



The subtle influence of information on voting behaviour

Referendums and political elections in Italy and the UK

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the effects of information on voting behaviour and political attitudes in three case studies, with a combination of original empirical data and secondary survey data. In Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, I explored how issue-based arguments influenced attitudes and voting behaviour in the campaign for the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. Data from a laboratory experiment, two follow-up surveys and additional survey data reveal that information led to different patterns of attitude polarization and depolarization, depending on the moderating elements of attitude relevance and decision about how to vote. With regard to voting intentions, campaign arguments increased the support for Scottish independence mainly through reducing the uncertainties related to this referendum option.

In Chapter 4, the analysis of an online experiment, in combination with a representative panel survey, aims to identify how negative messages by party leaders affected support for parties in the 2015 British general election. Findings show that negative campaigning polarised the electorate along national identity lines: among British voters, negativity increased support for some of the parties sponsoring the attacks, while among Scottish voters it actually increased support for the target of the attacks.

Lastly, in Chapter 5, I examine how the recent introduction of digital television affected turnout and voting behaviour in a series of referendum and election consultations that took place between 2010 and 2013 in Italy. The method applied is a regression discontinuity design that exploits the heterogeneous diffusion of digital television in a quasi-experimental setting. The analysis of two extensive datasets with voting and socio-demographic data at the municipality level that I personally collected confirms that increasing the availability of entertainment channels reduced electoral participation in different referendum and electoral consultations.

The studies presented in this thesis indicate that the effects of information on political behaviour might be subtler than early research generally conceived, due to the crucial role of different moderating variables at the individual level. Nevertheless, in a complex political world, subtle effects can still contribute to winning elections. From a normative perspective, identifying how citizens make political decisions in response to information acquires substantial relevance not only for academic research, but also for improving democratic decisions. Without knowing the mechanisms of information processing

and the consequences of these mechanisms on opinion formation, the idea that an informed society is a better society remains a vague ideal.



Jury:

Rune Slothuus (Aarhus University), Diego Gambetta (EUI, Supervisor), Davide Morisi (Ph.D. Candidate), Alexander H. Trechsel (University of Lucerne, formerly EUI, Co-supervisor), John T. Jost (New York University) (via videolink)

Bio

Davide Morisi is a PhD researcher at the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the European University Institute. His research focuses on how information influences political attitudes and voting behaviour in referendums and election campaigns. He employs mostly survey and experimental methods, with a particular attention on the mechanisms of information processing at the individual level.