

PHD SUMMARY

What Ends Justify the Means? Explaining Party Campaign Spending in European Referendums

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Abstract

Over the past century, referendums have become a key feature of democratic practice in Europe, as they are being used more frequently and for an increasingly wide range of topics and issues (Silagadze & Gherghina, 2020; Qvortrup, 2021). Research has shown that this is driven primarily by instrumentalisation efforts by political elites (i.e., parties and their politicians), who often initiate referendums and do so mainly to achieve institutional, organisational, or electoral goals (Gherghina, 2019; Gherghina & Silagadze, 2021; Hollander, 2019). Yet, only limited scholarly work exists on how these elites engage with referendum *campaigns*, even though the literature has hinted at their strategic importance. These campaigns are considered more influential than electoral campaigns due to a more volatile information context, within which political parties play a key role as information providers that can shape referendum outcomes by providing strong and clear cues (de Vreese, 2006; de Vreese & Semetko, 2004; Hartliński, 2019; McAllister & Biddle, 2024). As such, a referendum's campaign can play a key role in achieving the goals that initially motivated its initiation (Gherghina et al., 2024).

Keywords: Referendums, Party campaign spending, Political finance regulation, European politics, Elite instrumentalisation

To address this research gap, a political finance lens was adopted using parties' spending as a proxy for their participation in referendum campaigns. The idea is straightforward: The more parties spend, the higher their desire to be present in

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the campaign. Three key research questions are pursued: (1) How do countries vary in regulating referendum campaign finance? (2) How much do political parties spend in European referendum campaigns? And (3) what factors explain variation in this spending? Answering the first question is essential for establishing the regulatory contexts within which political parties operate when it comes to referendum campaign finance, but also for identifying those countries where the necessary spending data was available. A descriptive panel dataset was formed indicating the presence/absence of 39 types of referendum campaign finance regulations across 143 countries, which was then reduced to a single continuous indicator using multiple correspondence analysis. This indicator essentially captured the level of regulation in each country in the sample and was termed the Referendum Campaign Finance Regulation Index (RefCFRI). The benefit of this indicator is that it is readily comparable and allows for the classification of countries into *unregulated*, *below-averagely regulated*, and *above-averagely regulated*.

Regarding questions (2) and (3), an analytical framework identifying potential explanatory strategic factors for party campaign spending in referendums was devised using a grounded theory approach. Concretely, this means that empirical insights from descriptive case studies (in this case, the United Kingdom and Ireland) were fused with theoretical considerations from the referendum instrumentalisation literature. Based on this, an analytical framework was developed with four potential factors: the public salience of a referendum, its proximity to future elections, the salience of the referendum issue for the party in question, and whether or not the party initiated the referendum. This framework was then applied to two broader contexts: Swiss referendums from 2020–2023, and a cross-national analysis covering 75 parties across 27 referendums in eight European countries (Denmark, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom).

The dissertation's findings show, firstly, that party spending in referendum campaigns is driven largely by the public salience of a referendum, as well as whether the party initiated the vote. This suggests that parties turn to referendums for their "free publicity and higher visibility" (Gherghina, 2019, p. 682), which is amplified in publicly salient votes. But, at the same time, parties also want a referendum they initiated to succeed, possibly to then attribute it to their merit and thus reap popularity benefits (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004). As such, party campaign spending in the European referendums under study in the dissertation is likely driven mainly by *image-building*, but that does not exclude other motivations that are linked to this key driver. For one, parties might want to win the referendums they initiate to create *policy change*, which they can then attribute to their own merit, thus furthering their image-building goals. In turn, image-building likely has the end goal of getting *more votes in future election cycles*. As such, the dissertation lifts the veil on the black box

that is party behaviour in referendum campaigns; it does so by collecting a wealth of data on party spending that can be built on by a variety of actors.

A final but nonetheless key finding is that party spending in referendum campaigns is shaped by structural shortcomings in national political finance regimes. Existing regulatory frameworks are ineffective, being either too lenient or too easily circumvented and thus failing to achieve 'regulated equality' between parties. The dissertation provides a set of practical recommendations to address these regulatory deficiencies, which include stricter spending limits, dedicated legislation on referendum campaign finance, and a registration obligation for all actors that want to participate in a referendum campaign. By implementing these recommendations, law- and policy-makers might be able to ensure the conditions for fair and democratic procedures that avoid biasing the result of the vote.

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