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—CHAPTER 16—

Don't trust your poll lead: how public opinion changes during referendum campaigns

Alan Renwick

Our politicians are increasingly enthusiastic about promising referendums. Indeed, on a range of constitutional matters, the convention is now that politicians have little choice but to call a referendum if they want to pursue change. Naturally enough, so far as they can, they want to hold only referendums that they are going to win.

But such votes sometimes deliver sharp surprises. Lib Dems pressed in 2010 for a referendum to change the electoral system because they believed public desire for political reform would carry the day, only to suffer humiliating defeat. In 2013, the Irish government held a referendum to abolish the Senate – a move that the polls had for years supported – only to see the pro-reform lead evaporate in the final months before the vote. The 2014 Scottish independence referendum, which many presumed would deliver an easy victory for the status quo, ended up going down to the wire.

So politicians and others need to get better at calculating their

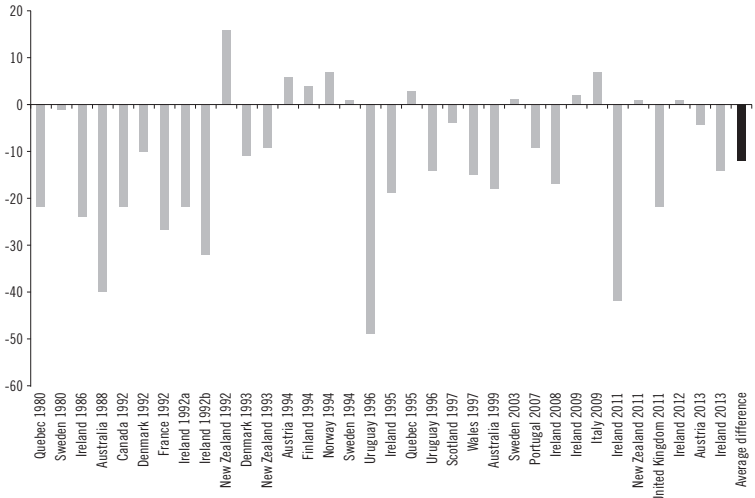
chances of winning, and at working out what they can do in a campaign to maximise these chances. To make such predictions, we need to know how and why public opinion changes in the course of a referendum campaign.

Research conducted by the Canadian political scientist, Larry LeDuc, combined with my own updates, reveals the general pattern.

The following figure shows the difference between the percentage of voters who say they will vote 'Yes' in pre-referendum polls (up to one month before polling day, ignoring the 'don't knows') and the percentage who actually vote 'Yes' in the referendum.

If the bar points down, that means support for 'Yes' goes down. If the bar points up, support for 'Yes' goes up.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SUPPORT FOR 'YES' IN PRE-REFERENDUM OPINION POLLS AND SUPPORT IN THE REFERENDUM (%)



Source: Figures compiled by Lawrence LeDuc and the author

It is not difficult to see that support for the 'Yes' option – which almost always means the change option – goes down more often than it goes up. Of the thirty-four referendums shown, support for reform goes down in twenty-three and up in only eleven. Furthermore, the drops in support are typically much bigger than the rises: the total area of all the bars below the line is thirteen times greater than the area of the bars above.

That suggests that, unless you are already way ahead in the polls, you should be cautious of advocating a referendum on your pet reform idea.

But we can be more subtle in our analysis than that. Support for change generally falls as polling day approaches, but there are some exceptions. If we really want to know our chances of success, we will want to understand the exceptions as well as the rule.

Why does support for change generally fall? The main reason is that uncertain voters typically end up sticking with the devil they know. If you are unsure quite what effects a change will have, then it is safer to hold to the familiarity of the status quo. This mechanism is accentuated if the idea of reform sounds appealing at first blush; voters may respond positively to pollsters when they have not really thought the matter through, only for doubts to develop as they engage later. Examples of this abound. The most familiar in the UK is the electoral reform referendum of 2011. The idea of shaking up the political system, particularly after the expenses scandal, initially appealed to many voters; but as they engaged more, they worried about AV's possible implications, and most ended up voting 'No'. More strikingly still, Ireland's voters opted in October 2013 to retain their Senate even though polls had long shown a majority for abolition. Fear of empowering the government too far changed many minds.

What, then, explains the exceptions to these patterns? There are

three basic reasons why support for reform may pick up steam. The first and most banal is that voters sometimes already know what they think well ahead of the vote. If opinion is already settled, scope for a drop in the 'Yes' vote is limited. The Scottish devolution referendum of 1997 provides a good example. It was, famously, the 'settled will' of the Scottish people that they should obtain a degree of self-government, and the polls barely changed throughout the referendum campaign.

Things get more interesting with the second reason. This is what is called 'reversion point reversal'. The 'reversion point' of a referendum is the situation that ensues following a 'No' vote. Generally, the reversion point is the status quo: if voters opt against change, then the pre-existing situation continues. But sometimes the pre-existing situation can successfully be painted as unsustainable. In several European countries, for example, voters, in being asked to vote a second time on an EU treaty that they had previously rejected, were warned that a second 'No' vote could jeopardise their country's position in the Union. Fear of the unknown now pushed voters towards a 'Yes' vote. Similarly, in four EU accession referendums in 1994, 'Yes' campaigners argued that, in a globalising post-Cold War world, isolation was an increasing danger and the old way of doing things was no longer an option.

The third and final mechanism is the anti-establishment bandwagon. If the establishment as a whole opposes reform and voters are in the mood to give it a kicking, a bandwagon for change can sometimes gather speed. This is particularly likely where the vote appears non-decisive and a protest vote therefore carries little danger. Such conditions applied in New Zealand in 1992 – the highest peak in our figure. The referendum was on electoral reform and most politicians united against it. Voters wished to express their anger over the behaviour of a political class that they thought was

out of control. And the referendum was not decisive: a 'Yes' vote would simply trigger another referendum and a second chance to decide the following year.

If, therefore, you want to change the system and you are thinking about calling for a referendum to achieve it, beyond just looking at the current polling figures, you need to ask yourself three questions:

First, how firm is your support? Do poll respondents back you because they have thought about the issue and come to a clear view or just because the idea sounds nice? If the latter, expect your mouth-watering poll lead to evaporate.

Second, can you plausibly argue that the reform you want, while changing certain things for the better, will also protect aspects of the status quo that voters cherish? If you can, that could significantly boost your prospects.

Finally, are there any plausible bandwagon effects? Bandwagons are fickle: they can go one way or the other. So think about whether you can use them, but don't rely on them alone.

In the case of Scotland's independence referendum, the polls narrowed in the weeks and months before polling day. That happened because of deft use by the 'Yes' campaign of both reversion point reversal and bandwagon effects. Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond argued that independence would protect the National Health Service and other aspects of Scotland's social model from cutters and privatisers in Westminster. The pro-independence campaign successfully portrayed those who highlighted the uncertainties and risks of independence as members or dupes of a distant, arrogant elite who wanted to do Scotland down. In addition, in a referendum that sparked exceptional interest and passion, a positive 'we can really do this' bandwagon also emerged. Ultimately, however, it appears that those who made up their minds at the last moment plumped, on the whole, for the security of the status quo, and the

'No' side therefore won. The mechanisms that we see across most referendums therefore operated also in this dramatic case.

FURTHER READING

For Lawrence LeDuc's research, see his chapter 'Referendums and elections: how do campaigns differ?' in *Do Political Campaigns Matter? Campaign Effects in Elections and Referendums* (Routledge, 2001). The idea of the 'reversion point' is developed by Sara Binzer Hobolt in *Europe in Question: Referendums on European Integration* (Oxford University Press, 2009). For the dynamics of the UK referendum of 2011, see the special issue of *Electoral Studies* (2013) on 'The UK Electoral System Referendum, May 2011'.