

PHD REVIEW

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

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Abstract

Referendums are unpredictable, and the preferences of voters can change sharply over the course of a campaign. The range of actors that participate in referendum campaigns is often much wider than in a typical election, and the intensity of that participation can also vary greatly. This is especially among political parties that occasionally have variable interest in the question being decided, may have to manage internal dissent, and need to navigate often complex campaign finance arrangements. In his PhD thesis, Toine Paulissen tackles these complexities using party spending in a referendum campaign as the starting point for understanding and unpacking the nuances of political parties' involvement in referendum decisions.

Keywords: Referendum(s), Political parties, Campaign spending, Referendum campaign regulation

Perhaps the single most important contribution of the thesis lies in the development of a campaign finance regulation model. The three-point schema proposed is a valuable tool that is used to structure some of the later analysis in the thesis, but it also provides a stand-alone contribution to research on referendum campaigns. The regulation data collected and analysed as part of this stage of the research is immensely impressive and there is very important potential for the financial regulation model and analysis to be used in policy research for the development of legislative frameworks within countries.

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The use of grounded theory to develop the theoretical core of the thesis is a novel departure and an especially welcome innovation in referendum research. Drawing on case studies of UK and Irish referendums, the model developed is nuanced and insightful, with important potential to be used and refined in future research.

It is clear from the empirical analysis that the salience of a referendum is a key driver of political party participation. This challenges some conventional wisdom on party participation in referendum campaigns, which suggested that parties occasionally sought to avoid becoming enmeshed in salient, but divisive, political questions and used referendums strategically to hand decision-making to voters directly and avoid responsibility for the final outcome. The finding that parties use referendum campaigns to enhance their public visibility is well substantiated and relevant not just to referendum research but also to the field of party politics.

Overall, this is an excellent thesis. It is persuasive in all of its arguments. The theoretical core is explicated thoroughly, and the grounded theory approach is innovative and interesting within the context of a quantitative study on political party campaign spending in referendums and referendum campaign regulations. The data collection is impressive in its scope and scale, and it is put to excellent use throughout the thesis. The methodological tools deployed are sophisticated and carefully documented. Each of the country case chapters on the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Switzerland, and the comparative chapter, which includes eight countries, build towards a robust testing of the theoretical model. The results from the comparative chapter proved somewhat challenging, but they are situated well within the context of multi-layered global regulatory frameworks for the conduct of referendums. In its totality, this is an excellent piece of work. It is clear that the researcher has huge enthusiasm for the topic and has developed an impressive subject matter expertise over the course of the degree programme. They are to be commended for this polished contribution to the field of referendum research.