

HOW TO LOSE A REFERENDUM ON THE EURO

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The author was chair of the all party campaign for a 'Yes' vote in the 1997 Scottish devolution referendum and has advised other referendum campaigns including the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland 1998

The euro-lobby argue that once the Government leads a "great national debate" and the issues are "explained", undecided voters will settle for the Government's position. This defies the evidence presented by previous referendum campaigns.

During referendums the swing tends to be against change

Referendums offer the electorate a choice between 'change' and the 'status quo'. The study of previous referendum campaigns demonstrate a marked conservative trend in opinion during the two or three months usually devoted to a referendum. As voters learn more about the change option and the motives of those proposing it, they become more cautious. What might have initially seemed like a good idea is, during the closer scrutiny of a referendum campaign, seen to carry risks and so the electorate's natural preference for the status quo prevails.

Look at the table below. Only a quarter of these change campaigns managed to increase their support *during the official referendum campaign* and then only by an average of 10%. Three times as many change campaigns saw support swing away from them and by a much more powerful average of 20%.

Country	'Change' proposed	Swing
Russia	1993 Q2 support	+29%
New Zealand	1992 Change electoral system ¹	+16%
Norway	1994 European union	+7%
Austria	1994 European union	+6%
Finland	1994 European union	+5%
Quebec	1995 Sovereignty	+3%
Sweden	1994 European union	+1%
Sweden	1980 Nuclear power ²	-1%
Scotland	1997 Scottish Parliament	-4%
New Zealand	1993 Preferred PR system	-9%
Northern Ireland	1998 Good Friday agreement	-9%
Denmark	1993 Edinburgh agreement	-10%
Denmark	1992 Maastricht treaty	-11%
Uruguay	1996 Electoral system	-14%
Wales	1997 Devolution	-15%
Australia	1999 Republic	-18%
Ireland	1995 Divorce amendment	-19%
Quebec	1980 Sovereignty association	-22%
Ireland	1992 Maastricht treaty	-22%
Canada	1992 Charlottetown agreement	-22%
Ireland	1986 Divorce amendment	-24%
France	1992 Maastricht treaty	-27%
Ireland	1992 Abortion restriction	-32%
Australia	1988 Rights and freedoms	-40%
Uruguay	1994 Electoral system	-49%

These results, with the exception of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and Quebec, are taken from the Comparative Referendums Project led by Prof. Larry Leduc. The initial poll of public opinion is usually 2 or 3 months before referendum day but in a few cases is earlier or later.

¹ New Zealand multi-option.

² There were three options - in effect the choice was staying nuclear or going non-nuclear.

These swings need not be decisive if the change campaign is far enough ahead at the beginning of the official campaign (as many of these were), but they do need to be anticipated and allowed for. In other words, campaigns matter and the status quo is a powerful advantage. Small wonder US political consultants prefer to work for 'No' or status quo campaigns.

Changing opinion takes time - look at devolution

One lesson is clear: change ought to be in the lead before a referendum is called. Unless it is about liberty like the referendums in South Africa or East Timor, campaigns proposing less popular or more complicated change need to have conducted long "pre-campaigns" and won sufficient public support before the referendum is called to allow for the probable swing towards the status quo during the campaign.

In Northern Ireland support for change was won gradually in the two years it took to negotiate the Good Friday Agreement rather than the few weeks of the referendum. In Scotland, opinion moved in favour of the Scottish Parliament over the many years of the Convention.

Peter Hain was personally involved in the 1997 Welsh referendum and saw at first hand the swing back to the status quo during the campaign as people had second thoughts. It wasn't quite enough to prevent a 'Yes' vote. The result meant that the biggest change in opinion in the UK occurred in Wales not during the referendum campaign but during the 18 years since the previous referendum in 1979, when devolution was heavily defeated.

The experience of the 1975 referendum on British membership of the EEC bears this out: an initially anti-EEC electorate opted for the status quo (staying in the EEC) rather than risk the change option of leaving. The swing took place before the official campaign pointing yet again to the importance of the pre-campaign.

The Government doesn't have time to win a referendum this Parliament

Support for change is won over many months if not years, not in a few weeks. Electorates react particularly adversely when political elites spring change on them in referendums. Nonetheless, euro enthusiasts like Peter Mandelson have convinced themselves that a "snap campaign" can turn around public opinion on the euro, despite the evidence of past referendums. This optimism also ignores the existence of an effective, cross-party and well financed campaign which argues for a double status quo: *'Europe yes, euro no'*.

I believe the Government would need a very long "pre-campaign" to move public opinion before it could approach a referendum with any degree of confidence.

Postscript.

Danish euro referendum	Sept 00	Yes 46.8%	No 53%	Campaign Swing -10%
Irish Nice referendum	June 01	Yes 46%	No 54%	Campaign swing - 6%

Copies of this, or other briefings from Nigel Smith ('Don't gamble on 1975' and 'Labour voters don't want the euro') are available from the office of Jon Cruddas MP in the House of Commons.

