

Framing Effects in Referendums on European Integration: Experimental Evidence

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Abstract

Direct democracy played no role in the early stages of the European integration process, but has become an increasingly important way of making decisions on important European issues. The outcome of this public consultation has occasionally both surprised and dismayed national and European political elites; most recently after French, Dutch and Irish voters rejected the attempts of constitutional reform of the European Union. Yet, elites also have considerable influence on how voters decide in referendums. This paper examines one aspect of elite influence in direct democracy, namely how different 'frames' affect individual vote choices in referendums on European integration. Framing effects occur when people's responses to an issue depend on how it is portrayed. This paper relies on survey experiments to examine two types of framing effects in (hypothetical) EU referendums. First, it explores the influence of party endorsements on partisan and non-partisan voters. Second, it examines the effect of describing different consequences of voting yes or no on vote choices. This experimental evidence contributes to the existing literature on EU referendums by exploring how voters respond to elite recommendations and how the framing of the context influences the choice between two options.

Framing is an essential feature of public discourse on matters of political import. Every public issue is contested in a symbolic arena, where advocates attempt to impose their own meaning on the issue.

- Nelson and Kinder 1996: 1057

Direct democracy has become an increasingly common feature of European politics. During the past four decades, European countries have conducted 45 referendums on aspects of European integration. In stark contrast to the otherwise elite-driven nature of the integration project, such national referendums have provided a direct means of involving citizens in the integration process. This has recently resulted in a constitutional crisis in the Union when a majority of French and the Dutch voters said no to the Constitutional Treaty in 2005, followed by a rejection of the carefully negotiated successor treaty, the Lisbon Treaty, by Irish voters in 2008. Yet, although referendums give citizens the right to endorse or veto proposals, national elites still play an important role in the referendum process. In particular, elites have the power to *frame* the choice in a referendum. Frames provide 'a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving connection among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue' (Gamson and Modigliani 1987:143). Frames are never neutral. By defining what the heart of matter is, they suggest how people should decide on an issue. Given the volatility of electorates in referendums and the relative unfamiliarity of most citizens with issue of European integration, framing should matter more than in other electoral situations.

The aim of this paper is to examine the micro-mechanisms of public opinion formation in referendums by exploring the principal ways in which elites can influence individual attitudes towards EU ballot proposal: by supporting or opposing the proposal (elite cues) and by emphasizing certain aspects of the proposal (issue framing). Specifically, we look at the effect of government endorsements on partisan and non-partisan voters (*government endorsement*) and the effect of emphasizing different consequences of the two possible outcomes (*consequences frame*). The central proposition is that elite frames matter vote choices in referendums, but that the effect is mediated to some extent by political awareness and partisan affiliations.

To test these predictions concerning framing effects, this paper analyses the data from two survey experiments. By using an experimental design, it is possible to determine the specific nature of the frame and make assessments of causal predictions by neutralizing the effect of confounding factors. This experimental evidence complements the extant literature on voting behaviour in EU referendums by exploring how citizens respond to elite recommendations and how the framing of an ballot proposal influences vote choices.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, it presents a more detailed discussion of framing theory and outlines the key hypotheses concerning framing effects in referendums. Thereafter, it presents two survey experiments designed to test framing effects in referendums: an experiment on a (hypothetical) referendum on the Euro and an experiment on a (hypothetical) referendum on the EU's Lisbon Treaty. This is followed by a discussion of the experimental evidence. The final section concludes.

Theories of framing effects

Citizens' perceptions of political issues are shaped not only by the amount of information they receive, but also by the selection and presentation of information. A ballot proposal on European integration is inevitably a complex and multifaceted issue. A vote on EU treaty ratification may, for example, be presented as an issue of surrender of national sovereignty, or it may be portrayed as a matter of maintaining essential economic and political ties with European neighbours. In other words, a single proposal may be 'framed' in different ways. Framing refers to the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue. A framing *effect* occurs when the emphasis on a subset of potentially relevant considerations causes individuals to focus on these considerations when constructing their opinion on an issue (Chong and Druckman 2007a, 2007b; Druckman 2001a, 2001b; Nelson et al. 1997).

The literature suggests two primary ways in which frames operate: 'the importance change model' and 'the content change model' (see Chong and Druckman 2007a; Slothuus 2008). According to the importance change model, frames operate by making certain beliefs more relevant and applicable to the issue at stake (Nelson and

Kinder 1996; Nelson et al. 1997).¹ Frames ‘affect opinion simply by making certain considerations seem more important than others; these considerations in turn, carry greater weight for the final attitude’ (Nelson et al. 1997:569). A less prominent interpretation of the framing process is the content change model, which stresses that frames introduce new arguments and information that the individual had not previously thought about (Chong and Druckman 2007a; Slothuus 2008). According to this model, framing changes the content of the underlying considerations, whereas the former model emphasizes changes in the importance of pre-existing considerations. In the political psychology literature, framing effects have been expressed formally by way of a conventional expectation value model of individual attitudes. Here, individual attitudes can be portrayed as $Attitude = \sum v_i w_i$, where v_i is the evaluation of the object on attribute i and w_i is the salience weight associated with that attribute (Chong and Druckman 2007a; Nelson et al. 1997). For example, an individual’s overall attitude towards a referendum proposal will consist of a combination of positive and negative evaluations of the proposal, v_i , on different dimensions i . An individual may believe that the treaty will result in further surrender of national sovereignty ($i=1$), but that European integration is essential for her country’s economy ($i=2$). The overall evaluation of the project will therefore depend on the relative magnitudes of v_1 and v_2 discounted by the relative salience weights w_1 and w_2 . (Nelson et al. 1997; Nelson and Oxley 1999). Framing can thus operate by influencing the relative salience of different evaluations w_i (*importance change*) or by introducing new dimensions i in the minds of voters (*content change*).

This model highlights a conceptual distinction between framing effects and persuasion (or *belief change*), which involves changing people’s minds about the particular attributes of the project v_i (Nelson and Oxley 1999). Whereas changing people’s fundamental beliefs is a tall order for most politicians, they can more easily attempt to mobilize voters behind or in opposition to a proposal by encouraging them to think about the proposal along particular lines. Framing effects thus constitute one of the primary means by which elites influence citizens’ opinion. Elites will, of course, not

¹ This model is related to the so-called ‘accessibility model’, which stresses that frames operate by making a person’s pre-existing considerations more accessible in the minds of voters and hence more important in the opinion formation process (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Slothuus 2008; Zaller 1992).

limit themselves to the framing of issues, but will also generally try to influence public opinion by more openly speaking in favour or against an issue. Such elite cues can also be very effective, but they tend to be strongly conditional on individuals' feelings about the elites in question (Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Sniderman 2000). In other words elite cues, such as party endorsements, will primarily have an effect on those citizens who are positively disposed towards the party that gives the endorsement, whereas issue framing may work as a more subtle way of increasing the salience of certain considerations in the minds of citizens.

Framing can influence attitudes towards ballot proposals in EU referendums by influencing individuals' perceptions of the choice set. Elite cues equally provide citizens with information about their own position in relation to the ballot proposal. Hence, a close examination of framing effects and elite cues allows us to explore the micro-mechanisms of opinion formation in European integration referendums. This is discussed in greater detail in the following section.

Framing effects and elite cues in referendums

Framing effects and elite endorsements are highly relevant in the context of referendums on European integration where the multifaceted nature of the proposals, coupled with the uncertainty of voters, provides plenty of scope for elites to offer competing interpretations of the issue at stake. In this paper, we are specifically interested in two types of elite framing. The first is the framing of the position of the proposal and the reversion point. The second type of framing is elite cues, or party endorsements.

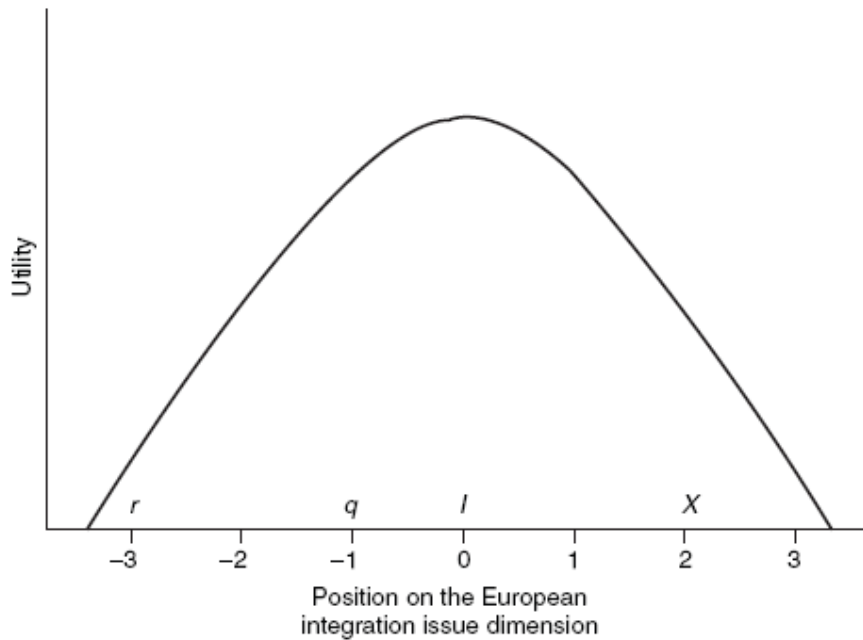
An obvious starting point for considering voting behaviour and framing effects in EU referendum is a simple spatial model of vote choice (see also Hobolt 2009). Spatial models of voting were originally developed in the context of a two-party system where voters have to choose between two distinct candidates and where they are assumed to vote for the candidate that has issue positions closest to their own ideal point (Alvarez 1997; Downs 1957). Although this theory is rarely explicitly applied to direct democracy, it can render some important insights into voting in referendums. Just as in a two-party system election, referendums on European integration allow citizens to make a binary

choice between two alternatives. We can thus use the spatial proximity model to illustrate the choice that voters face in referendums, assuming that voters will choose the option that is closest to their own ideal point on a single-issue dimension, related to European integration.² In other words, this simple model assumes that issue preferences (or attitudes towards European integration) are the only factor that determines the perceived utility of a ballot proposal. While this assumption is, of course, problematic, it provides a useful starting point for thinking about framing effects in referendums. Moreover, several studies have suggested that issue voting is the primary mode of decision-making in EU referendum, since vote choices reflect people's broad underlying attitudes towards European integration (Siune et al. 1994; Svensson 1994, 2002, Garry et al. 2005; Beach and Nielsen 2007; Hobolt 2005, 2009).

In a referendum on European integration voters are asked to choose between two alternatives; the proposal described on the ballot, x , and the policy entailed by a no-vote, the reversion point r . It is often assumed that voters simply choose between the ballot and the status quo. Yet, it is important to consider the reversion point - that is, 'the outcome to occur if the proposal offered by the agenda setter is defeated' (Banks 1990: 446) - because the policy entailed by a no-vote in referendums does not necessarily equal the status quo. Voters cannot be certain that a vote against the proposal will simply lead to a continuation of the pre-existing status quo, since a no-vote in a treaty ratification or single issue referendum may have consequences for the Union in its entirety and may have specific consequences for the country that fails to ratify, such as exit from the Union. Hence, according to this model, all the rational voter needs to do is to figure out whether the policy described on the ballot is better or worse than the alternative. We assume that voters have single-peaked symmetric preferences over a policy outcome and have a most preferred or ideal point (I) on a single policy dimension of more or less European integration. Following the logic of the proximity theory what matters is which of the alternative policy outcomes, x or r , is closer to I . This can be illustrated in a simple spatial representation as in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Spatial representation of vote choice in EU referendums

² For the sake of simplicity we address the case in which votes have quadratic utility functions over the single issue of European integration (see also Enelow and Hinich 1981).



In this example, the ballot issue, x , may be the ratification of a treaty or the adoption of a specific policy (such as the common currency), and the continuum represents a range of policy options from less European integration (e.g. exit from the European Union) to more European integration (e.g. the creation of the United States of Europe). The voter's utilities are a quadratic function of the expected distance between both the ballot proposal and reversion point and the voter's ideal point. In other words, voters are expected to optimize their utility by choosing the option closest to their own preferences, and in this case, a rational and informed voter with the ideal point at 0 would vote for the proposal as this is closer to her ideal point than the reversion point r (albeit further away than status quo q).

In line with this theory, we expect that citizens' evaluations of a proposal are influenced by the manner in which the proposal and reversion point positions are framed. We refer to this type of frame as *consequences frames*, since they emphasize the potentially negative or positive consequences of the two possible outcomes. Consequences frames are closely related to what is known as 'valence frames' in the framing literature, that is frames that evaluate political issues or situations in either positive or negative terms (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2003) or in terms of risk and opportunity (Schuck and de Vreese 2006). In the context of referendums, such frames

can emphasize the potentially negative (or positive) consequences of either of the outcome, and therefore influence how voters think about the choice set. More specifically, we would expect that a frame which highlights the most extreme consequences of the proposal will lead more people to oppose the proposal, since this frame increases the salience of the potentially negative attributes associated with the proposal rather than with the reversion point. Equally, we expect that a frame which highlights the negative aspects of the reversion point – the consequences of a no-vote – will encourage more people to evaluate the proposal positively. Thinking about this spatially, the former frame emphasizes that the proposal's position is far from the median voter, whereas the latter frame emphasizes the extreme position of the reversion point (see Figure 1). Of course, some individuals may favour the more extreme positions, but such voters who hold strong anti- or pro-European position are unlikely to be swayed by elite framing either way. Hence, we can formulate the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 Frames that emphasize the potentially negative consequences of a ballot proposal will make individuals more likely to oppose the proposal.

Hypothesis 2 Frames that emphasize the potentially negative consequences of a no-vote (reversion point) will make individuals more likely to favour the proposal.

Framing effects also influence the level of certainty associated with voters' perceptions of the ballot proposal/reversion point. By providing information on their positions, frames can increase voters' utility of either the proposal or the reversion point and make voters less likely to be undecided (and abstain) in a referendum. In a competitive context, citizens will be exposed to competing frames and as such the information flow is likely to increase the certainty about both the proposal and the reversion point. In a highly competitive campaign, voters are more likely to rely on their prior issue attitudes when voting and they are also less likely to abstain (see Hobolt 2007, 2009). When we present voters with one-sided frames, we also expect them to be more decisive, given that frames provide additional information.

Hypothesis 3 Individuals who are exposed to elite framing of the proposal are more likely to have an opinion on the proposal than individuals who are not exposed to framing.

Frames that focus on a particular aspect of a policy issue are often referred to as ‘issue frames’ or ‘frames in communication’ (Chong and Druckman 2007a; Druckman 2001a; Slothuus 2008). They influence political opinion, and behaviour, by defining and constructing a political issue. Another related way in which elite communication can influence public attitudes towards an issue is through elite endorsements. Elite endorsements do not generally focus on a particular aspect of the issue and are consequently not normally interpreted as “framing effects” in the literature,³ but just like issue frames, endorsements are one of the principal tools that elites use to influence public opinion (see Lupia 1994). Elite endorsements provide information to the voter about the position of the proposal, and indeed the position of the voter’s own ideal point, and thus persuade her to vote a certain way. As Lau and Redlawsk (2001: 953) have pointed out, elite endorsements have an obvious heuristic value as ‘all that is necessary is to learn the candidate endorsed by a group and one’s own attitude toward the group, and an obvious cognitively-efficient inference can be made’ (see also Sniderman et al. 1991). In European referendums, the endorsements of political parties are arguably the most visible elite cues. Kriesi (2005: 139) has referred to the partisan heuristic as ‘the quintessential shortcut in direct democratic votes’. Several studies of voting behaviour in European integration referendums have also shown that recommendations by political parties have an important effect of vote choices (see Franklin et al. 1995; Garry et al. 2005; Hobolt 2009). Hence, we expect that endorsements by elites, such as governments, will influence the way in which people think about a proposal. Overall we expect that government endorsements will make voters more positively disposed toward a proposal:

³ Druckman (2001a, 2001b), however, has examined how the credibility of elites influences the effectiveness of their frames. He finds that perceived source credibility is a prerequisite for successful elite framing.

Hypothesis 4 A government endorsement of a ballot proposal will make people more likely to favour the proposal, all other things being equal.

It is unlikely that government endorsement will have the same effect for all voters, however. Sniderman (2000) and others have referred to elite endorsements as the 'likeability heuristic', implying that voters infer their own position on the basis of whether it is endorsed by a group they like or dislike. Moreover, proponents of the "second-order model" (Reif and Schmitt 1980) of EU referendums argue that voters use referendums on European integration as a means of signalling their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the government and parties (Franklin, Marsh and Wlezien 1994; Franklin, Marsh and McLaren 1994; Franklin, van der Eijk and Marsh 1995; Franklin 2002). According to these studies, voters who are dissatisfied with the performance of the government may use EU referendums to punish the government by voting against the proposals; whereas voters who are satisfied may follow the recommendations of the parties in power. We thus expect that citizens who are positively disposed toward the government will be more likely to be swayed by their endorsement than citizens who oppose the government. This brings us to the more general question of *framing moderators*, that is individual-level attributes that condition framing effects.

Moderators of framing effects

We expect opinion formation processes to vary across different types of individuals. We expect that individual attributes will condition the effect of framing (see Chong and Druckman 2007a; Druckman and Nelson 2003; Slothuus 2008). Specially, we focus on two types of moderators: political awareness and partisanship.

Studies of the mediating effect of political awareness on framing effects have produced mixed results. On the one hand, some scholars have argued that more political aware (and knowledgeable) individuals possess more strongly held prior opinions and therefore they are less susceptible to framing effects (Haider-Markel and Joselyn 2001; Kinder and Sanders 1990). On the other hand, it has been argued that frames will have a greater effect on more knowledgeable people, because such people are likely to comprehend the considerations presented in a frame and be capable of

integrating them in their utility calculation (Druckman and Nelson 2003; Nelson et al. 1997; Slothuus 2008; Zaller 1992). Given that both arguments are likely to hold some truth – individuals who possess prior opinions will exhibit less susceptibility to new frames and knowledge will facilitate the response to frames – it may be difficult to disentangle the moderating effects of political awareness. Chong and Druckman (2007a: 112) recommend that scholars control for prior attitudes when estimating frame effects, in which case they predict that ‘knowledge enhances framing effects because it increases the likelihood that the considerations emphasized in a frame will be available or comprehensible to the individual’.

The existing literature on framing has, however, tended to ignore that the moderating effect of political knowledge may also depend on the *type* of frame that individuals are exposed to. More specifically, we can distinguish between issue frames and equivalency frames. As described above, issue frames are concerned with emphasizing a subset of potentially relevant considerations, whereas equivalency frames examines how the use of ‘different but logically equivalent words or phrases causes individual to alter their preferences’ (Druckman 2001a: 228). An example of an equivalency frame is the Kahneman and Tversky (1984) study, which provided two frames of the effectiveness of a programme to combat ‘an unusual Asian disease’ by stating either that 200 out of 600 people ‘will be saved’ or that 400 out of 600 ‘will die’. The two framings are logically indistinguishable in real terms, but Kahneman and Tversky found a significant difference in support for the programme depending on which frames subjects were exposed to. We expect that more knowledgeable people will be less likely to be swayed by such equivalency frames which are essentially based on framing information in a positive or negative light without any real change of content. On the other hand, knowledgeable people will be more likely to respond to issue frames that require integration new information into their overall evaluation. Hence, we can specify the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5 Politically aware citizens are less susceptible to equivalency frames, but more responsive to issue frames compared to less politically aware individuals.

As already mentioned above, we also expect that citizens will respond differentially to elite endorsements, depending on their partisanship. For example, if the government expresses support for a particular proposal, this is likely to have an effect only on people who support the government, whereas people who oppose the government will be no more likely, or perhaps less likely, to support the proposal. Hence, it follows that:

Hypothesis 6 Government endorsements have a stronger effect on the opinions of people who support the government than on those who do not.

These propositions are tested using two survey experiments, which will be described in further detail in the next section.

Two survey experiments

We use data from two survey experiments in order to test framing effects in referendums. In each of these experiments voters were asked how they would vote in a (hypothetical) referendum. The first experiment related to a referendum on joining the European single currency, the euro, and the second concerned the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty. Both survey experiments were carried out in Britain. The experimental aspect of these two surveys implies the random assignment of respondents to ‘control’ and ‘treatment’ conditions. The control group simply received the vote intention question, whereas the ‘treatment groups’ were also exposed to survey items manipulated to represent different ‘consequence’ and ‘elite endorsement’ frames. By comparing the vote intention of respondents in the treatment groups to those in the control group, we can evaluate the causal effect of these frames.

There are several advantages to using survey experiments to examine our propositions. First, the experimental method allows us to design and control the frames that respondents are exposed to. Second, experiments enable us to make clear causal predictions through random assignment of frames (treatments) to respondents. Finally, these survey experiments – unlike most laboratory experiments – were carried out using a representative sample of the population, and hence they allow us to draw more accurate inferences about real-world opinion formation processes (Gaines, Kuklinski,

and Quirk 2007). One of the criticisms levelled against experimental research is that the external validity is low. When seeking to infer to the real world, an important task of the researcher is therefore to create an experimental context that closely resembles a real-world environment. In our survey experiments, respondents were asked about how they would vote in two hypothetical referendums. Given that these questions were not asked during actual referendum campaigns, this may appear reduce the ‘real-world resemblance’ of the design. However, in both cases the experiments were carried out at a time when such referendums were a real possibility.⁴ Moreover, the fact that they were not carried out during an actual referendum campaign made it easier to interpret the results, since the respondents were less contaminated by actual campaign effects (Gaines, Kuklinski, and Quirk 2007). We describe each of the experiments in greater detail below.

The Euro referendum experiment

The Euro referendum experiment was designed by the British Election Study as a part of their 2001 campaign study and was conducted using a random-digit-dialling telephone sample by Gallup (see Clarke et al. 2005).⁵ There were four groups of respondents which represent the split sample experiment. Each treatment went to just under 1,000 respondents and the treatments were framing both the question and the answers. These treatments are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Euro referendum Split Sample Experimental Treatments

Treatment 1:	When the referendum on British membership in the European Monetary
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⁴ When the Euro experiment was conducted in 2001, there was a real possibility that the Labour government would hold a referendum on the single currency during that parliamentary period. Equally, there were strong pressures on the Labour government to hold a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty in 2008 due to the party’s manifesto pledge to hold a referendum on the Constitutional Treaty. Hence, in both instances the questions on vote intention were not entirely hypothetical.

⁵ Interviews were carried out by telephone using a CATI system. The data and supporting documentation are available from the UK Data Archive at the University of Essex.

Control	Union, the EURO, is held will you vote to...? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • give up pound & join euro • keep pound & reject euro
Treatment 2: Euro frame	When the referendum on British membership in the European Monetary Union, the EURO, is held will you vote to...? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • join euro • reject euro
Treatment 3: Government support cue	When the referendum on British membership in the European Monetary Union, the EURO, is held and the British government recommends entry, will you vote to...? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • give up pound & join euro • keep pound & reject euro
Treatment 4: Government support & euro frame	When the referendum on British membership in the European Monetary Union, the EURO, is held and the British government recommends entry, will you vote to...? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • join euro • reject euro

As Table 1 shows, respondents in the control group⁶ were asked how they would vote in a referendum on the Euro, and given the option to ‘give up the pound and join the euro’ or ‘keep the pound and reject the euro’. The second group was given a different set of options, which only mentions the euro. This can be regarded as an ‘equivalency frame’ since the answer categories of group 1 and 2 are logically equivalent (joining the euro implies giving up the pound); yet, the two answer categories also highlight the implications of the proposal in different manners. The first set of answer categories puts emphasis of the negative consequences of a yes-vote (‘give up the pound and join the euro’) to a greater extent than the second set of answer category (‘join the euro’). We would thus expect that fewer voters would support the proposal when presented with the first set of answer categories compared with the latter (Hypothesis 2). The second type of treatment includes a government support cue (‘the British government

⁶ It is not clear that this experiment was designed with a clear control group in mind. The investigators do not compare with a specific control group in their analysis of this experiment, but compare treatment groups instead (see Clarke et al. 2005). However, with no explicit baseline, it is more difficult for the researcher to evaluate which treatments shape attitudes (see Gaines et al. 2007). Hence, in this analysis I designate the first treatment group as the ‘control’ and compare the other groups with this baseline. In the design of the second experiment, I explicitly included a control group as a baseline for testing the effectiveness of each of the frames.

recommends entry’) in the question wording for each of the two answer categories (treatments 3 and 4). As hypothesized above, we expect individuals exposed to this frame will be more likely to support the proposal, conditioned by their pre-existing attitudes towards the government and partisanship.

Lisbon Treaty referendum experiment

Another experiment was designed by this author specifically for the purposes of testing the theoretical propositions outlined above. This experiment was carried out in January 2008 by the internet survey company YouGov, as a part of their Omnibus survey answered by a nationally representative sample of 2,000 British adults. As shown in Table 2, this experiment involves the random assignment of respondents to one control condition and three treatment conditions.

Table 2: Lisbon Treaty referendum Split Sample Experimental Treatments

Treatment 1: Control group	Last December, governments across the European Union signed a new treaty, the Treaty of Lisbon. This treaty replaces the draft EU Constitutional Treaty. Some countries will hold a referendum on the new treaty [<i>Introduction</i>]. If there were to be a referendum in Britain, how would you vote?
Treatment 2: Government support	[<i>Introduction</i>] The British Labour government is strongly in favour of the treaty. If there were to be a referendum in Britain, how would you vote?
Treatment 3: Reversion point frame	[<i>Introduction</i>]. If Britain rejects the treaty, some experts have warned that this will result in Britain leaving the EU. If there were to be a referendum in Britain, how would you vote?
Treatment 4: Proposal frame	[<i>Introduction</i>]. If Britain accepts the treaty, some experts have warned that Britain will surrender further powers to the EU. If there were to be a referendum in Britain, how would you vote?

All respondents were asked how they would vote in a referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon. Respondents in the first treatment group were also provided with a government endorsement: ‘the British Labour government is strongly in favour of the treaty’. Again, we would expect that respondents exposed to this endorsement to be more willing to favour the proposal, especially those who are Labour supporters. The two other treatments frame the consequences of rejecting the proposal (‘some experts have warned

that this will result in Britain leaving the EU’) and accepting the proposal (‘some experts have warned that Britain will surrender further powers to the EU’). We expect that the individuals exposed to the former frame will be more likely to vote yes, whereas those exposed to the latter will be more likely to vote no. These propositions, as well as the moderating factors, are examined in the next section.

Results

Given the experimental design, it is quite simple to test whether the consequences frames and government cues have an effect on public opinion. All we need to do is to compare the vote intention of the treatment groups with the control group and test whether they are statistically different in the expected direction. Table 3 shows the result from the Euro referendum experiment.

Table 3: Framing effects in the Euro referendum experiment

	Yes	No	Undecided	<i>Difference in yes-vote</i>
Control group (N=909)	24.4	61.8	13.6	-
Euro frame (N=937)	32.2	49.6	18.1	7.8***
Government support frame (N=934)	30.0	56.5	13.5	5.6***
Government support and euro frame (N=941)	32.7	53.0	12.5	8.3***

Note: Table entries are percentages for each treatment group.
 *** significant difference between control and treatment with $p < .01$ (two-tailed)

We can see that each of the frames have worked as expected. Respondent who were asked to “join the euro” were 8 percentage points more likely to say that they would vote in favour of the proposal, compared with those who were asked to ‘give up the pound and join the euro’. Equally, the government endorsement had a significant effect: respondent receiving this cue were 6 percentage points more likely to say they would vote yes. Respondents in the final group, which combined the two frames, were unsurprisingly the most likely to favour the proposal. The Euro referendum experiment

thus lends support to our expectations concerning framing effects in referendums. Interestingly, the frames do not make people less indecisive, but this is not unsurprising given that equivalence frames provide limited additional information. In fact, the Euro frame, which provides the least information about the consequences have the highest number of undecided respondents (18 per cent), as we would expect.

Table 4 shows the results from our Lisbon Treaty experiment and paints a similar picture.

Table 4: Framing effects in the Lisbon Treaty referendum experiment

	Yes	No	Undecided	<i>Difference in vote†</i>
Control group (N=522)	17.4	40.6	41.9	-
Government support (N=511)	23.5	36.4	40.1	6.1***
Reversion point frame (N=433)	23.1	42.9	33.9	5.7**
Proposal frame (N=487)	15.8	59.3	24.9	18.7***

*** significant difference between control and treatment with $p < .01$ ** $p < .05$ (two-tailed)

† For treatment 2 and 3 we measure the difference in yes-vote, for treatment 4 (proposal frame) we measure the difference in no-vote.

Again, we can see that all three frames have a significant effect on vote intention. As in the previous experiment, respondents exposed to the government endorsement are also about 6 percentage points more likely to support the proposal. The reversion point frame - warning about Britain’s exit of the EU as a possible consequence of rejecting the treaty - has a similar effect on the yes-vote. Interestingly, respondents exposed to this frame are also, on average, slightly more likely to reject the proposal, which suggests that Britain’s exit from the EU is not perceived as a negative frame by all voters. Indeed, we would expect that issue frames provide more information about the position of the proposal/reversion point and that people exposed to such frames are less likely to be undecided as a consequence (Hypothesis 3). It is not surprising that the issue frames in this experiment provide more information, and in turn more certainty of opinion, than the equivalency frames in the Euro experiment. We see the same pattern for respondents

exposed to the proposal frame (warning of the surrender of powers to the EU). This frame has by far the largest effect on intended no-votes: individuals receiving this frame are almost 19 percentage points more likely to reject the proposal. The difference is caused by a shift from undecided to no-voters, which implies that the proposal frame gives voters the certainty about the position of the proposal that enable them to reject it rather than be uncertain (the number of undecided respondents drops from 42 to 25 per cent).

Hence, overall both experiments confirm that frames can have significant effects on public opinion. Framing the consequences of the proposal/reversion point will change voters' minds as expected, and equally government endorsement make voters more likely to accept the proposal. Yet, as discussed above, we also expect that these frames may work differently depending on the political awareness and the partisanship of the individual respondents. This is examined in further detail below.

Effect of individual-level moderators

To examine the conditioning effect of individual-level attributes, we estimate a multinomial logit model⁷ with vote intention (yes, no, undecided) as the dependent variable, and the treatment effects as well as individual-level attributes as the independent variables. By interacting the treatment effects with the relevant individual level variables, we can establish whether framing effects are conditioned by these attributes. For each of our experiments we estimate three models. The first model is a base model with a dummy for each of the treatments (with the control group as the reference category). The second model examines the moderating effect of political awareness. Recall that we expected political sophisticates to be less susceptible to equivalency frames, but more susceptible to issue frames. Finally, our third model examines whether the effect of government endorsements is mediated by partisanship.

⁷ Diagnostic checks on both experiments failed to indicate the multinomial logit analyses suffered from violations of the IIA (independence from irrelevant alternatives) assumption, and re-estimating the analyses using multinomial probit produced results very similar to those presented in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5 examines the Euro referendum experiment. For the sake of simplicity, we only look at two of the three treatment conditions: euro frame and government support cue (treatments 2 and 4 in Table 1).⁸

Table 5: Multinomial logit of vote choice in Euro referendum

	<i>Model 1: Frames</i>		<i>Model 2: Political att.</i>		<i>Model 3: Partisan</i>	
	Yes	Undecided	Yes	Undecided	Yes	Undecided
	Log odds (SE)	Log odds (SE)	Log odds (SE)	Log odds (SE)	Log odds (SE)	Log odds (SE)
Government support cue	0.29*** (0.09)	0.15 (0.12)	0.40*** (0.11)	0.21* (0.12)	0.14 (0.13)	-0.03 (0.17)
Euro frame	0.34** (0.09)	0.46*** (0.11)	0.59*** (0.14)	0.36** (0.16)	0.41*** (0.09)	0.52*** (0.11)
Attitudes towards EU membership	-	-	2.06*** (0.08)	1.23*** (0.08)	-	-
Political attention	-	-	0.54*** (0.10)	0.21* (0.12)	-	-
Partisanship (<i>reference=no party</i>)						
Labour partisan	-	-	-	-	0.72*** (0.11)	0.21 (0.13)
Conservative partisan	-	-	-	-	-	-1.19*** (0.17)
Liberal Democrat partisan	-	-	-	-	1.30*** (0.15)	0.05 (0.17)
Political attention*Euro frame	-	-	-0.40** (0.19)	0.23 (0.22)	0.65*** (0.14)	0.05 (0.17)
Labour*Government cue	-	-	-	-	0.43*** (0.16)	0.48** (0.21)
Constant	-0.78*** (0.05)	-1.47*** (-0.07)	-	-4.82*** (0.25)	-	-1.32*** (0.12)
N	3721		3715		3715	
McFadden's R squared	0.004		0.16		0.07	

Source: BES Euro referendum experiment ***p<0.01 **p<0.05 *p<0.10

As we saw in Table 3, both frames have a positive effect on yes-vote, whereas only the euro frame has a significant effect when we compare undecided with a no-vote intention. Model 2 examines the conditioning effect of political awareness. Political

⁸ The main findings are the same when we estimate the effects of treatments 3 and 4 separately.

awareness is measured in terms of how much attention the respondent pays to politics.⁹ We control for EU attitudes,¹⁰ since politically aware respondents are expected to have stronger prior attitudes (see Druckman and Nelson 2003; Chong and Druckman 2007a). Unsurprisingly, attitudes towards EU membership have a significant and quite substantial effect on intended vote choice. The table also shows that people who are politically aware are more likely to favour the proposal to join the euro, even when controlling for attitudes. The analysis of the conditioning effect of political awareness in model 2 shows that politically aware respondents are less likely to be affected by the frame. This result is as we expected, since political sophisticates ought to be less susceptible to equivalency frames, such as this one.

Model 3 also conforms to our expectations. It shows that the elite endorsement cue only has an effect on the vote intention of Labour party identifiers whereas respondents identifying with other parties do not respond to this treatment.¹¹ The Labour government, which was in power at the time of the survey, supported entry into the euro (when certain conditions were met). Entry into the Euro-zone was also supported by the Liberal Democrats, whereas the Conservatives strongly opposed it. We can also see that party identification generally has the expected effect vote intention: Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters are more likely to vote yes than no, whereas Conservative identifiers are much more likely to vote no. These results are thus in line with the existing studies of voting behaviour in referendums, which have shown that people who identify with parties recommending a yes are more likely to support a referendum proposal (see Franklin et al. 2005; Svensson 2003; Garry et al. 2005; Hobolt 2005, 2009). By using experimental methods, we are able not only to examine the effect

⁹ Attention to politics is measured using the following question: 'On a scale from 0 to 10 where 10 means a great deal of attention [emphasis in original] and 0 means no attention [emphasis in original], how much attention do you pay to politics and public affairs?'

¹⁰ Attitudes towards the EU is measured by asking respondents whether they strongly disapprove, disapprove, approve or strongly approve of Britain's membership of the EU.

¹¹ The party identification data are gathered using the question: 'Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat or what?'. We coded three dummies for Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat identifiers. Other party supporters and respondents with no party identification were coded as the reference category. For the sake of simplicity, we only include the interaction between government supporters and government cue in model 3. When we also include the interaction between opposition supporters (Conservatives and Liberal Democrats) and government cue in the model the coefficient on the government interaction remains significant and positive, but the opposition interactions are insignificant. We find the same results in the Lisbon Treaty experiment.

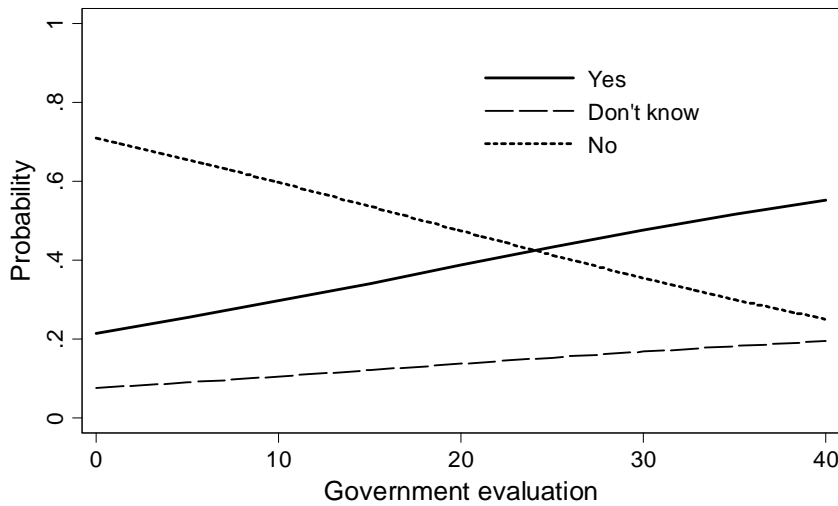
of partisanship on vote choice, but also to explicitly model how citizens respond to elite cues concerning the cues, without the concerns about endogeneity.

The relationship between vote choice, government evaluations and partisanship can also be illustrated graphically. In Figure 2, we show the vote intention of respondents who were exposed to the government endorsement cue, using data from the Euro referendum experiment. The figure shows vote intention as a function of respondents' evaluation of the government's performance as well as their partisanship.¹²

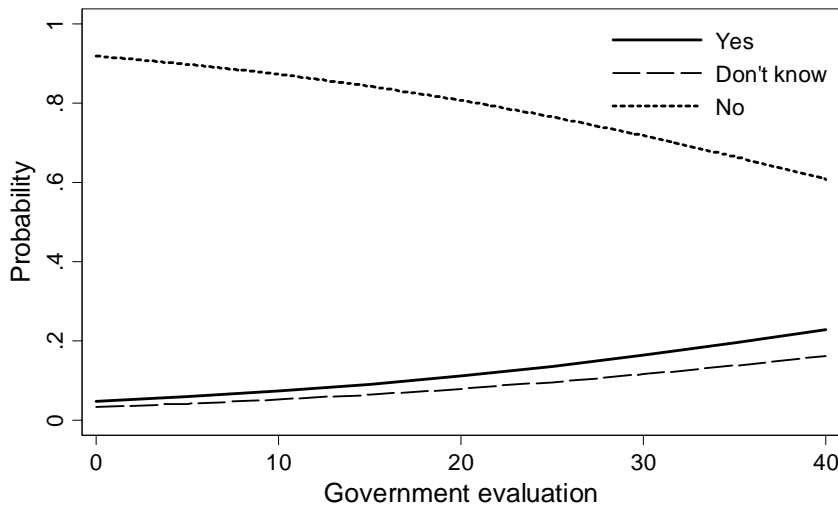
¹² To measure evaluations of government performance, respondents were asked to use 11-point scales to rate how well the incumbent government had performed in four policy areas: (i) health care, (ii) taxation, (iii) education, (iv) crime. The question is: 'How many marks out of 10 would you give the Government for its performance in each of the following areas: (a) the National Health Service, (b) taxation; (c) education; (d) the level of crime in Britain'. On the basis of these questions, we created an additive scale of government performance, ranging from 0 to 40.

Figure 2: Effect of government cue and evaluation on Euro referendum vote

A: Effect on Labour supporters



B: Effect on Conservative supporters



Note: Figures show predicted probabilities of vote choice for Labour/Conservative party identifiers with mean EU attitudes, who were exposed to a government endorsement frame.

Source: BES Euro referendum experiment 2001.

Figure 2 shows that citizens' vote decision is dependent not only on their partisan affiliation, but also on how they evaluate the government's performance at a particular point in time. Labour supporters, who receive the elite endorsement, are likely to support the ballot proposal when they feel that the government has done a good job, but

they are far more likely to reject it when they are dissatisfied with the government's performance. Unsurprisingly, Conservative supporters have less than a 25 per cent probability of supporting the Euro proposal, regardless of what they feel about the government's performance. As shown in Table 5, voters' responsiveness to government cues and government performance is thus strongly mediated by partisanship.

Table 6 illustrates the results for the same models applied to the Lisbon Treaty referendum experiment.

Table 6: **Multinomial logit of vote choice in Lisbon Treaty referendum**

	<i>Model 1: Frames</i>		<i>Model 2: Political att.</i>		<i>Model 3: Partisan</i>	
	Yes	Undecided	Yes	Undecided	Yes	Undecided
	Log odds (SE)	Log odds (SE)	Log odds (SE)	Log odds (SE)	Log odds (SE)	Log odds (SE)
Government support cue	0.41** (0.17)	0.06 (0.14)	0.37 (0.24)	0.05 (0.18)	0.21 (0.22)	0.08 (0.16)
Reversion point frame	0.23 (0.18)	-0.27* (0.15)	0.06 (0.32)	-0.57** (0.24)	0.25 (0.19)	-0.28* (0.15)
Proposal frame	-0.48*** (0.18)	-0.90*** (0.15)	-1.12*** (0.33)	-1.49*** (0.22)	-1.01*** (0.19)	-0.95*** (0.15)
Attitudes towards European unification	-	-	1.05*** (0.05)	0.64*** (0.03)	-	-
Political attention	-	-	0.26 (0.24)	-1.55*** (0.19)	-	-
Partisanship (<i>reference=no party</i>)						
Labour partisan	-	-	-	-	1.38*** (0.20)	0.39** (0.17)
Conservative partisan	-	-	-	-	-1.01*** (0.19)	-1.24*** (0.13)
Liberal Democrat partisan	-	-	-	-	1.12*** (0.22)	0.36* (0.19)
Political attention*Reversion point	-	-	0.47** (0.17)	0.50 (0.35)	-	-
Political attention*Proposal	-	-	0.43 (0.33)	0.58* (0.32)	-	-
Labour*Government cue	-	-	-	-	0.73** (0.34)	0.22 (0.33)
Constant	-0.85*** (0.13)	0.03 (0.09)	-4.69*** (0.29)	1.52*** (0.52)	-1.06*** (0.18)	0.37*** (0.13)
N	1953		1953		1953	
McFadden's R squared	0.02		0.37		0.10	

Source: Lisbon Treaty referendum experiment ***p<0.01 **p<0.05 *p<0.10

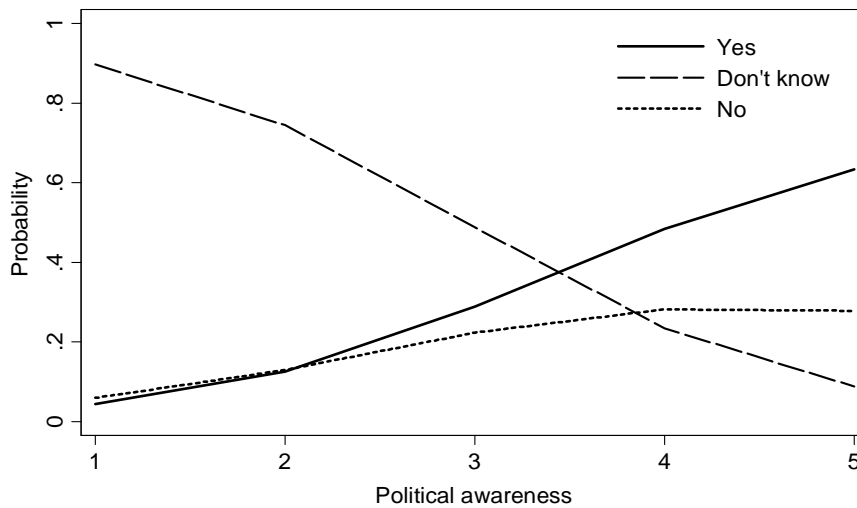
Again, the first model shows that government endorsements make respondents more likely to vote yes, but they do not make potential no-voters significantly more uncertain. In model 2, we estimate the conditioning effect of political attention, controlling for attitudes towards European unification.¹³ Unlike the previous experiment, the proposal and reversion frames are not “equivalency frames”, and we therefore expect that

¹³ EU attitudes are measured using the question: ‘Some say European unification should be pushed further. Others say it already has gone too far. What is your opinion? Please indicate your views using a 10-point-scale. On this scale, 1 means unification “has already gone too far” and 10 means it ‘should be pushed further’. What number on this scale best describes your position?’.

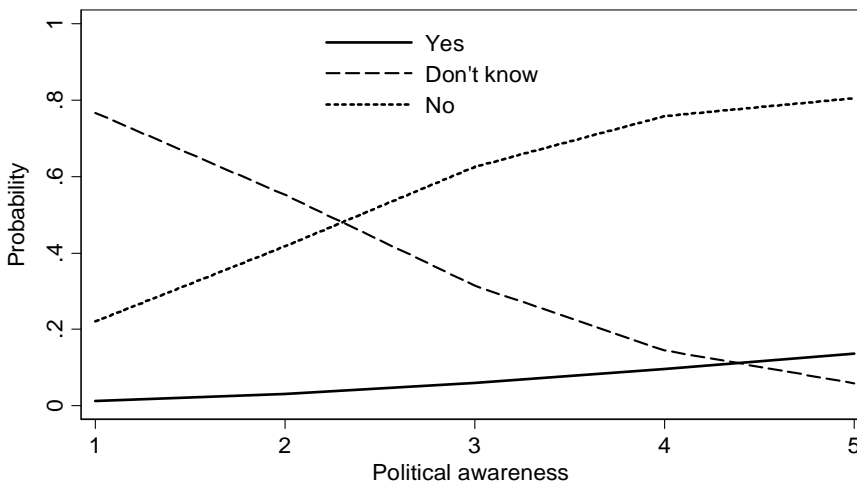
politically attentive respondents will be more likely to pick up on the information provided in these frames. As expected, we find that the interaction between the reversion point frame and political awareness is positive and significant. This suggests that more politically aware citizens are more likely to respond to this frame. However, none of the other interactions are significant at the 95% level. These mixed results lend some support to our hypothesis, but also echo the disagreement in the literature concerning the effect of political awareness as a moderator of framing effects. On the one hand, political sophisticates hold stronger prior attitudes and are thus less likely to change their mind. On the other hand, they are more likely to pick up on frames, given their knowledge, and integrate it into their utility calculation. To illustrate the effect of political awareness on vote intention, we plot the vote intention of those respondents exposed to either of the two issue frames in Figure 3. We plot the vote intention of both Labour and Conservative Party identifiers.

Figure 3: Effect of political awareness on Lisbon Treaty vote

A: Labour supporters



B: Conservative supporters



Note: Figures show predicted probabilities of vote choice for Labour/Conservative party identifiers with mean EU attitudes, who were exposed to issue frames.

Source: Lisbon Treaty referendum experiment, 2008.

Figure 3 shows that lack of political awareness is likely to lead to indecision for both groups of party supporters. Yet, it is interesting to note that as awareness increases, Labour supporters are more likely to favour the proposal, whereas Conservative supporters are more likely to reject the proposal as they become more knowledgeable. These figures thus illustrate that political awareness, combined with issue frames,

makes people more likely to have an opinion on ballot proposal, yet this opinion is tempered by pre-existing attitudes and loyalties.

As illustrated in Figure 3, the final model in Table 6 shows that partisanship operates as a reliable moderator of framing effects: as in the previous experiment, we find that only Labour supporters respond to the government endorsement cue. We also find the same main effects: Labour and Liberal Democrat partisans are more likely to support the treaty, whereas Conservative supporters are less supportive.

Conclusion

This paper has employed survey experiments to investigate framing effects in referendums. The experimental evidence has clearly shown that issue frames and elite endorsements can sway public opinion. We have found that frames which emphasize the consequences of a yes- or a no-vote in the referendum influence citizens' vote intention. When the negative consequences of a no-vote are highlighted, more people favour the proposal, and when the negative consequences of a yes-vote were presented to respondents, more people decided to oppose the proposal. Put in spatial terms, these frames can be seen to push either the proposal or the reversion point to a more extreme position, further away from the ideal point of most voters. Moreover, this paper has shown that endorsements by governments make citizens who are positively disposed towards the government more likely to support a ballot proposal.

But in real-world campaigns, voters are exposed to competing elite cues and conflicting frames, highlighting both negative and positive consequences of the proposal and the reversion point. So what, if any, inferences can we draw from these one-sided experiments? First, our results imply that issue frames provide information to voters that makes them more likely to express an opinion on the issue at stake. This echoes the findings in the extant literature, which has shown that individuals who are more exposed to the campaign information were more likely to rely on their issue attitudes when voting and less likely to abstain (see Hobolt 2005, 2007, 2009). Second, the fact that referendum campaigns are competitive environments does not imply that issue frames have no effects. Chong and Druckman (2007b: 640) have found that in competitive environments, 'strong frames will dominate weak frames because strong frames will be

considered more applicable to the issue'. The 'strength' of a frame is determined by a number of factors, including the quality of the argument, the saliency of the message and the credibility of the source. Perceptions of credibility will vary across contexts and across individuals. A third, and related, point is that the effectiveness of frames depends in large part on individual abilities and pre-existing attitudes and loyalties. The analyses in this paper have clearly shown how government endorsements only have an effect on those citizens who are already positively disposed toward the government. In a competitive campaign environment, party endorsements are thus likely to have an effect, but they will be mediated by voters' feelings towards the party as well as their pre-existing attitudes. The analysis of the mediating effect of political awareness presented a more mixed picture, which suggests that politically aware voters are more responsive to information provided by issue frames, but less susceptible to 'equivalency frames'.

This paper has thus shown that citizens do respond to the messages received by elites. Yet, their responses are tempered by pre-existing attitudes and partisanship and mediated by their knowledge of politics. This raises the important question of citizen competence: are voters too easily manipulated by elites, too fickle and uninformed, to make competent decisions in referendums? Framing effects have often been described as a sign of 'citizen incompetence', but this may be not necessarily be the right inference to make. The evidence in this paper has shown that while public opinion is swayed by the information provided by frames, this information also provides them with more firm opinions on the proposal and these opinions are broadly in line with pre-existing attitudes and loyalties. As Druckman (2001a: 246) notes, 'citizens appear to consciously weigh the considerations suggested by elite frames, compare these consideration to their predispositions and information, and contemplate the source of the frame. This all suggests that citizens deal with elite frames in a relatively competent and well-reasoned manner'.

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