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Editorial

Referendum Campaigns in the Digital Age: Towards (More) Comparative Analyses in Hybrid Media Systems

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Abstract

Referendum campaigns, which happen in many countries on the national or sub-national level, are highly important and special periods of political communication. Unlike elections, however, referendum campaigns are understudied phenomena. This thematic issue addresses patterns of referendum campaigns, which increasingly take place in digital and hybrid media environments, where political actors conduct campaigns through various channels, news media react to and shape debates on social media, and citizens receive a large share of political information from traditional and digital media. In this editorial, we provide a short overview of how research on referendum campaigns has evolved and how it has started to shift its attention away from news coverage and toward the role of campaign actors and the citizens who use (or engage with) search engines and social media platforms. The articles in this thematic issue reflect this shift but also show that news media remain important actors in referendum campaigns. Finally, we outline further research steps, which should include even more holistic analyses of the hybridity of referendum campaigns and hopefully more comparisons across cases.

Keywords

digitalization; direct democracy; hybrid media system; news media; referendum campaigns; social media; tech platforms

Issue

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1. Introduction

National referendum campaigns happen in many countries across the world. Referendum campaigns are both highly important and represent special periods in political communication. Many referendums, especially if they happen infrequently, involve large parts of the electorate and can represent “watershed moments” for societies. Referendum campaigns are special periods because political actors increase their activities, referendums attract a great deal of media attention, and journalists are aware that special guidelines exist precisely for these intense campaign periods. Compared to election campaigns, referendum campaigns lead to even more volatility and insecurity. They involve issues rather than a party or a candidate on the ballot, and thus political actors

are faced with the challenge of how to position themselves in relation to the issue and whether to ally themselves with other political actors (who might otherwise be competitors during elections). Additionally, referendum campaigns open the door for a broader set of actors, often from civil society, to engage in campaigning. Whereas in election reporting journalists can rely on the track records of political parties, in referendum coverage, neither journalists nor citizens know in advance which actors will campaign or who will take which positions. Because of these insecurities, campaigns are said to have particularly strong effects (de Vreese, 2015).

Against this background, it is surprising that referendum campaigns are not the focus of political communication scholars. Our thematic issue is one (modest) attempt to move the study of referendum campaigns more to

the forefront. The issue addresses patterns of referendum campaigns in public communication, which increasingly take place in digital and hybrid media environments, where political actors conduct campaigns through various media channels, journalists report on these activities on various channels, and citizens receive a large share of political information no longer only from traditional media but increasingly from digital media as well.

2. The Development of Research on Referendum Campaigns

Political communication scholars have traditionally studied referendum campaigns by focusing either on campaign actors, news media, or the audience. In the biggest research strand, scholars have focused on the patterns of news coverage, essentially evaluating the quality of media coverage across a broad set of indicators (Marcinkowski & Donk, 2012; Marquis et al., 2011) or focusing on one or few indicators, such as balance (e.g., Cushion & Lewis, 2017), the existence of issue frames instead of game frames (Dekavalla, 2018), dialogue (e.g., Hänggli, 2020), or topic diversity (e.g., Udris et al., 2016). While content analyses with core indicators of media quality have increasingly become complex and nuanced, they do not provide detailed insights on the quality of argumentation (one exception is Renwick & Lamb, 2013), a feature which is considered necessary for issue-focused referendum campaigns and threatened by politicians' "strategic lying" (Gaber & Fisher, 2021). For instance, Maia (2009) captured the number of arguments used in media texts but did not assess the validity or accuracy of arguments.

The "demand side" (i.e., decision-making processes and actual voting behavior of citizens) is frequently studied, but there are surprisingly few studies that have focused on news consumption (e.g., Bonfadelli & Friemel, 2012; Hopmann et al., 2016). The "supply side" of referendum campaigns (i.e., the role of political actors) has not featured prominently either. Among the few studies, Bernhard (2012) highlighted the strategic choices of political actors in forming coalitions for campaigns. Nai and Sciarini (2015) identified strategic and situational determinants of political actors' use of attacks in political advertising. Even fewer studies have combined data on campaign actors with content analyses and attitudes and behaviors of citizens. A few linkage studies set news coverage in relation to voting behavior (Schuck & de Vreese, 2011; Rinscheid & Udris, 2022). To the best of our knowledge, Kriesi's (2012) integrative approach is the only one that has systematically connected all three strands empirically.

3. Current Perspectives on Referendum Campaigns

In the digital age, the previous distinction between the production (or sending) of messages by campaign actors, the production of news by journalists, and

the consumption of messages has become increasingly doubtful. On digital platforms, campaign actors can bypass the media, and users can also act as communicators, leading to a new, hybrid role of "producers." Furthermore, on digital platforms, production and consumption become observable at the same time; each post comes with metrics that provide insights into user behavior and a possible link between content/message features and audience reactions. Overall, partly because of the increasing relevance of tech platforms and partly because of the better availability of metrics on user behavior, political communication scholars have shifted their attention away from news media content and toward the digital activities of campaign actors (e.g., Langer et al., 2019) and, above all, to media users who are active on platforms (Arlt et al., 2018; Balcells & Padró-Solanet, 2020; Del Vicario et al., 2017; van Klingeren et al., 2021).

This shift is reflected in the articles that were submitted to this thematic issue. Also considering the submissions that could not be included, it becomes clear that more articles are primarily addressing the role of tech platforms and the audience (the public) rather than referendum coverage of news media. This is a welcome shift, as it broadens our knowledge of increasingly digital referendum campaigns in innovative ways, such as tracking studies or data donations and large-scale datasets (e.g., a decade of Facebook posts). At the same time, most of the articles still address the importance of traditional news media during referendum campaigns in numerous ways. Thus, these articles underline the need to understand campaigns in hybrid media environments.

In a tracking study combined with a survey, Vogler et al. (2023) analyzed news consumption patterns of young adults in Switzerland in the run-up to a referendum, showing that the use of media content from traditional news media (on smartphones) and the use of social media have distinct effects on the duration and diversity of news consumption.

Based on user data from data donations and survey data, Blassnig et al. (2023) studied how Swiss citizens use Google to search for information before a referendum. They found that, despite the overall importance of search engines in people's everyday lives, Google is not frequently used for referendum-related information. Citizens still rely on information provided directly by news organizations instead.

Referendum coverage by news organizations has been shown to have an effect on how much voters use social media to form an opinion. Combining survey data from 13 referendum days with media content data, Bernhard and Kübler (2023) showed that men use social media for referendum-related information more often than women, but, as the intensity of news coverage increases, this "gender gap" on social media decreases.

Analyzing Facebook posts by campaign actors and user reactions to these posts before 91 votes in Switzerland from 2010 to 2020, Fischer and Gilardi (2023)

found that the amount of Facebook activities before referendum campaigns increases over time. Strikingly, users engage with campaigns of the challenger camp about as much as with those of pro-government campaigns. Further, while the government camp usually “outperforms” the challenger camp in terms of political ads in newspapers, the amount of campaign activity on Facebook does not differ as much on Facebook, which lends support to the “equalization hypothesis.”

In a hybrid media environment, campaign actors have to take into account the various logics of media channels and platforms. In their case study on a referendum on cannabis legislation in New Zealand, Rychert and Wilkins (2023) shed light on the strategies of these campaign actors, not only contrasting political advertising on traditional media with that on social media but also fleshing out the interplay between these arenas.

Most research on campaign strategies on traditional and digital channels has focused on visible campaign activities and thus the “front stage.” Rone (2023), however, scrutinized the “backstage,” analyzing which user data campaign organizations gather, process, and repurpose. Her case study of campaigns around Brexit revealed problematic data practices, not least because data collected in the run-up to the Brexit referendum were later re-used for other campaigns.

Finally, in a commentary piece, Reidy and Suiter (2023) reminded us that, amid public fears about the (negative) impact of social media on referendum campaigns, social media do not constitute the most important source of information for citizens. Moreover, social media users do not skew to the conservative side, which opposes social progress (e.g., abolishment of the ban on abortion). Their commentary also served as a plea to study a referendum campaign beyond the actual hot phase.

4. Studying Referendum Campaigns in Hybrid Media Systems

The studies collected in this thematic issue provide a good indication of the direction in which referendum campaign research has developed recently and should develop further. Complex analyses including the role of tech platforms while still considering the role of news media do justice to the current multi-channel environment. However, as Chadwick (2017) pointed out, studying the hybridity of media systems does not primarily mean contrasting “old” channels with “new” channels separately. Rather, it means studying the ongoing complex interplay between various channels, focusing on information flows, campaign dynamics, and concrete episodes. In Switzerland’s frequent referendum campaigns, for instance, one could observe the recent rise of what Chadwick (2017) called “hybrid mobilization movements.” One organization, consisting of young people from civil society with (semi-)professional communication and marketing skills, keeps exploiting the various log-

ics the hybrid media system affords. In an interview with one of the guest editors, an activist of this organization in charge of the communication strategy explained the need to create an “infinite loop” in the information flow across various channels through “stunts.” This starts, for instance, with a provocative campaign ad, both on social media and on physical billboards located near places where journalists commute to work. Once the ad has triggered media attention, it is then amplified by the organization on its social media channels. Additionally, social media is used for crowdfunding, which is then used to buy advertising space covering the whole front page of Switzerland’s largest (free-sheet) newspaper, with the newspaper ad and the debate about it being reused as material on digital channels. While this more qualitative, process-oriented case observation clearly illustrates a hybrid style of campaigning, the challenge for political communication researchers lies in determining whether these kinds of episodes can be generalized and combining qualitative approaches with big data analyses of social media communication.

The published articles in this thematic issue also show that comparisons and analyses across single votes are usually restricted to the case of Switzerland, a paradigmatic case with a longstanding tradition of direct democracy. Given the fact that comparative communication research has many merits and is increasingly applied to election campaigns, scholars should invest more in finding ways to study referendum campaigns across cases, possibly even across countries (e.g., Renwick & Vowles, 2022). Of course, some votes might be too idiosyncratic to allow comparison. However, several votes take place in similar time periods and share characteristics. The issue of abortion, for example, has been on the ballot in several countries and states recently. Further, many countries have regular referendum campaigns on a sub-national level, which allows for comparative analyses. For instance, in the United States, an average of 161 state-wide ballots take place every year, with substantial campaign activity and overall campaign expenditures of roughly one billion USD (Ballotpedia, 2022). We hope that this thematic issue serves as a springboard for more in-depth, systematic, and possibly even comparative research on referendum campaigns in our complex, hybrid media environment.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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