

Will domino theory work in the Euro referendum?

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Sweden and Denmark are contemplating new referendums on the euro and Norway one on joining the European Union. While the Norwegian referendum seems to have been postponed beyond our time frame, the visit to Downing Street made early in 2002 by the Prime Ministers of Sweden and Denmark and frequently since by the Swedish Premier makes it clear the leaders want to synchronise their referendums to produce a bandwagon calculated to sway Britain's reluctant electorate.

Because rolling elections introduce bias, modern electoral law tends to ban the practice *within* States. However, it was tried *between* European States in 1994 when some countries synchronised their referendums deliberately putting Austria, the country most likely to vote in favour of joining the EU, first and Norway, the least likely, last.

This international exercise in domino theory, for which there was no historical precedent, came to be labelled *the nearly successful strategy* because it failed to move Norway and the experts couldn't measure the effects elsewhere. By some accounts, the Norwegian YES campaign may have gained 4% but it wasn't enough to win.

The sequence of referendums on membership of the European Union 1994

Country	Date	Yes	No
Austria	12 June	66.6%	
Finland	16 October	56.9%	
Sweden	13 November	52.3%	
Norway	27 November		52.2%

Austria, being the only country constitutionally required to win public approval in a referendum, started preparing a year before the poll, spent a lot of money on the campaign in a one-sided manner that most Electoral Commissions would now find unfair and probably rule as illegitimate.

In Sweden and Finland, the next two countries, post cold war security issues dominated the referendums creating a strong cross border interest between the two countries. Austria seemed less important. One poll showed only 56% of Finns knew the Austrian result when they voted thus halving any possible domino effect.

Another poll claimed that if Finland had voted NO, Sweden would have switched sides to a NO vote of 54% - a swing of 8%. If true, it would be a very powerful domino effect.

The same poll showed a Finnish NO would have increased the Norwegian NO vote to 55% - a swing of 3%.

UK Devolution referendums 1997

In these referendums, the Labour government arranged to hold the vote in Wales place one week after Scotland in the belief that Welsh voters would not want to *be left behind*. The Yes campaigners exploited the Scottish result but nobody afterwards was able to measure the effect. Indeed, 74% of voters when questioned said the result in Scotland would make no difference to them (implying that it would for some of the balance). However, the narrowness of the result in Wales 50.1% to YES, shows that in a close campaign, the effect need only be small to be decisive.

Maastricht ratification referendums 1992

Whoever chose to organise the dates of the Maastricht ratification referendums didn't bother with domino theory. By putting Denmark, the country least likely to vote in favour of the treaty, first they may have added to the swing against YES in France which stopped just short of a No vote – YES 51%. This near disaster, an unproven domino effect, was the genesis of the 1994 “nearly successful” strategy.

Conclusion

While it is hard to measure the effect, it would be a brave commentator who said there was none. The fact that democracies have come to rule out rolling elections suggests the effect cannot be disregarded. It would not be surprising that as Europe's constitution develops, the practice will be seen as similarly unfair at a European level. Until that day we should assume there is some effect but that it is likely to be small and that additionally the extra media coverage might increase turnout.

However, if the UK Government sought to overplay the link, it would risk a backlash as the No camp would claim the Brussels political elite was once again trying to tell the British people what to do.

As the Yes side are presumably looking for votes wherever they can find them, I would expect them to seek the aid of the other countries especially as it plays so well with the arguments of being *isolated and alone* as well as *inevitable*. They must first be certain the other countries can be counted upon to deliver a Yes vote, otherwise the strategy backfires. The timetable must also fit, something of a tall order considering the complications already in it.

There are only sketchy timetable details. A Swedish referendum has been suggested as early as Spring 2003 but more likely later in the year. Because Denmark takes over the European Presidency on the 1st July 2003 for six months, a referendum is unlikely there until 2004. Given the relative sizes of the countries, a UK referendum decision is more likely to affect Sweden than vice versa.

All in all, while domino theory should not be ignored, it need not give us too much concern. If these other countries were likely to produce a landslide in favour, I would have to revise my opinion. That seems an unlikely possibility.

Nigel Smith, July 2002