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'The long shadow of attitudes: differential campaign effects and issue voting in EU referendums.'

Abstract

Can voters be persuaded by referendum campaigns? This article develops a theoretical model that synthesizes the existing literature on campaign effects and issue-voting by arguing that the strength of pre-existing attitudes conditions voter receptivity to campaign arguments, thereby also determining their eventual vote choice. Using original panel data for the 2015 Danish opt-out referendum, there is evidence that attitude strength matters for whether voters are responsive to persuasion during campaigns. The article finds that voters with the most strongly-held attitudes felt well informed and certain about the consequences of the vote even before the start of the campaign, whereas voters with moderately-held attitudes are found to be more prone to believe those campaign arguments that are consistent with their EU attitudes, changing their vote intentions accordingly. Finally, voters with weakly-held attitudes were equally persuadable for the No and the Yes side of the campaign, but they are also the least pre-disposed to pay attention to campaign messages. The conclusions discuss the broader implications of the findings for our understanding of EU referendum campaigns.

1. Introduction

Can voters be persuaded by campaign arguments in EU referendums? On the one hand, given the novelty of propositions put to vote in many EU referendums, one would expect that this is an environment in which voters could be persuaded by arguments provided during the campaign (LeDuc, 2002; Hobolt, 2006; de Vreese 2007; Hobolt and Brouard 2011).¹ On the other hand, given the salience of the EU issue in many member states, we can expect that voters would hold relatively strong, pre-existing attitudes towards the EU, resulting in issue-voting behavior in which they make decisions based on their pre-existing attitudes (Svensson, 2002; Hobolt, 2006, 2009; Schuck and de Vreese, 2008; Garry, 2013). The existing literature presents these theories of campaign effects versus issue-voting as competing explanations whose effects might vary across different referendum campaign contexts.

In this article, we propose a theoretical resolution of this ongoing controversy by suggesting that *both theories can be correct within a given referendum campaign*, but that we can expect that they hold for *different groups of voters* according to the *strength of their pre-existing EU attitudes*.² We contend that *campaign arguments can persuade* voters with *weakly-held* EU attitudes, whereas voters with *more strongly-held attitudes* either are *irresponsive* to campaign arguments or engage in motivated reasoning by *responding selectively* and only accepting arguments that are in-line with their pre-existing attitudes. Voters with more strongly-held attitudes engage in issue-voting as a result.

We test this argument about persuasion and the strength of pre-existing EU attitudes in EU referendums using original panel data from the campaign during the Danish Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) referendum in 2015 in a real-world campaign that approximates a natural experiment. In the referendum, Danish voters were confronted with competing arguments for

¹ - We therefore do not necessarily expect the same learning dynamics to be at play in 'repeat' referendums held after a first no vote, as in Denmark in 1992/93, and Ireland in 02/03.

² - Attitudes towards the EU are not the only factor impacting voter choice, with other factors including risk propensity (Stenbergen and Siczik, 2017) and the role of emotions (Garry, 2014) also potentially shaping how voters process information and make choices.

choosing whether to keep the existing opt-out of all supranational JHA legal acts, or to adopt a new protocol that enabled parliament to opt-in to individual legal acts.³ In connection with the referendum, a majority of parties in parliament decided that if the new protocol was ratified in the referendum, Denmark would join over forty EU legal acts while staying outside of others in sensitive areas like the EU's common asylum and immigration policy.

We leverage a two-wave panel design to carefully analyze voters' evaluation of competing arguments before and after the campaign. The real-world setting means that there are some confounders that cannot be eliminated as in a laboratory experiment due to events during the campaign. Nevertheless, we believe that the setting approximates a natural experiment because there is no reason to expect that these potentially confounding events would produce different effects across different groups of voters.

First, the results show that voters held stable underlying attitudes towards the EU that did not change during the campaign. Second, our findings demonstrate that the strength of EU attitudes does impact whether and how voters were responsive to campaign arguments. We find that there are few campaign effects for voters with very strong EU attitudes, whereas campaign effects are very strong for voters with weakly-held attitudes. In contrast, voters with moderately strong EU attitudes are *selectively responsive* to campaign arguments, buying only those that are consistent with their underlying attitudes, as we would expect if they engage in motivated reasoning. Finally, across all voters we found that choices on whether to vote yes or no matched the arguments that voters agreed with.

In sum, our findings suggest that campaign information and the arguments made by parties can *persuade* voters to vote differently than their original intentions at the start of a campaign, but only for those with weakly-held attitudes. In contrast, campaign arguments merely increase the ability of voters with more strongly-held attitudes to reason and vote based on their underlying, pre-existing EU attitudes. Due to motivated reasoning process, these voters are able to engage in issue-voting, where pre-existing EU attitudes determine which campaign arguments they agree with and thereby also how they subsequently vote in an EU referendum.

³ - See appendix B for more information about the context and the campaign of the 2015 JHA referendum.

Motivated reasoning affects whether voters are responsive to campaign arguments, thereby influencing their subsequent vote choice. It is therefore one way - but not the only way - that voters are able to make choices in EU referendums that match their underlying attitudes towards the EU. In the conclusions, we discuss the implications of our findings, and whether they can shed light on EU referendum dynamics in other countries.

2. Theory - campaign effects and issue-voting

One of the central findings of the literature on voting behavior EU referendums is that when the proposition has relatively high salience, voters choose whether to vote yes or no based on their underlying pro/anti attitudes towards the EU. At the same time, parties and other elites expend considerable time and effort during referendum campaigns in crafting arguments and trying to sell them to voters. What can explain this paradox of extensive campaigning if campaigns do not really matter?

The literature on campaign effects suggests that EU referendums often deal with complex topics that do not necessarily map onto normal political cleavages, creating a novel choice situation for the voters (Hobolt, 2006; LeDuc, 2002). In this type of situation, voters lack signposts that guide the formation of their opinions and that create a context, in which how issues are framed by media and political elites can be very important for the ultimate vote choices (LeDuc 2002; de Vreese, 2007; Marsh, 2007; Schuck and de Vreese, 2008; Neijens and de Vreese, 2009). Irrespective of whether voters are actually 'persuaded' by arguments, or whether campaign effects work through either media effects and exposure to particular arguments (e.g. Schuck and de Vreese, 2008) or partisan endorsements and elite cues (e.g. Hobolt, 2006, 2009; Kriesi, 2005; Peterson, 2019), the logic remains the same: Campaign arguments are theorized to impact vote choices.

The literature on issue-voting contends in contrast that campaign messages do not really matter. Instead, at most they provide information that enables voters to make choices in EU

referendums that map onto their underlying EU attitudes, enabling them to engage in issue-voting (e.g. Svensson, 2002; Hobolt, 2006, 2009; Schuck and de Vreese, 2008; Garry, 2013). How voters actually engage in issue-voting are typically less well-defined in the literature. The most advanced model is developed by Hobolt (2009), where she argues for a rational choice model in which voters decide based on their evaluation of the proximity of the proposition under consideration with their ideal point of EU integration (Hobolt, 2009). However, while this model might hold for voters who hold very strong EU attitudes and have a high level of information prior to a referendum campaign, we suggest based on the considerable body of evidence from political psychology that issue-voting can also work through motivated reasoning.

Based on the theory of motivated reasoning, we can expect that voter with strongly-held attitudes will respond to arguments *selectively* based on their compatibility with voters' underlying EU attitudes. While motivated reasoning cannot lead voters to conclude whatever they want, irrespective of 'the facts' (Kunda, 1990; Arceneaux and Vander Wielen, 2017), it can lead voters to latch onto arguments that confirm their preferred worldview (e.g. Leeper and Slothuus, 2014). When voters have strongly-held and stable pre-existing attitudes, there is a large body of evidence that suggests that *citizens with stronger-held attitudes are more prone to engage in motivated reasoning, other things equal* (Holbrook et al, 2005; Taber et al., 2009; Druckman, 2012; Redlawsk, 2002; Houston and Fazio, 1989). Strong attitudes are views towards an issue that are 1) resistant to change; 2) persist over time, 3) guide information processing, and 4) direct behavior (Krosnick and Petty, 1995).

Critical to motivated reasoning is the degree to which voters have pre-existing attitudes towards an issue. Without underlying attitudes towards an issue, motivated reasoning cannot take place. This is a realistic assumption in EU referendums in many member states, where voters in places like Denmark are very familiar with the EU issue and therefore can be expected to have relatively well-defined and stable underlying attitudes about the EU and European integration in general.⁴

⁴ - This can be due to news coverage of EU affairs, but also because of past EU referendums and EP elections. There is evidence that most voters in the Danish context hold stable and consistent attitudes towards the EU (see Hobolt,

Theories of motivated reasoning from political psychology suggest that voters with strong issue attitudes will feel better informed even before a campaign starts, and once it starts, they will engage in more biased processing of campaign arguments and make choices more in accordance with underlying attitudes than we would otherwise expect (aka issue-voting) (Druckman, 2012; Redlawsk, 2002; Houston and Fazio, 1989). In contrast, unbiased processing of arguments about the merits of a proposal is essentially a simple objective Bayesian model of updating where *priors are flat*, meaning that new information is used to update in a neutral fashion which position one should take on a given proposition based on the strength of the campaign arguments.

Motivated reasoning describes a model of updating where issue attitudes act as strong priors, determining how arguments are processed. In this understanding, voters selectively recruit and evaluate campaign arguments to correspond with underlying attitudes, leading to voting behavior more in line with prior attitudes than we otherwise would expect (Fischbach and Ferguson, 2007; Gaines et al, 2007; Taber and Lodge, 2006). Motivated reasoning even leads voters to engage in the selective recruitment of new information, often only admitting information that is consistent with one's priors and/or ignoring disconfirming information (Druckman et al, 2012; Epley and Gilovich, 2016; Visser et al, 2006; Taber et al, 2009). In addition, voters with strongly held attitudes have greater confidence in the epistemic authority of sources of attitude-consistent arguments, whereas they discredit sources that provide arguments that do not correspond to their attitudes (Kruglanski et al, 2005; Visser et al, 2017). Therefore, even when a voter actually hears an argument that does not match their priors, they can maintain 'cognitive closure' by discrediting the source as untrustworthy *irrespective* of whether the argument has substantive merits (Kruglanski et al, 2005). The result is that voters with strongly-held attitudes are more receptive to attitude-consistent arguments and make choices that are more consistent with their attitudes than voters with less strongly held attitudes (Druckman, 2012; Redlawsk, 2002; Houston and Fazio, 1989).

2009). Theoretically, there is the potential that voter attitudes towards the EU could be affected by information in a referendum campaign, raising the risk of endogeneity. However, in our panel analysis we found stability in the underlying EU attitudes of voters (see Appendix A1).

Overall, the causal relevance of motivated reasoning increases linearly in attitude strength. However, there is evidence that voters with *very strong attitudes* require precious little new information in order to be convinced by attitude-consistent arguments and behave in accordance with their attitudes (Holbrook et al, 2005; Visser et al, 2017). Therefore, we can expect that voters with extreme attitudes will *not* be significantly impacted by campaign effects at all because they are convinced about arguments and know how they will vote even *before* the campaign really starts.

Taken together, our theoretical synthesis suggests that the impact of campaign arguments will vary depending on the strength of pre-existing EU attitudes. This leads to three sets of hypotheses, depending on the level of attitude strength.

The first set of hypotheses deals with voters with very strong pre-existing attitudes towards the EU. We expect that these voters will feel more informed even *before* a campaign starts than other voters. Additionally, we expect that they take more attitude-consistent positions on key arguments even before they receive information from the campaign than other voters. Moreover, we expect that their voting intentions before the campaign will be more attitude-consistent than other voters. Taken as a whole, this means that we expect these voters to have already made up their minds before the campaign really starts.

H1a - Voters with the most strongly-held attitudes will feel more informed about a proposition even *before* they receive campaign information.

H1b - Voters with the most strongly-held attitudes are more likely to take attitude-consistent positions related to key arguments *before* they receive campaign information.

H1c - Voters with the most strongly-held attitudes are more likely to have attitude-consistent voting intentions *before* they receive campaign information.

The next two hypotheses investigate whether there are systematic differences in how groups with moderately-strong and weakly-held attitudes respond differently to campaign arguments and how this responsiveness impacts changes in voting intentions.

Receptivity towards campaign arguments should in theory vary depending on the strength of voter attitudes. In order to assess receptivity, we analyze panel data to explore stability and changes in how voters evaluate key campaign arguments before and after the campaign. Theoretically, we should expect a U-shaped relationship between attitude strength and receptivity to attitude-consistent arguments. Voters with the most strongly-held attitudes, because they already are convinced before the campaign starts, can be expected to *not change* their assessments of campaign arguments during the campaign. In contrast, we should expect motivated reasoning to be most evident for voters with moderately-strong attitudes, who can be expected to be very responsive to attitude-consistent arguments and irresponsive to attitude-inconsistent arguments. Finally, we should expect to find little effect of attitude-consistency amongst voters with weakly-held attitudes, meaning that campaign effects can matter for this group of voters. These expectations lead to three testable sub-hypotheses.

H2a – Voters with strongly-held attitudes will not change their assessment of arguments during the campaign.

H2b – Voters with moderately-strong attitudes will be more likely to change their beliefs about campaign arguments in an attitude-consistent direction than other voters.

H2c – Voters with weak attitudes will be equally responsive to attitude-consistent and inconsistent arguments provided during a campaign.

The third hypothesis deals with the behavioral consequences of changes in beliefs about campaign arguments. If motivated reasoning produces issue-voting, we should expect that changes in the position towards an argument will lead to a corresponding shift from voting intention at the start of the campaign to voting behavior on election day.

H3 – Changes in beliefs about an argument produce a change in voting intention in the same direction.

3. Research design and data

Testing these hypotheses about attitude strength and campaign effects outside of the laboratory requires deployment of a panel study design to observe how campaign information impacts receptivity to arguments and voting behavior. While the laboratory setting enables strong internal validity because of the ability to control potential confounders, the effects found in the lab do not necessarily map onto what occurs in noisy real-world campaign settings.

We deploy a two-wave panel design, in which arguments provided during the referendum campaign act as the treatment. We engage in pre- and post-treatment measures of receptivity to arguments and voting intention/behavior before the campaign really started and then again after the vote occurred. Although the pre/post-treatment panel design is optimal for ascertaining the effect of a treatment on individual-level variables in real-world conditions, there are (at least) two potential confounders in our design. The first is that there might be a bias in accepting the invitation to participate in the second part of the panel study (panel mortality, see below). We try to deal with panel mortality by controlling for some predetermined socio-demographic factors when estimating effects in our analysis that might bias our results. The second potential confounder is that we are not able to control for other temporally-correlated contextual factors that might influence voters, such as major events that coincide with the campaign. The most important of these historic developments was the migration crisis, in which there was a large stream of refugees to and through Denmark, leading Sweden for instance to close its borders on November 12. These events were front page news in Denmark and could have increased concerns about common immigration policies, especially amongst some of the voters with negative attitudes towards the EU. Additionally, there was a horrific terrorist attack in Paris on November 13 - an event that could have made concerns about the EU and the fight against terror more salient for voters with both positive and negative attitudes towards the EU. However, there is no reason to expect that these events had significantly *different* impacts on voters with *different* strengths of attitudes towards the EU, which is what we are trying to assess in this article.

We now turn to the details of the survey. The survey was implemented as a web survey (CAWI) by the polling company Epinion, using an internet panel to recruit respondents. The first wave of the panel survey was carried out approximately seven weeks before the Election Day, resulting in almost 1000 responses. This was before the campaign really started to provide information to voters on the proposition, as measured both through newspapers and TV, and in social media.⁵ After the final vote they were re-invited to answer an almost identical set of questions (589 voters in the pre/post-treatment panels, with a response rate for those who completed both waves = 61.9%). The post-election survey was undertaken using a combination of web surveys and telephone interviews in the weeks after the vote (combined response rate = 35%). We find that the sample is more highly educated and includes significantly more voters from the middle age group (40-59) than the population as a whole. Moreover, the panel suffers from a disproportionate drop out of non-voters: Our data registers the turnout at around 90 percent, while the real turnout was only 72 percent. Overall, we have no reason to suspect that that our sampling leads to biased result, yet we nevertheless suggest some caution with generalizing our findings to the full population of Danish voters.

Next, we turn to the operationalization of key variables, including (i) underlying EU attitudes, (ii) attitude strength, (iii) feeling informed about the proposition (iv) beliefs about core campaign arguments, and (v) vote intention/ voting behavior. Voters' EU attitudes are crucial for operationalizing the strength and direction of their underlying attitudes. Traditionally, EU support has been measured along a single latent dimension (e.g. Hooghe and Marks, 2005; Hobolt and de Vries, 2016). Literature that is more recent sometimes conceptualizes EU support along a multiple dimensions such as utilitarian, identity, performance and diffuse affection (Boomgarden et al. 2011). In the present article, we measure the *EU attitudes of voters* by extracting the first component of answers to the following three question: Does Denmark have more advantages or disadvantages from being a member in the EU? How should Denmark's future cooperation with the EU look like? (exit the EU, less EU, Status quo, more EU,

⁵ - In the period covered by the first panel sample, only 10% of front-page stories dealt with EU-related issues, whereas the figure increased to 12.5% from four weeks to two weeks out, and 16% in the final two weeks. The newspapers where a media content analysis was done were the two main Danish dailies (Politiken and Jyllands-Posten), and the most circulated tabloid daily (BT).

united states of Europe). Do you feel like an EU citizen? (totally agree, agree, neither nor, not agree, totally disagree). When we analyzed the responses to all three questions, we found that they were highly correlated ($r > 0.65$), and explorative factor analysis returned a single latent dimension that explains 75% of the observed variation, suggesting that it is appropriate to work with a single dimension in our study.

Attitude strength is a complex, multi-dimensional concept that has been defined and measured in a variety of ways (Visser et al. 2017: 210). Bassili (1996) differentiates attitude strength into two distinct conceptual dimensions, where meta-attitudinal definitions are based on personal assessments, whereas operative measures are related to how a voter uses the attitude (Bassili, 1996; Miller and Peterson, 2004). Meta-attitudinal definitions of attitude strength relate to whether voters perceive the issue to be important to them (Gopinath and Nyer 2009; Miller and Peterson, 2004: 852), or the degree to which people feel confident about their attitudes⁶ (Alvarez and Franklin, 1994; Bassili, 1996). Operative definitions relate to features such as extremity of beliefs (Krosnick and Petty 1995; Miller and Peterson, 2004: 848-9; Visser et al, 2017; Howe and Krosnick, 2017), or ease of accessibility of the underlying attitude (Roese and Olson, 1994).

In our study, we utilize an operative definition - extremity of EU attitudes - because we are interested in the behavioral consequences of motivated reasoning,⁷ which is theorized to be a function of attitude strength. However, we assessed the robustness of our findings across meta-attitudinal measures of attitude strength (confidence, importance), finding little difference.

To assess whether voters *feel informed about the proposition*, we asked respondents “In how far do you agree to the statement ‘I have sufficient information to vote?’”. We used five answer

⁶ - Note that confidence about how one will vote is not the same as certainty about underlying attitudes.

⁷ - In this type of attitudinal question, there is some ambiguity about whether respondents chose more extreme answers in relation to questions such as ‘is the EU a good thing’ because they believe that the EU is really a very good thing, or because they are expressing the strength of their attitude. The implication of this is that for voters expressing sincere preferences based on positionality, extremity is only an indirect proxy for attitude strength, whereas for other voters, extremity is a direct measure of attitude strength because this is the question that they were actually answering.

categories, ranging from ‘completely agree’ to ‘completely disagree’. The survey also includes a battery of four questions, which test voters’ objective knowledge about the proposal put to vote. Using this as a proxy, we find that *feeling informed* is only partly a consequence of *being informed*, with roughly 75% of the variation remaining unexplained (see Appendix 2).

Beliefs about core campaign arguments are measured in the survey by investigating how respondents evaluate the consequences of the vote on four questions that we identified as likely arguments for/against prior to the campaign starting. Specifically, the survey asked whether respondents believed that replacing the opt-out with an opt-in would influence:

1. the effectiveness of fighting cross border crime.
2. Denmark’s ability to participate in the Europol cooperation.
3. Denmark’s influence in the EU.
4. the likelihood that Denmark opts in to the common migration and asylum policy.

The survey measured respondents’ answers on each of these campaign arguments (five answer categories). The consistency of the evaluation of the arguments with pre-existing EU attitudes is self-explanatory: for voters with underlying pro-EU attitudes, keeping the opt-out would make fighting cross border crime more difficult, it would impair cooperation with Europol, and lower Denmark’s influence in the EU and overall economic development. At the same time, we should expect that they would see no risk in the Danish parliament joining the common asylum and immigration policy later⁸ - and vice versa for EU skeptic voters. These four questions capture the key arguments used during the campaign based on a qualitative assessment of the campaign undertaken by the authors, using both newspaper and TV sources.

⁸ - With the existing opt-out, joining the supranational legal acts related to the common asylum and immigration policy was impossible. In contrast, with the proposed opt-in, a majority in parliament could at a later date decide to opt-in to any of these supranational acts. Many Danish voters (especially on the right) strongly opposed joining the common asylum and immigration policy.

4. Results

We present the results of our empirical analysis in three parts that correspond to our three hypotheses. First, we focus on the voters with very strong attitudes and their level of information, their beliefs on main campaign issues and their vote intention *before the campaign*. Second, we analyze voters' *changing beliefs* in core arguments over the course of the campaign. Third, we test whether the observed changes in beliefs had an effect on *voting behavior*.

Hypothesis 1 - Reasoning and behavior of the voters with very strongly-held attitudes before the campaign starts

In this section, we test H1, which focuses on voters with very strongly-held attitudes before the campaign. Specifically, H1a suggests that for voters with very strongly-held attitudes, we should expect that even before the campaign starts they will feel sufficiently informed about the proposition. This makes these voters more likely to be unresponsive to campaign arguments (H1b), and as a result, they are more likely to have already made up their mind about the coming vote, i.e. they have clear attitude-consistent vote intentions before the campaign (H1c).

To test these arguments we regress our measure for EU attitude (squared) on a set of variables operationalizing the certainty and the direction of beliefs. Doing so, we control for age, gender, education and left-right self-placement. The results are displayed in table 1. First, we find that voters with very strong EU attitudes feel more informed than those with weaker held EU attitudes. The predicted probabilities are displayed in Figure 1. Extremely EU skeptic as well as extremely EU friendly voters agree with a probability of 0.8 that they are sufficiently informed to vote in the upcoming referendum. This probability drops to 0.3 for moderate voters. Overall, these results confirm H1a.

Second, we use a dichotomous dependent variable indicating whether voters are still undecided on what to vote. Here the predicted gap in probabilities is even larger: voters without strongly-held EU attitudes have a probability of 0.7 for being undecided, whereas for voters with very strongly-held attitudes this probability drops below 0.2. Third, we test whether the direction of vote intention is attitude consistent by using an ordinal variable that distinguishes between voting yes ($y=1$), undecided ($y=2$) and voting no ($y=3$). The results provide evidence that

extremely EU skeptic voters are most likely to vote No and vice versa. Hence, the results support H1c.

Fourth, we test whether beliefs on the most important campaign issues are attitude consistent. Column 5 in table 1 regresses EU attitudes on voters' belief on whether or not a No-vote would have negative consequences for fighting cross border crime (1= completely agree, 5= completely disagree). The results show that extremely EU friendly voters are most concerned about more cross-border crime in case of a No-vote. Column 6 in table 1 evaluates whether EU attitudes have an impact on voters' belief that a No-vote would weaken Denmark's influence in the EU. The results show that extremely EU friendly voters are most concerned about weaker Danish influence in the EU in case of a No-vote. The results for the remaining two, related issues (Europol cooperation, Asylum and Migration policy) are similar in effect size (see Appendix A2.1). Overall, we find strong support for H1b, i.e. voters with very strongly-held attitudes had attitude consistent beliefs about the merits of the arguments *before* the start of the campaign.

>> INSERT TABLE 1 HERE <<

>> INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE <<

In this section, we have shown that voters with very strongly-held attitudes feel sufficiently informed, have firm, attitude-consistent beliefs about the merits of arguments, and have made up their minds even *before* the campaign really started. In the next two sections, we first focus on the nexus between attitude strength and change in beliefs about campaign arguments. Subsequently, we study how changes in beliefs affect changes in vote intention. Overall, based on the first set of hypotheses, we expect to detect little change for voters with very strongly-held attitudes.

H2 - motivated reasoning and directional changes in beliefs about campaign arguments

Here, we explore whether the selective receptivity to arguments due to motivated reasoning strengthens the link between EU attitudes and issues voting over the course of an electoral campaign. Our overall hypothesis H2 suggests that the relevance of this mechanism depends on the strength of issue attitudes. In the previous section, we have shown that voters with very

strongly-held attitudes hold firm, attitude-consistent beliefs about arguments even at the start of the campaign. These voters will not change their assessments during the campaign (H2a). Voters with weakly-held attitudes towards the EU are equally responsive to both sides of a campaign (H2c). The most interesting group are voters with moderately-strong attitudes, i.e. voters who have a firm but not extreme attitudes toward the EU. They do not hold firm beliefs on the most important arguments at the start of the campaign, but we expected that they will be more responsive to attitude-consistent arguments during the campaign due to motivated reasoning (H2b). Moderately EU friendly voters are more likely to believe arguments from the Yes-campaign, whereas moderately EU-skeptic voters are more likely to believe the No-campaign.

To test these expectations, we study voters' assessment of the consequences of the voting outcome for the most debated issues listed above: effective fight against cross border crime (incl. Europol cooperation), Denmark's influence in the EU and Denmark's future participation in a common migration and asylum policy. Specifically, we compare voters' responses before the campaign (t-1) to their responses immediately after the vote (t). We observe significant changes. For example, only 44% of the respondents held stable beliefs about the relevance of the opt-in for effectively fighting cross border crime. By contrast, we observe roughly 25% of the voters shifting one category with regard to the relevance for cross border crime and 30% shifting two or more categories. The changes in beliefs on the other issues is of similar size.

As explained above, our belief questions had five answer categories. Consequently, our measure for change in belief could have nine categories ranging from $1-5=-4$ to $5-4=4$. However, empirically a change of four categories in either direction is very rare and we therefore recoded the few "-4" and "+4" to "-3" and "+3" to facilitate the interpretation of the results. Please note that this does not change the substantive findings.

Consequently, change in belief is treated as an ordered variable with seven categories, which lends itself to ordered logistic regression. The key explanatory variable for H2 is the "*EU attitude*³", which allows for testing the non-monotone relationship between attitudes strength and change in beliefs postulated in H2. We include the same set of control variables, i.e. age, education, left-right placement and gender. In addition, we control for respondents'

beliefs on all four major issue at t-1, i.e. at the start of the campaign. In doing so, we control for ceiling effects, i.e. extremely positive (negative) beliefs cannot get any more positive (negative).

The results are displayed in table 2, which is organized in three sections. The first bloc shows the non-monotonic effect of EU attitude strength, i.e. our key independent variable. The second bloc includes the estimates for our lagged dependent variable as well as the respondents' attitudes on other issues at the start of the campaign. The third bloc shows the control variables. However, the results are best interpreted by plotting the predicted marginal probabilities. For lack of space, we focus on the most important argument during the campaign in figure 2, namely the expected effect of the voting outcome on the ability of Denmark to fight cross border crime (which is highly correlated to the arguments about Denmark's Europol membership). The predicted probability plots for the other three arguments can be found in the appendix (see A3.2).

>> INSERT TABLE 2 HERE <<

>> INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE <<

Figure 2 plots the predicted probability for a change in belief of two categories. The findings strongly confirm our second overall hypothesis. First, voters without a firm attitude on the EU have the same probability ($p=0.11$) to be convinced by either the No- or the Yes-campaign (H2b). Second, voters with extreme EU attitudes rarely change their beliefs about the merits of the arguments, consequently the probability for change decreases towards both ends of the ideological dimension (H2a). Finally, our focus is on voters with moderate EU attitudes, highlighted in Figure 2 with black marking. Our results confirm H2c in predicting that voters with moderate EU attitudes have a probability of approx. 0.25 of changing their beliefs two categories. Importantly, the direction of change is attitude consistent. Moderately Euro-skeptic voters have changed their beliefs towards the argument that a No-vote would *not* impede the effectiveness of fighting cross-border crime. By contrast, Euro-friendly voters have changed their beliefs in the other direction. The estimated effects for the changing beliefs with regard to

Denmark's influence in the EU and joining the Common Asylum and Migration are of similar magnitude (see Appendix A3.2).

Overall, we find attitude consistent changes of voters' beliefs in the merits of key campaign arguments. As expected, the consistency in receptiveness increases with attitude strength, reaching a peak for moderately strong EU attitudes. In the next section, we analyze in how far the changing beliefs in core campaign arguments actually impacted voting behavior.

H3 - change in voting behavior

Finally, we turn to investigate whether motivated reasoning has behavioral implications for vote choice. Specifically, we are interested in explaining the recalled vote (t) by using the stated vote intention and the beliefs over core arguments at the start of the campaign (t-1) as well as the change in beliefs over the set of most relevant issues. We control for the usual set of socio-demographic variables. In addition, we control for whether respondents voted for one of the yes parties in the last national election ("party endorsement"). The results are displayed in table 3.

>> INSERT TABLE 3 HERE <<

Our analysis reveals that a change in belief of two categories has a strong effect on vote intention. In fact, such a change in belief is not only sufficient to turn a previously uncertain voter into a fairly certain Yes or No voter, but could even turn previous No and Yes voters the other way. However, voters with strongly-held attitudes who have been confident about how they will vote at the start of the campaign were very unlikely to experience a fundamental change in beliefs in the first place. In contrast, voters with firm but moderate EU attitudes exhibit the largest changes in beliefs about campaign arguments, and therefore exhibit the strongest effects on the overall voting result.

In order to gauge the size of these effects, Table 4 shows the predicted probabilities to vote No based on (i) the original vote intention and (ii) a change in belief on the two security-related dimension, i.e. "Europol" and "Fight Cross border Crime". Specifically, we calculated the

probabilities for respondents who change only one category on either of the two questions (0,1; 1,0), one category on both questions (1,1) and two categories on both questions (2,2). All other variables are at their mean. First, our prediction for the average voter reveals significant difference based on their vote intention at t-1. Voters who intended to vote No are more than twice as likely to have voted No than those who intended to vote Yes (0.60 as compared to 0.26). Moreover, we predict significantly different probabilities for all three possible vote intention, i.e. “Yes”, “don’t know/abstain”, “No”. However, we also predict that minor changes in the security related beliefs led to major changes in voting. For example, a single category change on one of the two security questions changes the predicted probability to vote No from 0.41 to 0.54 for Abstainers and from 0.26 to 0.37 for those who intended to vote Yes. A fundamental change in beliefs by two categories makes a Yes voter an almost certain No voter ($p=0.68$). For those who planned to abstain a minor change in belief by one category on each variable suffices to turn them into almost certain No voter ($p=0.65$).

>> INSERT TABLE 4 HERE <<

Importantly, these effects work in both directions. Consequently, and given the closeness of the race, a minor asymmetry in campaign success could have been sufficient to win the race. Unfortunately, our sample is neither large enough nor representative enough to identify such differences reliably, not least because it over represents highly educated and younger voters.

Overall, we find support for hypothesis 3. Selective responsiveness to arguments and the corresponding change in beliefs cannot only turn a previously uncertain voter into an almost certain Yes or No voter, but can even turn previous No and Yes voters the other way. However, keep in mind that voters who have been confident about how they will vote at the *start* of the campaign are very unlikely to experience such a fundamental change of assessments in the first place. Hence, the observed change in beliefs and the corresponding change in voting behavior are most relevant for voters with moderate EU attitudes.

5. Conclusion

Existing literature on campaigns and voting behavior in EU referendums present what is theorized to be two *competing* models: either campaigns matter, or voters act based on their underlying attitudes towards the EU (issue-voting). In this article, we propose a theoretical *synthesis* that suggests that whether campaign effects matter depends on the strength of voters' attitudes towards the EU. Voters with strongly-held attitudes are theorized to engage in issue-voting because their beliefs and vote intentions are completely unaffected by the campaign. Instead, their vote is best explained by their EU attitude. By contrast, voters with weakly-held attitudes are theorized to be equally responsive to both sides of the campaign. Most interestingly, campaign information changes the beliefs and vote intentions of voters with moderately-held attitudes in an attitude-consistent direction.

Our empirical analysis found confirming evidence for all three sets of hypotheses that we developed. First, there were groups of voters who had made up their mind before the campaign started. Voters with very strongly-held attitudes had *little doubt about their vote intentions* and, consequently, vote intentions (t-1) strongly predicted voting behavior (t). Second, over the course of the campaign, voters changed their beliefs about the consequences of the vote for Europol cooperation, and the effective fight against crime and Denmark's influence in the EU. These *changes in beliefs* about the merits of competing arguments are powerful predictors of the observed change in vote intention. However, we found that for voters with moderately strongly-held attitudes, the direction of observed changes in beliefs has been pre-determined by voters' underlying EU attitudes. Consequently, referendum campaigns are not so much about convincing these voters about the merits of the proposition but instead are about providing information that enables these voters to make a choice that matches their underlying attitudes, thereby enabling issue-voting. Given what we know more broadly about persuasion and motivated reasoning, the actual content of arguments matters probably less than the direction of the argument. The only voters who were really up for grabs were voters with weakly-held attitudes; voters who are also pre-disposed to either tune out or stay home.

What light do our findings shed on other EU referendums? Based on our theory and the results, we should expect to find similar effects present in other referendums when (i) voters have relatively stable underlying attitudes towards the EU because the issue is salient in their polity and (ii) the proposition sent to a vote is important enough for voters to pay attention to the campaign itself. If we look at the 2016 British referendum on EU membership, both conditions held, meaning that we should expect differential effects of the campaign across different voters.⁹ We should therefore expect that many voters with strongly-held attitudes had already made up their minds before the campaign started. Second, we should expect that the campaign for many other voters was not about convincing them of the merits, but instead providing them with the necessary information to make an attitude-consistent choice. In a more positive light, this implies that even misleading claims will not convince these voters if it goes in the opposite direction of their pre-existing attitudes. In the British 2016 referendum, much blame for the surprising leave-vote was attributed to misleading claims about the costs of membership (e.g. the infamous 'red bus' claim about getting 350 million pounds back from the EU that could be used for the NHS). Our results suggest that such a misleading claim would do little to convince moderately EU-friendly voters, whereas it would only reinforce the intention of moderately EU-skeptic voters to vote for Brexit.

One of the questions that remains unexplored in our model is the extent to which campaign arguments – beyond providing information that enables attitude-consistent choices – also play a role in mobilizing turnout. Even though the type of high salience EU referendums discussed in this article typically have relatively high turnout (72% in both the 2015 Danish JHA vote and the 2016 UK referendum), differences in voters' turnout can still play a determining role in close votes. One interesting avenue for further research would therefore be to extend our argument by exploring the role of attitude-consistent campaign arguments in also mobilizing voters, especially through the use of emotive appeals such as arguments about protecting national sovereignty and taking back control that fall more naturally to the no-side.

⁹ - First, while British voters had not been asked to vote in an EU referendum since 1975, EU issues were discussed frequently in the media - especially in the years prior to the referendum due to the eurocrisis and 2015 refugee crisis. Additionally, Eurobarometer responses to questions on the merits of the EU suggest that UK voters do have relatively stable (and strong) underlying attitudes towards the EU.

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