

Davide Morisi

## **The influence of information in political campaigns**

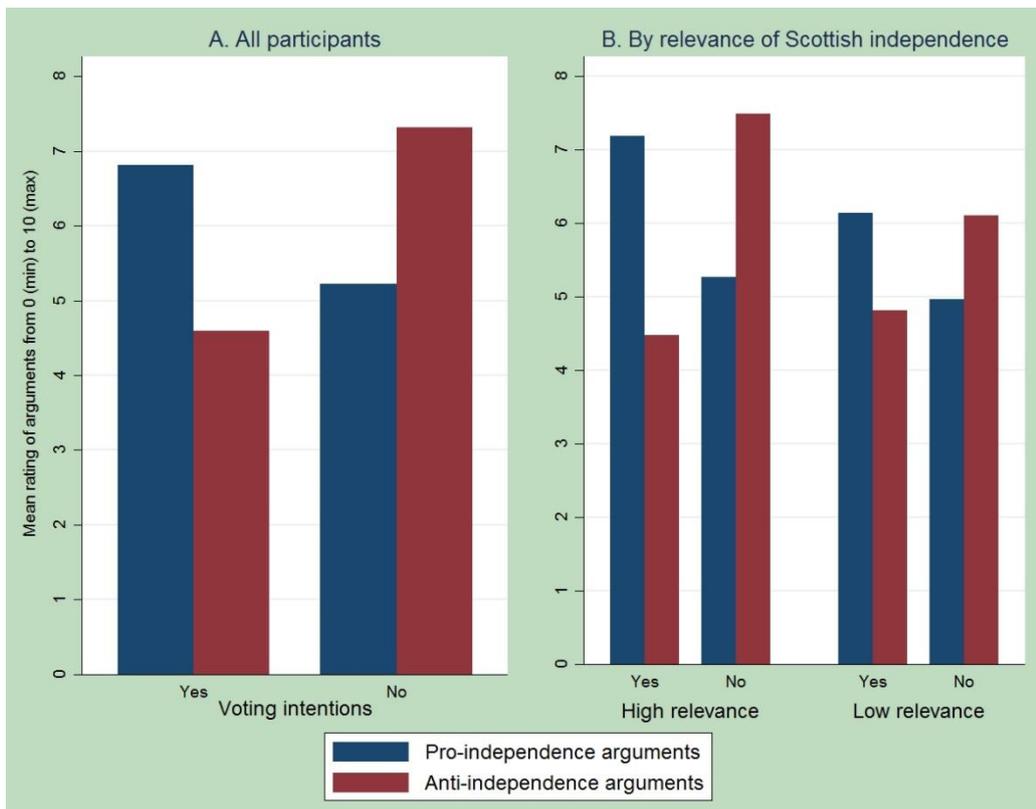
From Britain's decision to leave the EU to Donald Trump's victory in the U.S., recent political events in 2016 have shown how voters' decisions in election and referendum campaigns can lead to unpredictable and sometimes troubling outcomes. Among the many factors influencing these outcomes, information plays a crucial role. How do voters react to campaign arguments when they need to make political decisions, such as voting for a candidate, a political party, or a particular issue presented in a referendum? How does availability of information sources influence these decisions?

Davide Morisi's PhD thesis makes a unique contribution to understanding these fundamental questions. His investigation aims at identifying causal effects of information, which has been a persistent challenge for research on public opinion and political behaviour. This challenge has acquired increased relevance in the current information environment where the possibilities to access content have dramatically increased. In his PhD thesis, Morisi employs an original combination of quantitative methods, including experimental designs, survey research and regression discontinuity designs based on quasi-natural experiments. The combination of these methods provides us with novel empirical evidence on how information shapes voting behaviour in different political contexts.

The analysis focuses on three case studies. The first one concerns how campaign arguments influenced attitudes and voting behaviour in the campaign for the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. Drawing on data from a laboratory experiment, two follow-up surveys and additional survey data, Morisi's analysis reveals that information increased the support for Scottish independence mainly through reducing the uncertainties related to this referendum option. In addition, results show that also in a referendum campaign voters display a series of "biases" in information processing, since they interpret the same arguments in completely different directions, depending on their prior opinions on Scottish independence (a so-called "confirmation bias").

As Figure 1 illustrates, voters evaluated the same arguments in favour or against Scottish independence in opposite directions, depending on how they intended to vote in the referendum: while Yes voters found pro-independence arguments more convincing than anti-independence arguments, the opposite effect occurred among No voters. Among highly-engaged voters (i.e. those who considered Scottish independence a highly relevant issues), this gap is even larger (Graph B). These results tell us how difficult it is to persuade voters in a referendum campaign through the "forceless force" of the better argument, as Habermas famously put it, since voters filter new information through the lenses of their prior dispositions.

*Figure 1. Evaluation of pro- and anti-Scottish independence arguments by prior voting intentions*



Note: Data from control group only, N=59. Experiment conducted in May 2014.

The second case study focuses on how negative messages by party leaders affected support for parties in the 2015 British general election in Scotland. Findings based on an online experiment and a representative panel survey show that negative campaigning polarised the electorate along national identity lines, by driving British and Scottish voters more apart in their support for parties. Morisi’s third case concerns how the recent introduction of digital television in Italy affected turnout and voting behaviour in a series of referendums and elections. By exploiting a quasi-natural experimental setting, the analysis reveals that the increased availability of entertainment channels brought by digital television reduced turnout at the elections indirectly by dragging out some voters from the political arena.

The main message of Morisi’ PhD thesis is that information does influence political behaviour in election and referendum campaigns, although this influence is subtler than generally imagined by earlier research, since individuals’ reaction to political messages differs markedly. Nevertheless, in a complex political world, subtle effects can still contribute to winning elections. Identifying how citizens make political decisions in response to information matters not only from an academic perspective but also for improving the quality of the democratic process.