

The ever-contested referendum? How media and politicians reacted to the 2011 UK referendum on the Alternative Vote system

Introduction

In May 2010, two middle-aged men appeared in a rose garden to exchange their political vows; for the first time since the Second World War, the United Kingdom would have a coalition government, composed of the (senior) conservatives and the (junior) Liberal-Democrats. Almost a year later, in May 2011, the United Kingdom witnessed a political event which was only slightly less unique: for the first time since 1974, a nation-wide referendum was held. Moreover, since the university constituencies were abolished in 1950, the UK has had an unintermitted electoral system of 'pure' Single-Member Plurality (SMP), also known as First Past the Post (FPTP). While the introduction of Alternative Vote (AV) would have kept the single-seat districts in place, it would have changed dynamics of political competition for these seats profoundly. It was a unique referendum on a unique proposal within unique circumstances. Despite this 'cumulative uniqueness', we see some elements in this referendum which could help us explain general dynamics concerning referendums: voters were not used to the referendum instrument, the two governing parties disagreed on the ballot proposal, and there was a considerable interest for all politicians in either reforming or not reforming the electoral system. This paper focuses on how this referendum influenced political life in the UK *after* the referendum had passed. In the first part of the paper, we will establish the 'state of the art' in studies on the consequences of referendums, and point out how the current literature pays little attention to 'irregular referendums'. In the second part, we will explain how 'framing theory' might provide a tool to explore these one-off referendums. In the third part, we will describe the case of the AV referendum, describe the different arguments used in the referendum debate, and describe the aftermath of the referendum. In the fourth and final part, we will reflect on what we 'found' while studying the AV referendum, and coin some hypotheses for further research.

Existing research

Outlining a research agenda on referendums on European integration, Hobolt (2006) identified three main research lines to follow in studying referendums: the perspective of voters ("how do voters behave"), the perspective of political elites ("what is the role of political elites?") and the perspective of policy outcomes ("does direct democracy affect policy outcomes"). Arguments pro or contra the use of direct democracy – whether or not in the form of referendums - have often touched on at least one of these three approaches. Specifically, the 'outcome'-oriented approach presses that, in general, the possibility of direct democracy has some effects on a number of macro-level variables. Several angles of approach have been proposed. A prominent strand of research on the consequences of direct democratic institutions focuses on the concept of 'efficacy' or the somewhat more broad concept of 'civic engagement' (Mendelsohn & Cutler, 2000; Hero & Tolbert, 2004; however, see Schlozman & Yohai, 2008). The logic behind this thinking stresses that the democratic

participation – people becoming directly involved in decision making – both gives people the necessary information to understand politics and the self-confidence to engage in politics, thus providing an ‘indirect’ benefit of direct democratic decision making. In a same mould, several authors have stressed that direct democratic institutions might lead to ‘better’ policy outcomes. Blomberg *et al.* (2004) stress that the possibility of voter initiatives leads to a higher average growth within US states; Matsusaka (2005) perceives an effect on the general tax burden: initiatives lead to a lower average tax rate. Reflecting on the use of direct democracy in Switzerland, Feld & Kirchgässner (2000) tout several hypotheses concerning the link between direct democracy and political outcomes. Feld & Kirchgässner approach direct democracy both from a Habermasian perspective and from a public choice perspective. From the first perspective, Feld & Kirchgässner argue that direct democracy gives space to regular political debates which go beyond the narrow political elite, thereby implying the population in the decision making procedure and enhancing the political information voters receive. Moreover, this public debate might induce voters to revise their opinion on the issue at hand in the direction of the mean, thereby stimulating popular consensus on key subjects. Finally, the referendum environment forces politicians to reveal their positions (and the arguments for these positions), giving voters more information on the distribution of opinions within the political agenda in general, as well as revealing the popular distribution of opinions to politicians. The first flow of information can aid voters in judging the merits of politicians and parties, while the second flow of information can aid the political class in calibrating policies more carefully along lines of public opinion. From the perspective of principal-agent theory, the authors continue on the ‘classic’ argument that the threat of defeats in referendums or popular initiatives limits the leeway of representatives to follow their self-interest in between elections. Referendums and initiatives form, in this respect, a ‘break’ on the space political ‘agents’ have to deviate from the preferences of the ‘median’ voter (see also Gerber, 1996). These two perspectives – the Habermasian perspective of debate and information exchange and the public choice perspective of more control over political agents – form the theoretical underpinnings of many alleged ‘consequences’ of direct democracy. The informational perspective can be linked to studies indicating that direct democracy leads to a higher efficacy and willingness to political participation amongst voters; the principal-agent perspective can be linked to findings indicating stronger economic performance and less fiscal ‘waste’, and both perspectives can be linked to stronger policy congruence within jurisdictions with direct democracy.

What is direct democracy?

Looking more carefully at the presented research which apparently produces quite a positive perspective on the ‘consequences’ of referendums, some specificities cannot be ignored. Most

prominently, all the research we know of on the 'general' consequences of direct democracy has been performed in either Switzerland or the United States (in the latter case mostly focused on the predominantly Western states which introduced the initiative; see also Blomberg *et al.*, 2004). This focus on two specific cases leads to several limitations on the extent in which results sprouting from these studies can be generalised to the phenomenon of 'direct democracy' in general. The first, and probably the most general, critique might be that it is never very prudent to generalise from only two highest-level cases, especially when the total number of cases in which the practice of some sort of direct democracy can be researched is far greater than two; for example, over the last decennia, Europe has witnessed a slow turn towards heavier use of direct democracy (Scarrow, 2001). A second peculiarity about the Swiss and U.S. cases is that the specific implementation of direct democracy in many Swiss cantons, in all U.S. states with direct democracy and on the Swiss federal level hinges heavily on the possibility of initiatives. Yet, the exact relation between the possibility of initiatives¹ and the concept of direct democracy is not completely clear. In most countries in Europe and South America, for example, direct democracy is limited towards 'active referendums': popular votes on proposals drafted by the government, the president or the legislative majority (Barczak, 2001; Scarrow, 2001). How do these 'active referendums' (Hug, 2004) or 'plebiscites' (Vatter, 2000) relate to the popular initiatives which dominate the Swiss and American cases? Some authors have argued that the initiative has at least some fundamental differences when compared with 'active' referendums. For example, Romer & Rosenthal (1978) argue that initiatives enable voters to wrest control over the political agenda from the political class, an argument echoed by Feld & Kirchgässner (2000). Romer & Rosenthal give the specific example of a referendum on a budget: if the legislative majority is able to force an 'up-or-down vote' on the legislature, it might be able to force an unpopular budget on the voters, provided that the only alternative is budgetary mayhem. However, if some group of voters would be able to introduce an alternative proposal through popular initiative, this 'manipulation' of the referendum process by the legislative or the executive is not possible any longer. From another angle, Vatter (2000) notes that 'plebiscites' (referendums announced by the government or the legislative majority, on a proposal drafted by this same actor) are actually strongly majoritarian democratic tools, while initiatives, and especially the initiatives with a geographical quorum as used in Switzerland, are more consensual democratic tools. If this argumentation holds, and active referendums and initiatives do indeed belong to very different democratic traditions, initiatives might be little representative for direct democratic 'tools' in general. Some anecdotal evidence is further provided by Breuer (2007), who links the practice of direct democracy in South America to centralisation of (presidential) power, something which is in

¹ For those not familiar with terminology in direct democracy: 'initiatives' are a type of referendums in which the proposal is drafted by an actor outside of government and/or the legislative majority.

line with the idea of Vatter (2000) of the plebiscite as a majoritarian instrument, but which is harder to match with the idea by Feld & Kirchgässner of the referendum as a tool to hold elected politicians in check. Finally, the frequency of referendums is far higher in Switzerland – and especially in those Swiss cantons which have implemented direct democracy profoundly – and many U.S. states than it is in the typical (national) setting in Europe and Latin America. As Papadopoulos (2001) argues, the effects of direct democracy can be distinguished into the effects of *individual votes* and the effects of *referendums as an institution*. In the Swiss and Western cases, it is not clear to what extent the effects are caused by the cumulative effects of several individual ‘referendum events’, or by the general possibility of having referendums². This is not just a philosophical argument, but has important real-world implications. From an institutionalist point of view, whether a specific referendum is held or not is not very important; it is the *possibility* of having a referendum and its history within policy development which makes a difference. From a more constructivist point of view, however, an individual referendum can deconstruct and/or construct political discourse, while political discourse would not have seen such a development without the specific referendum event. Anecdotal evidence supporting such a perspective can be found in Proposition 13, at the same time one of the most famous and one of the most controversial (approved) ballot propositions the state of California has ever witnessed. The proposition, approved by the California electorate in 1978, went on to become the symbolic start of what is generally regarded as a nation-wide ‘tax revolt’ in the United States (Smith, 2004). The question why this proposition was approved, and the question why this specifically happened in 1978, is partially answered by Lowery & Sigelman (1981). Lowery and Sigelman assert that baseline attitudes towards taxation were latently existent within the general American population, but with a low salience and poorly pronounced. Proposition 13 managed to channel these ‘vague’ attitudes into concrete support for a ballot proposition, as Lowery and Sigelman assert, almost on an overnight basis. The shock-effect of this proposition, then, managed to induce copycat initiatives in other states, and to push opposition to taxes to the top of the political agenda. Moreover, this proposition changed political institutions *themselves*, upsetting the balance of powers between different levels of government and forcing legislators to follow electoral preferences more closely (Bowler & Donovan, 2004). However, what if Proposition 13 did not have taken place? Or, maybe even more realistic, what if Proposition 13 had taken place, but had rather been interpreted as an attempt by certain special interests to obtain government favouritisms, as propositions sometimes are? Although there is not any ‘hard proof’, it seems plausible that Proposition 13 was not only institutionally relevant, but that it also bumped up the salience of the tax issues, thereby influencing political discourse.

² As Papadopoulos (2001) argues, one can even wonder whether referendums as an institution make a difference, or whether this effect is rather due to a political culture formed by direct democracy.

It is from this perspective that we will study the aftermath of referendums. We will do this from the perspective that referendums have the possibility to 'construct' the political agenda; the outcome, but also the campaign and its key arguments, can influence the political arena beyond the mechanical effect of its outcome. We will specifically focus on a type of referendums little considered in the academic literature: government-called 'one-off' referendums. There are several reasons for zooming in on these referendums. First of all, they are slightly neglected in the existing literature, which, as said before, focuses mostly on initiative-heavy cases; all the same, the 'irregular' type of referendum has made quite some headway in the last decennia (Morel, 1992, 2007). Second, we expect many different arguments to spin around in 'irregular' referendums; in a public opinion environment which is not completely used to the occurrence of referendums, referendums might incite arguments from several perspectives; not only based on content or elite cues, but also on the merits of the referendum interest itself and political stakes in the outcome.

From cues, to frames, to policy metaphors

Referendum votes, contrary to 'ordinary' votes in elections, cannot be cast by 'default'; apart from saying 'yes' or 'no' to every proposal, which would make little sense, voters have to rely on some cue in order to cast a vote on the issue at hand. To make up for this 'knowledge gap', we hypothesize that competing political elites will emit several 'cues' in order to mobilize voters and persuade these voters to vote for the specific option these elites adhere to. Cues have been well-studied in the literature on referendum voting, in the United States as in Europe (Lupia, 1994; Christin *et al.*, 2002; Hobolt, 2007). To define 'cues', we stick to the definition given by Lupia (1994): one actor, having sufficient information to judge upon a certain issue, 'signals' to another actor – who does not have a sufficient level of information – how to act in this situation. This cue can range from very simple, individual and direct (a trusted friend advising you how to vote), to elaborate and wide-spread (a politician encouraging the population to vote in favour of some proposition because it would, for example, connect to 'middle class values'). One might be induced to reason that the decision process ends here; however, what if voters receive more than one cue, and what, moreover, if these cues conflict? The total number of dimensions on which voters have a certain piece of information about a certain issue, along with the value and the weight of these dimensions, is what Chong & Druckman (2007) call "a frame in thought". Political elites can influence these frames, their components or their internal equilibriums by trying to impose their own frame. As Lecheler & De Vreese (2011) write, "framing stresses certain aspects of reality and pushes others into the background; it has a selective function. In this way, certain attributes, judgments and decisions are suggested". This is how "frames in communication" (Chong & Druckman, 2007, pp. 106-109) appear: by mass

communications, political actors attempt to push the “thought frames” of a large number of citizens at the same time in the same direction.

The referendum campaign and the referendum event itself can go on to form a pivotal part of this ‘framing’ dynamic. Some frames can be reinforced by events occurring during the referendum, and by the referendum event itself. Take, for example, a case in which the performance of the incumbent government is ‘on the table’ in the beginning of a referendum campaign. Certain events highlight this argument (corruption scandals, failed public works, poor economic statistics...), which induce actors in public discourse to highlight these events even more, and heightens the chance that the referendum result will depend on attitudes related to this particular frame. This can lead to a dynamic in which the referendum result is, in the end, interpreted through this particular frame, even if this frame does not fully correspond to the actual reasons for voters to vote (or not to vote).

‘Successful’ frames (frames reinforced by the referendum campaign and the referendum outcome) might come to dominate the aftermath of the referendum. These frames might, then, take the form of a ‘policy metaphor’: policies are linked to specific social institutions, which are ‘familiar to all members of the culture, they are cognitively accessible to both the public and elite decision makers’ (Schlesinger & Lau, 2000). Some of the frames which appeared in the campaign, and which were reinforced by subsequent events in the campaign and the result itself, might be able to survive and go on to capture a broader part of the political spectrum. Summarizing, we expect ‘frames’ which were originally introduced to seduce voters into a certain vote choice to persist after the referendum, influencing public discourse and the perspective through which policies are perceived.

Framing the referendum

Referendum votes, contrary to ‘ordinary’ votes in elections, cannot be cast by ‘default’; apart from saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to every proposal, which would make little sense, voters have to rely on some cue in order to cast a vote on the issue at hand. To make up for this ‘knowledge gap’, we hypothesize that competing political elites will emit several ‘cues’ in order to mobilize voters and persuade these voters to vote for the specific option these elites adhere to. These cues, if incorporated in a structured way and if repeated frequently, can go on to become ‘frames’

We will discuss several of proposed ‘frames’ on referendums. We will start out from the general idea that frames on a specific political issue can either take the form of a ‘strategic frame’ or the form of an ‘issue frame’ (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996). Strategic frames focus on the strategic actors in the political game, and whether they gain or lose by certain political ‘events’; in the case of

referendums, whether certain political actors win or lose with a certain referendum result. 'Issue frames', on the contrary, focus on the actual issue which is on the ballot.

The punishment frame

The punishment frame, developed in the context of European elections and referendums on the EU, refers to referendums becoming the object of a process which is called 'the punishment trap' by Reif & Schmitt (1980). In this scenario, a certain referendum proposal is either positively or negatively too much tied to the lot of the incumbent government. As a result, the referendum becomes marred by political considerations which might trump any considerations on the actual content of the proposal; voters start voting 'in favour' or 'against' the incumbent government. This logic can also be deliberately applied when a referendum is initiated by the incumbent government; these referenda, dubbed 'power-reinforcing referendums' by Morel (2007) are deliberately introduced to bolster the position of the incumbent executive or legislative majority. If this frame comes to dominate (a referendum result either 'rewards' or 'punishes' certain political actors), the scope becomes almost completely strategic.

The partisan frame

The partisan frame is somewhat alike the punishment frame; it was developed by, amongst others, Kriesi (2006) to explain voting dynamics in Swiss referendums. This frame perceives parties as a 'cognitive shortcut' between voters and the ballot proposal. The main question is whether parties manage to convince and mobilize its own supporters and partisans; contrary to the punishment frame, within the partisan frame, the focus is more on the intra-party dynamics: does the party manage to present a united front, and how well does the party leadership function in the referendum campaign?

The disaffection frame

Lowery & Sigelman (1981) mention political disaffection as a possible explanation for the success of Proposition 13 (the 'tax revolt' proposition) in California. In general, the disaffection frame emphasizes the idea that voters cast a certain vote because they reject governmental processes rather than advocate or reject a certain proposal which is voted upon. Competition does not occur *between parties or within parties*, but rather *between elites and voters*.

The economic frame

In their research on framing of the possible introduction of the euro in Denmark, de Vreese *et al.* (2001) introduce the concept of the *economic frame*: in this frame, a certain proposal is judged on its perceived ability to generate economic benefits, or its perceived *liability* to accumulate additional costs. We expect the prominence of this particular frame to vary with the specific circumstances of the referendum. While referendums on the introduction of the euro have an obvious financial connection, this is much less the case for referendums on – for example – institutional reform, which do not have an obvious connection with the economy. More in general, we can extend this frame to references to valence issues in general; the economy can be such an issue, but management of the public affairs can be another issue in this direction.

The ideological frame

Proposed by de Vreese & Semetko (2004), the ideological frame might kick in where there is not such a partisan tale to tell, either because parties form a relatively modest political player (as is the case in most states in the United States), or where partisan competition on the issue is weak, rendering the referendum more a fight between parties and non-parties. When this frame dominates, we would expect to see a political aftermath in which general consequences for further policy developments (which would be expected to go into the direction of the referendum vote itself), and possibly, in more vague terms, about the future prospects of political actors adhering to both sides of the referendum choice. Yet, Semetko & Valkenburg (2000), in their analysis of political reporting of the Dutch media, find that ‘morality frames’ (which connect political topics with more general moral questions) are the least mentioned, and Jacobs (2011) finds that references to political values are generally little consequential in debates on political reform.

The direct democratic frame

In this frame, the merit of the direct democratic procedure itself, rather than its material or symbolic results, becomes the object of discussion. As Hobolt (2006) argues, the compatibility of the referendum instrument can be questioned when complex themes as European treaties are on the ballot. Equally, direct democracy can damage minority rights (Gamble, 1997) or upset prearranged institutional balances (Clark, 1998). These are all arguments which might surface in a review of the direct democratic instrument itself. From an opposite perspective, the clarity or the directness of the direct democratic instrument might be applauded.

The case: the 2011 UK referendum on Alternative Vote

The 2011 UK referendum on the introduction of the Alternative Vote system for the election of the House of Commons has already been discussed to some extent in the scholarly literature (e.g.

Qvortrup, 2012; Clarke *et al.*, 2013; Vowles, 2013). The referendum was part of a coalition agreement between two political parties, the Conservative Party and the Liberal-Democrats, and it can be regarded as a typical 'tiebreak' referendum (see, Morel, 2001, for more information on this theme): a referendum installed in order to compromise between the Conservatives, who wanted to keep the existing electoral system, and the Liberal-Democrats, who wanted to change the electoral system, primarily, but not solely, because the existing system seemed to work against this party. The main opposition party, the Labour Party, was divided on the subject; Ed Miliband, the party leader, was in favour of the proposal, but a plurality of the Labour MPs expressed themselves being against the proposal. The UK had only witnessed one nation-wide referendum before: in 1975, on the accession of what was, in that time, still the European Economic Community (EEC). This seems a promising 'petri dish' for finding possible results of referendums on political discourse. First, as argued before, referendums which occur in environments where referendums are irregular run a greater chance of having political-strategic consequences, since media and political elites are less used to the occurrence of a referendum. Second, since topics concerning electoral reform are generally poorly understood by citizens, the referendum can be assumed to have been a fertile environment for 'opinion formation' (Leduc, 2002): citizens learning about the referendum topic and its meaning during the campaign, giving a particular weight to the campaign within the referendum event in general. Third, the stakes for the three mainstream political parties, and for the individual MPs, were quite high. Nick Clegg and Ed Miliband were actively campaigning for a 'yes' vote, and David Cameron was doing the opposite. For some MPs, and arguably for the Liberal-Democrats at-large, the referendum result would be the difference between a safe seat and a cutthroat electoral competition at the next general elections, raising the political stakes.

The arguments

Some accounts of commonly recurring arguments within the political campaign have already been delivered. Qvortrup (2012) mentions two strategies pursued by the 'no' camp. First, the proposal was tied to LibDem party leader Nick Clegg, who was generally perceived in a little favourable way. This argument touches on both the partisan frame and the punishment frame. In general, from a partisan perspective, the communication focused on the potential benefits the system would bring to Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrats, to the detriment of the two mainstream parties. From a punishment perspective, the campaign focused on the 'broken promises' of Clegg within the liberal-conservative coalition. Second, the 'no' camp claimed that the introduction of the AV system, would cost the British treasurer a hefty sum of money, up to 250 million pounds, for installing the systems to count the AV ballots. This argument can directly be connected to the 'economic frame' as

proposed in the previous chapter; the suggestion is that Alternative Vote would leave less money for other public causes. The 'yes'-campaign tried to tap into popular discontent towards politics in general, touting the slogan 'make your MP work harder'; this argument can be connected to the economic frame, but in the form of a question of governance. The suggestion is that alternative Vote would lead to better governance. Moreover, Curtice (2013) adds that the 'yes' campaign tried to tap into the idea of 'fairness', stating that with AV, all MPs would effectively have to 'earn' a majority of the votes. This argument can be connected to the 'ideological' frame, creating the idea that Alternative Vote would render elections fairer. Finally, Curtice (2013) mentions that the 'no'-campaign employed a frame in which the Alternative Vote system was essentially juxtaposed against the British 'tradition' of democracy and government; as the 'make your MP work harder' campaign, this argument mostly touches upon the idea that Alternative Vote would have an impact on governance in the United Kingdom.

<- Table 1 about here ->

Assuming that 'winning' arguments recur more regularly than 'losing' arguments, we would expect references to one or more of the mentioned 'no' frames to dominate debate on the referendum issue *after* the day of the referendum.

Media coverage of the UK Alternative Vote referendum

For two newspapers, *The Times* and *The Guardian*, we searched newspaper archives for articles on the AV referendum which were actually published *after* the referendum had taken place (i.e. from the 6th of May 2011 onwards, onto approximately the end of June 2013, when we collected the articles). We applied a search query which is roughly similar to the query Renwick & Lamb (2013) used in their article on media reporting in the period before the referendum. Subsequently, we read every article and weeded out the articles which did not actually refer to the referendum³. We ended up with a total of 201 articles: 116 in *The Guardian*, and 85 in *The Times*. We did not include live coverage of events, but we did include letters sent by readers, since we reckoned these letters equally relevant in exploring which 'frames' had managed to last. Our choice for only *the Guardian* and *The Times* is not without its drawbacks. It is well-known that especially the British media landscape is characterised by a strong presence of tabloid newspapers, and Renwick & Lamb (2013) included these papers in their analysis. Our reasons not to include these papers (at least, not for this draft paper) our, at the same time, of an analytical and of a more mundane nature. Beginning with

³ This happened quite a few times. For example, the word combination 'alternative vote' is also used in the context of the primaries for the United States presidential elections, indicating votes cast by party supporters whose candidate of first choice has already dropped out of the race.

the latter, we were pressed for time and effort, and since the archives of *the Guardian* and *the Times* were more readily explorable, we decided to ‘plump’ for these two papers. Moreover, with focusing on these two broadsheet papers, we can assume to err on the side of caution: we are explicitly searching for simplicity in the results, in the form of public discourse converging on one specific narrative to explain what happened before, during and after a referendum. If we find such ‘simplicity’ in broadsheet newspapers, we can be quite confident that there is probably not much more ‘buzzing around’ than this specific explanation. Or, put into more abstract wording, broadsheet newspapers have less of an inherent tendency towards simplicity, so finding simplicity in broadsheets is a result which bears more significance. Finally, we are, for a part of the study, focusing on the long-term significance of the referendum event in public discourse, and we had the impression that broadsheet newspapers would contain more references after the initial ‘hype’ has died down.

For every article, we coded several characteristics. First, we coded whether the article had the AV referendum as its main topic. We included three coding categories: articles which had the AV referendum as their main topic, articles which did have a political topic, but did not focus on the referendum in particular, and articles which did not have a political topic (but still referred to the AV referendum somewhere in the article). Furthermore, for every article, we considered whether it referred to any of the frames presented in Table 1 (the partisan frame, the economic frame, the governance frame, the scandal frame, the fairness frame and the direct democratic frame). For articles which had the AV referendum as their main topic and which included multiple frames, we also investigated which frame, if any, tended to dominate the reporting in the article. Additionally, we coded whether the article reported on the AV referendum in relation to any of the three ‘main’ parties (Labour, the Conservatives, and the Liberal Democrats). Finally, we checked whether the AV referendum was mentioned in relation to three ‘related’ issues: the reform of the House of Lords, the reduction of the number seats in the House of Commons (linked to a proposal of boundary changes for the individual districts) and the ‘negotiations’ David Cameron announced concerning the relation between the United Kingdom and the EU. The first two are institutional reforms which, like the proposed alternative vote system, are directly related to the electoral interests of the main political parties, and the balance of powers within the legislative system. The latter topic would – eventually – involve a referendum, and might therefore induce observers to draw parallels with the AV referendum.

We will continue in two steps; in the first step, we will consider each of the arguments we presented in Table 1, and see how they fared in the period after the referendum. In the second step, we will present a more thematic account of the effects of the AV referendum on a subsequent debate of the

House of Lords, the 'British senate'. In this debate, many arguments heard during the referendum campaign were repeated and 're-weighted', giving us an opportunity to see how the referendum has influenced the political debate at-large.

The partisan-punishment argument

Of the 116 articles we analysed in *The Guardian*, 76 (about 65.5%) incorporated some references to the referendum having been a partisan struggle, having served as a partisan tool, or having had some partisan 'winners' and 'losers'. In *The Times*, this percentage was even higher, with 65 of 85 articles (about 76.5%). For articles which focused directly on the referendums, these percentages rised to respectively 86.1 percent and 80.5 percent (although most articles within this category referred to multiple frames). Furthermore, most of the articles which referred to multiple frames tended to have the partisan frame dominate, underscoring the preponderance of this frame. For example, one of the first articles *The Times* published after the results on the AV referendum were published was titled '*Ashdown condemns Cameron's 'betrayal' on electoral reform*', and strongly focused on the analysis of the former Liberal Democrats political leader concerning what happened during the referendum. The following phrase turned out to be the core of his statement: "*You cannot fund a deeply vicious campaign to destroy the personality of your partner, who has been unmoved in his brave support of the coalition, without there being consequences. When it comes to the bonhomie of the Downing Street rose garden⁴, it's never again glad confident morn.*"⁵ While Ashdown also showed some interest towards more material reasons for the failure of the AV proposal, the article was strongly skewed towards Ashdown criticising the Conservative Party, whether he had intended to do so or not. A more general article on the referendum in this same newspaper started with the words: "*Britain has voted decisively against a change in the voting system, compounding a day of electoral disaster for Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrats.*"⁶, implying that the result of the referendum should primarily be interpreted as a direct defeat for the Liberal Democrats, and even as a very personal defeat for its leader Nick Clegg. *The Guardian* seemed to be even a bit more direct, plainly stating that the '*AV battle dragged the coalition to the edge of a precipice*'⁷. Equally, in its analysis on the reasons why AV was not approved, *The Guardian* effectively named reasons related to the campaign or to partisan dynamics as six among its seven 'top reasons'⁸. Further along the road, during the 2011 Liberal Democrat party conference, *The*

⁴ When David Cameron and Nick Clegg announced their coalition agreement in May 2011, they held a press conference in a rose garden, which gave a slight impression that they would actually leave on a honeymoon.

⁵ <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/politics/article3009881.ece>

⁶ <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/politics/article3010993.ece>

⁷ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/may/05/av-dragged-coalition-to-edge>

⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/may/06/reasons-av-referendum-lost?INTCMP=SRCH>

Guardian wrote: “as whipping boys for tuition fees and much else, Lib Dems lost 700 council seats in May and saw hopes for Alternative Vote reform brutally dashed.”⁹, and *The Times* wrote “In May the decisive referendum rejection of the alternative vote — 2-1 against — was an unmitigated disaster and the Lib Dems also suffered setbacks in their local government redoubts, losing 700 councillors.”¹⁰, these being the only references to the Alternative Vote referendum around the Liberal Democrat conference.

The costs argument

In the economic frame, we were looking for references towards Alternative Vote bringing too much costs to the chancellor, references towards the state of the economy, and references towards electoral reform not being among the voters’ preferences. In short, we are exploring for links between the AV referendum and economic topics. In *The Guardian*, 13 of 116 (11.2%) referred to arguments or considerations in this direction, while in *The Times* 12 of 86 articles (14.0%) referred to this frame. One of the few articles referring explicitly to this frame was written by John Harris in *The Guardian*, writing: “We all know the drill. Why are our politics eternally in thrall to a somewhat strange and very small number of people who want great public services but wince at the requisite taxes? Why no traction for urgent issues like social housing and rights at work? What are we doing privileging Mondeo man and Worcester woman? Why Milton Keynes and Harlow, but not Pontypridd and Rotherham? Why bother voting Labour in Camberley, or Tory in Llanelli? Why the tyranny of a cynically constructed centre ground that ignores just as many people on the right as it does on the left?”¹¹. Also shortly after the referendum, *Times* columnist Bill Emmott wrote an article lamenting the lack of urgency for electoral reform compared with other issue areas¹². Striking, however, is that this perspective is only mentioned occasionally in the period *after* the direct aftermath of the referendum, indicating that the frame did not ‘stick’ in perceptions in public discourse. The few times this frame was referred to, it tended to go into a recurrent direction: Alternative vote did not interest anyone. In most cases, it was given as an additional case with a more recent example of such a ‘non-starter’.

The governance argument

Within this frame, we are mostly looking for references towards how the introduction of Alternative vote would impact governance in the United Kingdom. This is a mostly ‘material’ frame: it links

⁹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/sep/20/liberal-democrat-conference-realists-suits?INTCMP=SRCH>

¹⁰ <http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/comment/columns/martinivens/article778329.ece>

¹¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/may/06/av-referendum-electoral-reform>

¹² <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/columnists/billemmott/article3012276.ece>

Alternative Vote to the actual style of governing which is brought into practice in the United Kingdom, and on arguments whether it should be changed and/or will be changed. For example, when Tory MP Matt Hancock insists that “electoral reform is put off for a generation”¹³, this is a reference to governance, since it says something about the possible future of governance in the UK. 28 of 116 *Guardian* articles (24.1%) refer to this frame, while 15 of 86 *Times* articles (17.4%) referred to such frames. Two types of articles referring to this ‘frame’ stand out: articles which were published shortly after the referendum, and articles published several months or years after the referendum. The former category mostly converged on the question of how future governance would be influenced by the referendum. For example, *The Guardian* wrote on the day after the referendum: “Above all, Cameron has now secured the long-term future of a first-past-the-post system that ensured virtual Tory hegemony for most of the last century.” This implies that electoral reform would be of the agenda for the foreseeable future. In an editorial two days after the vote, *The Times* wrote “It will be many years before the question of electoral reform for House of Commons elections returns to the agenda.” These phrases summarize the general tendency in the direct after-referendum period: the idea of electoral reform is buried, and will not be touched upon for some time (yet, speculation on reform of the House of Lords began almost directly after the referendum defeat). Later, it was mostly referred to in relation to other proposed reforms, most prominently the proposed (and in the end, scuttled) reform of the House of Lords (on which we will come back later). In any case, references towards the AV referendum were mostly made by opponents of any other reform, who would argue that the referendum had shown that there was not any support for ‘institutional tinkering’.

The scandal argument

Connecting the Alternative Vote proposal to scandals concerning Members of Parliament declaring false expenses had been the original strategy of the ‘Yes’ campaign (Curtice, 2013), but apparently, the link between the introduction of a reformed voting system and deterrence of fraud with MPs became somewhat engulfed by the referendum campaign. After the referendum, hardly any newspaper article still made a reference to the scandal, and those articles that did make such a reference, mostly referred to the yes campaign having failed in making the connection between the expenses scandals and the reform proposal. Only 5 of 116 articles in *The Guardian*, and 2 of 85 articles in *The Times* actually referred to these scandals, all of them in a rather superficial and subordinate fashion.

The fairness argument

¹³ <http://www.theguardian.com/global/2011/may/06/michael-white-sketch-av-referendum-count>

The fairness frame concerns the question whether certain voting systems are up to democratic standards. The two newspapers we studied diverged in invoking this frame: while *The Times* invoked it only one time in 85 articles, *The Guardian* invoked the article 11 times in 116 articles. Possibly, this divergence is related to their respective editorial positions towards the Alternative Vote proposal, with AV being supported by *The Guardian* and mildly rejected by *The Times*. In most cases, this frame was invoked by ‘yes-campaigners’ trying to explain their motives for pushing Alternative Vote. Later, it was invoked a few times in relation to the attempt to reform the House of Lords.

The direct democratic argument

The direct democratic frame does not focus on the question which was asked to the voters, but on the fact that the question was asked in the first place. Like the other frames, this frame can be both reflective (was it a good idea to have the referendum?) and prospective (should such referendums be held in the future?) In *The Guardian*, 24 of 116 articles referred to such a frame (20.7%), with *The Times* referring in 8 of 85 articles (9.4%) to this frame. Judgments directly after the referendum were mostly scorning. The day after the referendum, Dan Hodges wrote in *The Guardian*: “A commitment that next time we ask the voters to sit in direct judgment, it will be on an issue that they, not their political masters, have decreed”¹⁴. At the same day, Philip Collins argued in *The Times* that the Alternative Vote campaign generated some particularly low-quality arguments¹⁵. Judgments delivered with a bit more time for reflection were not particularly mild, either. Writing about the possibility of a referendum on continued British membership of the European Union, George Suster wrote in *the Guardian*: “Those Eurosceptics who argue for a referendum on withdrawal should be careful what they wish for. The alternative-vote referendum last year vanquished the campaign for electoral reform for a generation and Peter Mandelson smirks knowingly at the prospect of the same thing happening to those arguing for a new settlement with the EU.”¹⁶ Referring to several proposals for referendums, Michael Meadowcroft argued that the AV referendum was ‘based on whether or not Nick Clegg was doing a good job in government’¹⁷. Interestingly, while *The Guardian* refers multiple times to a possible referendum on continued EU membership, *The Times* rather makes the connection between the AV referendum and a possible referendum on Scottish independence. For example, on the 13th October 2012, this newspaper wrote: “In the same way that we saw with the alternative-vote referendum, they (the voters, ER) are not particularly excited by the idea of

¹⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/may/06/av-referendum-charade>

¹⁵ <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/columnists/philipcollins/article3009655.ece>

¹⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jun/10/britain-can-change-eu-better-leave>

¹⁷ <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/the-northerner/2012/apr/26/mayoral-elections-localgovernment>

change”¹⁸. Equally, two months later, Gillian Bowditch wrote on this same newspaper: “In the referendums on elected mayors for English cities and on the alternative vote, the electorate overwhelmingly voted for the status quo”.¹⁹

The House of Lords reform: how different frames met again

One of the most interesting events in the aftermath of the AV referendum was a very much related institutional reform: the reform of the House of Lords. Together with the referendum on the Alternative Vote system, the coalition agreement included a provision to “bring forward proposals for a revised upper chamber”²⁰. While such a reform had been touted by all three main parties before the general elections of 2010, the cards for such a reform were stacked in quite a similar way as for the introduction of the Alternative Vote system. The Liberal Democrats were strongly in favour, with the Conservatives only grudgingly following their lead (in the end, the bill would be shelved in the face of strong opposition within the conservative party), and the Labour party taking a sceptical attitude, demanding a referendum on the reform. The argument of Labour in defense of a referendum referred to a ‘tradition’ in the United Kingdom to have voters have the final say in a referendum on main ‘constitutional’ issues. At the same time, senior Tories (but not David Cameron himself) seemed to endorse the idea of a referendum, which was firmly rejected by Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrats²¹. Three elements of the electoral reform debate came back within the House of Lords debate: the perspective of a (far-fetched) institutional reform, the intra-coalition squabbling between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, and the possibility of a referendum, including arguments on whether a referendum is appropriate within these circumstances.

We can draw some insights from the episode concerning the House of Lords reform. First, the reform agenda was not killed by the outcome of the referendum; rather to the contrary: the day after the referendum, Tim Farron, the chairman of the Liberal democrats, announced that reforming the House of Lords would be one of the top priorities for his party²². Second, it might well be that the AV referendum has facilitated a rise of the ‘strategic referendum’; the fact that Labour called for a referendum seems to be as much related to the fact that such a referendum would, once again, open rifts within the Conservative-Liberal coalition. Senior conservatives joining Labour in this call might have well been more motivated by killing the reform than by ‘idealistic’ direct democratic ideals, knowing that the result of the Alternative Vote would put off the Liberal Democrats for

¹⁸ http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/uk_news/scotland/article1147971.ece

¹⁹ http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/uk_news/scotland/article1177819.ece

²⁰ <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/politics/article3012578.ece>

²¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/apr/19/house-of-lords-reform-tories?INTCMP=SRCH&guni=Article:in%20body%20link>

²² <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/may/06/av-failure-lib-dems>

another referendum. Moreover, Labour knew that the Liberal Democrats would possibly retaliate for the abandoning of the House of Lords reform by not supporting an boundary change (and a linked decrease in seats in the House of Commons), a reform which would benefit the Conservatives, but hurt Labour. The AV referendum had instilled the idea of a referendum as a 'kill switch', and for different reasons, Labour and the Conservatives were happy to pull it. Third, the result of the Alternative Vote referendum led to an institutional gridlock: reforms on both the House of Lords and districting in the House of Commons were blocked by respectively the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats.

Reflections: how did the referendum influence political life?

So, did the referendum 'kill' the reform? If one observes the aftermath of the 2011 AV referendum, the conclusion is quite clear: while, technically, Alternative Vote was off the table after the referendum, it did not prevent the Liberal Democrats from 'claiming' new reforms. Immediately after the referendum, the House of Lords reform was put on the agenda by the Liberal Democrats, and while this plan was eventually aborted, the topic continued to form a strong priority for the Liberal Democrats: just recently, Nick Clegg announced that the introduction of 'some kind' of proportional representation would be a necessary precondition for the Liberal Democrats entering any future coalition government. If electoral reforms would indeed be off the agenda, Clegg would probably not have made such a bold statement. As we stated before, there are good reasons to expect direct democracy to 'trump' representative democracy; why, then, did this referendum do so little to the position of institutional reforms on the political agenda? Two lines of reasoning can be thought of: one of a more structural nature, and one of a more constructivist nature.

From a structural point of view, one has to consider that a reform to the British electoral system was specifically a wish of the Liberal Democrats, and this is at least partially a result of its direct interests: the existing Single-Member Plurality works against the party, continuously awarding it fewer seats in the House of Commons than it would be entitled to on basis of its vote share. This specific 'mechanical' interest does not disappear with a negative referendum result; even when it would ideologically shy away from the reform topic, the party would still gain by an electoral reform in the direction of proportional representation. This is also true for other 'third' parties: while the UK Independence Party is ideologically quite close to the Conservatives, it supported the AV proposal. More in general, a majority verdict will only put off stakeholders who actually claim to represent a popular majority. If a certain proponent of a proposal claims to support a certain proposal because it is the 'will of the people', it might be hard to continue touting this proposal after a defeat in referendum. However, the Liberal Democrats do not have to represent a majority of the British

voters: they even actively seek an electoral system in which parliamentary majorities would become, at best, extremely rare. The logic could even be turned around: a larger percentage of voters had supported the Alternative Vote system than had actually voted for the Liberal Democrats in the 2010 elections (33 percent versus 23 percent). Moreover, for the Liberal Democrats to influence any future government (assuming that the current coalition government will not enact any political reform), it is enough to have a blocking minority, rather than a majority. For a minority with a strong interest *and* the possibility to influence political decisions, it might well be beneficial to ignore the majority opinion as much as possible.

From a campaign perspective, one can argue that the referendum campaign turned out to be a disaster for the proponents of the Alternative Vote system, and for the Liberal Democrats and Nick Clegg in particular. While it is true that Clegg arguably got a rough time during the campaign, this might have had the consequence that the reform subject got somewhat forgotten, rendering the referendum more of a personal defeat for Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrats than as a decisive rejection of the idea of tinkering with the electoral rules. Proponents of electoral reform could even argue that the campaign was spoiled by personal attacks against Clegg, thus downplaying the relation between the referendum result and the actual preferences of the British electorate. Indeed, as our analysis of newspaper articles published on the referendum outcome has shown, a strong plurality mainly focused on the partisan conflict within the campaign, as well as on the consequences of the campaign and the referendum outcome on relations between the two partners in the coalition government.

Finally, there is the institutional setting. In a setting in which referendums occur regularly, or in which referendums on certain topics are even obligatory, it might be hard if not impossible to surpass a referendum result. Referendums are, however, still extremely rare within the British political setting. While it might be impossible – at least, from a political perspective – to pass a same type of reform without a referendum, there is still enough leeway to pass reforms with similar material effects without necessarily having a referendum.

From a political-strategic perspective, we have to conclude that the initial distinction between ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ did, on the long term, not really hold. While the media framed the referendum mostly in partisan terms, this was, on the long term, essentially reduced to a ‘conflict within the coalition government’. On the first sight, one might have been inclined to regard the ‘no-camp’ as winning, and the ‘yes-camp’ as losing. Yet, as the episodes concerning the reform of the House of Lords, the reduction of the number of seats in the House of Commons and the boundary changes in this same House show, the referendum and the campaigning preceding it seem to have changed

dynamics within the governing coalition which has benefitted neither of the parties. The zero-sum character of the referendum and the very personal campaign preceding it might have reinforced the idea within both parties that they are in the coalition to implement the maximum possible of their own policies, rather than to cooperate in a more consensual style. The result of the AV referendum induced the Liberal Democrats to accelerate their plans for a reform of the House of Lords, but it emboldened backbenchers within the Conservative party to resist such reforms. From an institutional point of view, we can observe two effects occurring around the campaign, the referendum, and the aftermath of the referendum: first, a coalition dynamic developed in a political environment that, in the words of Benjamin Disraeli, “does not love coalitions”. This led to a compromise on electoral reform which was not really loved by either of the parties (the Conservatives preferring the status quo, and the Liberal Democrats preferring a system of proportional representation. While such compromises are unavoidable within a coalition, they tend to enjoy little popularity with the general public. Second, a referendum was called to ‘depoliticise’ a conflict between the two coalition partners, yet it turned out to split the coalition not only on the AV proposal itself, but also on the nature of the referendum. The Liberal Democrats had expected the Conservative party leadership to refrain from campaigning against the AV proposal, but contrary to this expectation, David Cameron and the rest of the Conservative party turned the referendum into what was effectively a partisan conflict.

From a direct democratic perspective, the effects are not completely clear. On the one hand, media evaluations of the ‘democraticness’ of the referendum were rather scathing, apart from the obligatory salutations to ‘the people’s judgment’ by political figureheads. Most media references to the AV referendum in relation to other references were of a rather negative nature, implying that there would be little appetite for another such a referendum. However, at least three referendums have been proposed within public discourse in the United Kingdom since the AV referendum: a referendum on Scottish independence (which has been planned for the 18th of September, 2014), a referendum on a possible British withdrawal from the European Union (announced by David Cameron to take place *after* the next elections for the House of commons, in 2015), and a referendum on same-sex marriage (pressed for by some Conservative backbenchers; ultimately same-sex marriage passed without a referendum). Especially the last two ideas shared some aspects with the AV referendum: both seem to be born out of political discontent hailing from the arena of representative democracy. Cameron announced the prospect of a referendum on the EU in response to pressure within his own party to act on the EU topic; the referendum on same-sex marriage was proposed by activists within the Conservative party as a response to Cameron’s controversial support of same-sex marriage. These two proposals share a background of political disagreement

with the AV referendum. On a same note, Nick Clegg announced not to be in favour of a referendum on his proposed reform of the House of lords, because the three main parties had included such a reform in their election manifestos; political *agreement* becomes, in this case, an argument against a referendum. Moreover, Curtice (2013) notices that the main post-war referendums the UK has witnessed all had a background in political disagreement. Referendums seem to serve as some type of backstop for representative democracy, being called in when politicians disagree amongst themselves. Yet, as Morel (2001) theorises, these referendums might work as a precedent for future situations, rendering referendums unavoidable even when there is agreement amongst the political elites.

Summarizing: direct and representative democracy

The Alternative Vote referendum which was held on the 5th of May, 2011 throws a somewhat bleak light on the instrument of direct democracy. In our theoretical chapter, we distinguished direct democracy as an *institution* from direct democracy as an *event*. To isolate the effects of direct democracy as an event, we zoomed in on a situation in which direct democracy was far from institutionalized: the United Kingdom, which organised its second post-war nationwide referendum in 2011. While we have to be very careful with generalizing the results of a study which focuses on one case, we believe that there is a real possibility that the dynamics we observed around the 2011 referendum are related to more general tendencies in politics, and can therefore be found in similar cases, even under slightly different circumstances. Our first finding is that the policy effect of ‘incidental’ referendums might be limited. When such a referendum is called for (in such situations, this is normally done by the government), it implies that the sponsor has already enough leeway to get the proposal on the ballot. That the proposal is not directly voted into law by the majority, might imply that there is still some opposition to the proposal. In either case, the ‘losing side’ has, even after having received the direct democratic verdict, a particular interest of pushing its case. In a situation where referendums are institutionalized, this might be a futile effort, but in a situation where referendums are rare, such an effort might be worthwhile. Our second finding is that ‘incidental’ referendums tend to be interpreted in strongly political-strategic terms: coverage tends to zoom in on the consequences for governments, parties and politicians. More in general, these referendums might live on as ‘political symbols’: they become symbols for certain political battles or conflicts which surpass the proposal on the ballot. A range of referendums on the European Union in 1990s and 2000s in several European countries became a symbol for a perceived gap between political elites and voters on the European question (Franklin *et al.*, 1994; Hug & Sciarini, 2000; Crum, 2007). A series of simultaneous approved ballot initiatives in Italy in 2011 was regarded as a symbolic defeat for the incumbent Berlusconi government (Chiaramonte & D’Alimonte, 2012). A

similar fate can fall on the UK referendum; a provisional analysis of the media showed that it was much more interpreted as a partisan event than as a judgment on the actual content of the proposal. Both dynamics show some unease between direct democracy and representative democracy; where direct democracy is only an occasional phenomenon, its relation with representative democracy might be fluid, with politicians, voters and media having unclear or widely varying ideas about the role of referendums. Referendums as an institution might have the widely claimed positive effects on popular legitimacy, political participation and economic outcomes, but holding referendums without having institutionalised direct democracy does not necessarily have to show the same kind of effects, and might even, everything taken into account, have a detrimental effect on the democratic practice in democracies having a taste of them. Yet, these conclusions are still quite far-fetched; we will try to expand our research to other 'incidental' referendums involving institutional reforms to check whether the same dynamics can be found in other countries, with different circumstances.

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