or link the proposal to unpopular issues in order to succeed.

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Based on more than 140 in-depth interviews with campaigners and EU officials, media content analyses, and public opinion data from all cases, I show that the initially favorable public opinion before the French, Dutch, Luxembourgish, and first Irish referendums fell dramatically because the No campaigners *framed* the issue effectively. In these cases, the No frames argued that treaty ratification would increase immigration, lead to market-friendly reforms, cause rising unemployment, promote decline in the welfare state model, undermine national sovereignty, introduce conscription to an EU army, or even weaken domestic laws on abortion or taxation. On the other hand, the Yes campaign argumentation sounded overly technical and broad, presenting the treaty as an institutional step toward a better Europe. Whereas the No campaigners emphasized the pressing day-to-day issues, tapping into the existing fear of globalization, the Yes campaigners were very much tied to the content of the treaty, unable to make the benefits tangible. Therefore, the Yes side could not clarify what concrete benefits this treaty would provide. The No campaign frames were stronger as their themes were negative, concrete, and immediate, as opposed to the Yes frames that highlighted abstract, technical, and non-immediate benefits. In short, No campaigners were better *framers* in the French, Dutch, Luxembourgish, and first Irish referendums.

In the Spanish and the second Irish cases, what differed was primarily the No side's behavior. In Spain the No campaign did not link the treaty to sensitive topics, whereas in Ireland the "guarantees" the EU had provided stopped the No side from doing so in the second referendum. The Yes campaigns thereby had less difficulty in conveying an uncontroversial Yes message. Furthermore, these Yes campaigns were more strategic in crafting strong Yes frames centered on their country's national interest. The literature has so far focused on the reasons behind the rejections and largely ignored the cases with a positive outcome.<sup>12</sup> Considering both positive and negative votes allows for variation on the dependent variable, rendering the causal inference more reliable.<sup>13</sup> Bringing together these

<sup>12</sup> A few studies focused on the Spanish and Luxembourgish positive cases, but not in a comparative framework. See Joan Font and Elisa Rodriguez, "The Spanish Referendum on the EU Constitution: Issues, Party Cues and Second-Order Effects," in *The Midwest Political Science Association Annual National Conference* (Chicago, 2006); Patrick Dumont et al., *Le Référendum sur le Traité établissant une Constitution pour l'Europe: Rapport élaboré pour la Chambre des Députés* (Luxembourg: University of Luxembourg, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> See Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 129. A few studies compared the four TCE cases based on survey data. They highlight the need to study referendum campaigns further to understand how information, cues, and mobilization affect voting behavior. See Sara Hobolt, *Europe in Question: Referendums on*



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six cases in a comparative framework uncovers neglected similarities and differences among them and enables us to establish what truly drove the process.

Just as importantly, I argue that sequencing mattered. Because of networking and learning processes across campaigners in first- and second-mover countries, campaign frames were not always homegrown. Campaigners could *borrow* arguments from the previous campaigns. Tracing diffusion processes across the 2005 constitutional referendum campaigns, I show that cross-case influences were not automatic and depended on transmission belts between the states such as shared language, common media sources, and transnational linkages. Where these channels were open, diffusion was visible in the campaign strategies and arguments of second-mover countries.

Finally, the EU's involvement in these campaigns deserves attention. The Union officially refrains from interfering in the national ratification process. It is therefore difficult to measure its impact on referendum results. Nonetheless, local representations of the EU institutions inform the public on the upcoming vote, and EU politicians are free to comment on the consequences of a No vote. These activities create a gray zone. Moreover, the Dutch and French rejections gave a jolt to the system, causing the Union to pay particular attention to its communication policy and to undertake various reforms. Relying on interviews with EU officials and national campaigners, I investigate the extent to which European actors played a role in the Irish Lisbon referendums, as this case importantly falls into the post-2005 period. I show that although the EU did not become involved in the political campaign, its new communication style through dense informative activities arguably helped the Yes side in reversing public opinion.

### Understanding EU referendums: the literature

Studies focusing directly on EU referendums have been divided between “second-order” and “attitude/issue-voting” interpretations, in other words between attributing the results to domestic or European factors. The first approach claims that national issues dominate the campaign agenda. The implication is that the results do not reflect voters' opinion on integration issues; Union issues are relegated to second

*European Integration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Andrew Glencross and Alexander Trechsel, “First or Second Order Referendums? Understanding the Votes on the EU Constitutional Treaty in Four Member States,” *West European Politics* 34, no. 4 (2011).

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place.<sup>14</sup> Instead, national factors such as the level of satisfaction with the government and voter identification with the parties holding office are decisive. Thorough studies of the French, Dutch, and Irish rejections indeed highlight the significance of government unpopularity and the gap between the mainstream elite and voters.<sup>15</sup>

The “attitude/issue-voting” model, on the other hand, proposes that citizens vote in line with their underlying broad attitudes toward European integration.<sup>16</sup> This model rejects the first model’s claim that individual voters are unable to form their own opinions on low-salience issues such as the EU treaties. Rather, voters’ attitudes toward EU integration explain the referendum results. The fewer areas that voters want included in the European integration process, the more they vote No. Interestingly, the same studies of the French, Dutch, and Irish rejections also point to the role of scepticism toward certain EU policies such as EU enlargement, EU’s market-friendly fiscal policies, the euro, or European defense policy.

Survey-based studies therefore indicate that both these factors likely matter.<sup>17</sup> What we do not know is how these factors interact. Moreover,

<sup>14</sup> 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* 8, no. 1 (1980); Mark Franklin, Cees van der Eijk, and Michael Marsh, “Referendum Outcomes and Trust in Government: Public Support for Europe in the Wake of Maastricht,” *West European Politics* 18, no. 3 (1995).

<sup>15</sup> Sylvain Brouard and Vincent Tiberj, “The French Referendum: The Not So Simple Act of Saying Nay,” *Political Science and Politics* 39, no. 2 (2006); Sylvain Brouard and Nicolas Sauger, “Comprendre la victoire du ‘Non’: proximité partisane, conjoncture et attitude à l’égard de l’Europe,” in *Le référendum de ratification du Traité constitutionnel européen du 29 mai 2005: comprendre le “Non” français*, ed. Annie Laurent and Nicolas Sauger (Paris: CEVIPOF, 2005); Kees Aarts and Henk van der Kolk, “Understanding the Dutch ‘No’: The Euro, the East, and the Elite,” *Political Science and Politics* 39, no. 2 (2006); Andreas Schuck and Claes de Vreese, “The Dutch No to the EU Constitution: Assessing the Role of EU Skepticism and the Campaign,” *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion, and Parties* 18, no. 1 (2008); Richard Sinnott et al., “Attitudes and Behaviour in the Referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon,” *Report for the Department of Foreign Affairs* (2009); Richard Sinnott and Johan Elkind, “Attitudes and Behaviour in the Second Referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon,” *Report for the Department of Foreign Affairs* (2010).

<sup>16</sup> Karen Siune, Palle Svensson, and Ole Tønsgaard, “The European Union: The Danes Said ‘No’ in 1992, But ‘Yes’ in 1993: How and Why?,” *Electoral Studies* 13, no. 2 (1994); Palle Svensson, “Five Danish Referendums on the European Community and European Union: A Critical Assessment of the Franklin Thesis,” *European Journal of Political Research* 41, no. 6 (2002).

<sup>17</sup> For the broader literature presenting similar findings, see Hobolt, *Europe in Question*; Claes de Vreese and Hajo Boomgaarden, “Immigration, Identity, Economy and the Government: Understanding Variation in Explanations for Outcomes of EU-related Referendums,” in *The Dynamics of Referendum Campaigns: An International Perspective*, ed. Claes De Vreese (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Claes de Vreese and Holli Semetko, *Political Campaigning in Referendums: Framing the Referendum Issue* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2004), 164.