

Introduction

Referendums are an increasingly used form of direct democracy internationally, even though within individual states they tend to be rare, one-off occasions. In just the last two years prior to the time of writing, referendums were organised to decide whether the UK would remain or leave the European Union (2016), the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Ireland (2015), the financing of political parties, the interpretation of taxation law and the structure of election constituencies in Poland (2015), lowering the age of voting and allowing foreign nationals to vote in Luxemburg (2015), accepting EU austerity proposals in Greece (2015), oil and natural gas drilling in Italy (2016), ratifying the peace agreement for the termination of the conflict between the government and the guerrilla military movement in Colombia (2016), and the Ukraine–European Union Association agreement in the Netherlands (2016), to name but a few of the diverse issues put to the public vote.

In many of these cases, referendum issues were too highly contested for political elites to legislate and consulting the electorate directly was seen as enabling a more straightforward resolution. The outcomes of most of these referendums have had important implications in their respective countries. For instance, the UK's 2016 EU referendum, instigated the most radical change in the country's relationship with the rest of Europe since the 1970s. Colombia's 2016 referendum, on the other hand, could have concluded a fifty-year long conflict, had the proposals not been rejected.

For these reasons referendums matter. It is particularly important to analyse the communication processes that frame referendums in the public domain, and more specifically in the mass media, which in modern democracies are the key platforms of political deliberation and opinion formation. This book analyses mediation practices during a recent

referendum as an example, to help us understand the broader process by which the mass media define or frame what a contested political event is about.

This book aims to explain the media framing process in referendum campaigns as a distinctive category of political event. It looks at how the way journalists perform their daily work may impact on the way they construct political issues for their audiences. To address this aim, the book introduces an original frame-building analytical model (in chapter 6) to account more broadly for how the media frame and reframe their sources' perspectives on what is at stake within the context of highly contested referendum campaigns. The discussion in chapter 6 explores how this model may help us interpret political mediation in referendums in Western and/or Northern European contexts. The model thus makes a contribution to wider debates around the coverage of referendum campaigns in the media.

Much of what the book discusses is not unique to referendums but applies to the mediation of politics more broadly and of election campaigns more specifically. Throughout the book the discussion draws from and contributes to these larger academic debates. However, for reasons that will be explained later in this chapter, referendums deserve separate attention as they are a special kind of event, one of the few instances of direct participatory politics in today's mass representative democracies. They are thus outside the regular experience of most citizens and for this reason how the media explain what they are about becomes even more significant.

The question at the heart of the concept of framing is what is at stake, or 'what is going on here?' Framing was introduced into social sciences from psychology, where it originally referred to 'individual frames', namely how we define an issue, situation or event in our minds by focusing on some of its aspects over others and using them as cues to understand what is happening. To use one of Goffman's (1974) examples, a woman looking carefully at a mirror may be understood by an observer to either be inspecting it in order to determine its condition before an auction, or to be looking at her own reflection. Which definition of the situation we choose in observing this scene will determine our understanding of why she is there, our expectations of what she will do next, what are the possible outcomes of the situation and even what might be an appropriate thing to say or do if we were to approach her. Which frame we choose will therefore determine 'a particular causal explanation' of the situation (why she is there), 'evaluation' of the possible outcomes, and 'treatment recommendation' – what, if anything, we should do or say (Entman, 1993: 52). Which frame we choose to apply will likely

be determined by which aspects of what we see we choose to focus on. The concept of framing has been adapted in its application to the collective, social level in the study of politics and the media, as will be discussed in chapter 1, but its core essence as an organising principle that helps interpret events remains.

A key premise in framing is that social reality is constructed and reproduced through symbolic forms, such as language and images, which are the key components of media messages. Frame analysis is a relatively recent addition to an intellectual tradition of structuralist studies of the media, seeking in the analysis of text the key to the systems and processes of social signification and representation (Curran *et al.*, 1982: 19). If ideology, in an Althusserian understanding of the term, consists in the unconscious themes or categories through which people experience and represent the world and construct reality as social practice (Curran *et al.*, 1982), the study of frames is essentially a study of ideology.

However frame analysis does not share a view of frames as ‘a motivated distortion of the truth’, which is implicit in common sense understandings of ideology (Bennett, 1982: 44). In other words, there are not considered to be any ‘true’ interpretations of the world that are purposefully ‘distorted’ to perpetuate ‘class domination’, as in Marxist approaches to ideology. Rather different frames are seen as being promoted by different social groups and competing with each other for prominence in the public sphere and in the attention of journalists and audiences. Chapter 2 will discuss debates around journalistic frame-building in more detail as well as research on the effects of framing on audiences. It will also discuss how framing fits within normative debates on what the media should do to promote democratic citizenry.

The role of the media in offering the electorate information during a political campaign is very significant. In modern democracies the size of the electorate does not allow for face-to-face deliberation among all its members and deliberative democracy, understood as opinion formation and decision-making by citizens through public discussion and argumentation (Elster, 1998), is primarily realised through the media, which also feed frames into personal conversations and deliberations among citizens in the public sphere. For most people, the media are a key source of information on all political matters. They are even more important during major democratic events such as elections and referendums, while modern campaigns take place primarily through the media (Dalton, 2002) and are tailored to their needs.

The media landscape in much of the Western world has changed significantly in the last decades with the growth and wide adoption of digital

media. However, traditional news outlets such as television and the press have retained a significant part in the ‘relay race’ of discourses in the public sphere (Garton *et al.*, 1991: 100–103), whereby print, broadcast and online media co-create public debate and re-represent discourse on different platforms. For this reason traditional media, like television and newspapers, remain significant in the digital era. Although, since the establishment of the print press, other media have been added and even took over prominence as significant loci for political discourse in the public sphere, none of these platforms operates in isolation. Different media platforms feed from and into each other and together they construct and reconstruct public sense making.

This book thus focuses on ‘traditional’ or ‘old’ media, and seeks to address research questions on how frames emerge on these media during referendum campaigns, how these frames differ from the frames that define electoral contests, what factors may influence journalistic selection and adoption among the frames that are available in the public sphere and promoted by different interest groups, and whether journalists have an active role in creating original frames themselves when covering referendums. The empirical component of the study is based on the case of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, but previous analyses of different referendums in other countries are brought into focus to compare findings and derive broader insights into the process of framing referendums as distinctive political events.

These insights form the basis of the frame-building model for referendums, which is proposed in chapter 6. The book thus goes beyond the specific case study and proposes a new way of understanding frame-building in referendum campaigns, which can be applied and tested in other national contexts.

Although referendums are often seen as similar to election campaigns, they are significantly distinctive events and deserve separate analysis. Their purpose is not to elect a government but to consult the electorate on a divisive issue; the result of the vote does not directly affect who is to be in power; referendums are one-offs, not regular events; there may not be clear correspondence between party identification and ideological stance, as there often is in elections; parties may cluster in unexpected coalitions, supporting the same side of a referendum question whereas otherwise their political agendas may clash (de Vreese and Semetko, 2004).

Referendums remain one of the few commonly used forms of direct democracy. Mechanisms of direct democracy may be defined as ‘a publicly recognized institution wherein citizens decide or emit their opinion on issues – other than through legislative and executive elections – directly at

the ballot box through universal and secret suffrage' (Altman, 2011: 7). Direct democracy mechanisms include referendums, but also plebiscites, citizen initiatives and recalls of elected officials. Direct democracy allows citizens to decide on divisive issues directly rather than through their representatives. Representative democracy, on the other hand, is based on citizens electing representatives at regular intervals to make decisions on behalf of their constituents, or according to another view, on behalf of the 'common', national good (Cronin, 1989: 26). Representative democracy systems often make use of direct democracy mechanisms in exceptional circumstances, so the two ways of decision-making are complementary rather than conflicting.

Still, the usefulness of direct democracy mechanisms has been disputed. Those who argue against the use of referendums as an instrument of decision-making claim that referendums can allow elite groups to manipulate public opinion and use direct democracy for their own benefit, that they weaken the role of elected officials, that they privilege the rule of minorities by the majority, that ordinary people do not have the 'competence' to make important political decisions and they sometimes vote against their own interests. On the other hand, proponents of referendums stress their capacity to increase citizens' interest in public affairs and their control in decision-making, to enhance accountability, to train people in self-government and civil awareness, to resolve difficult issues fairly and transparently (Cronin, 1989; Butler and Ramney, 1994; Altman, 2011; Tierney, 2012).

Proponents of direct democracy mechanisms argue that a combination of the two forms of democracy, with referendums being called occasionally to allow citizens to decide on specific issues, actually helps representative democracy work better. According to Altman (2011: 197), in mature democracies referendums work as 'a legitimization tool for constitutional changes that occasionally serve as a synchronization mechanism between politicians and citizens' and do not compromise the quality of democratic rule. Qvortrup (2014: 12) associates the increasingly common adoption of referendums to a de-alignment in recent history between political parties and the needs of civic and minority groups, as well as a growing feeling among the electorate that parties are not able to represent them. He suggests that the role of referendums is often to relieve the political system from individual groups' demands, which may not be supported by the majority of citizens but which may still put pressure on governments. As he puts it, in those cases referendums act as a pressure valve, letting off political steam, while at the same time they help rebuild trust in the democratic system and remove controversial issues from the political agenda. The role of governments and elite political groups in

shaping discourse during referendums will be examined in detail in subsequent chapters.

This book analyses coverage of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum in television and newspapers, as well as insights from interviews with television reporters, heads of television news departments and public affairs producers, broadcasting regulators, political campaign managers, and civic society representatives who remained neutral in the referendum but communicated with the media during the campaign to promote issues that were significant to their specific groups.

The aim of the analysis is to explain how the media select, reproduce or reconstruct ways of understanding what referendum campaigns are about, based on the direct experience of actors who participated in this process. It contributes to our understanding of which frames become prominent in political coverage by detailing how specific factors relating to journalists, their professional values, their organisations and their relationships with their political sources may combine with each other to promote particular interpretations of what is at stake.

Each referendum has unique features determined by the national context, political culture and media system as well as the particularities of the issue itself, how much it has been previously debated in the public arena, how political elites cluster around the possible options and how fixed public opinion is on this issue (LeDuc, 2002: 145). Acknowledging that different contexts give rise to different dynamics in the media coverage of a referendum, chapter 6 attempts to identify broad similarities between the media framing of the Scottish referendum and that of other, rather diverse campaigns. It discusses these similarities within the context of common characteristics shared by the media systems where similar studies have taken place, and proposes an original framework, which expands understanding of journalistic frame-building in highly contested referendums within these media systems.

The 2014 Scottish referendum was a historic occasion. As voters went to polling stations on 18 September 2014 there was a clear sense that they were participating in a rare event that was likely to have a lasting impact on the structure of the United Kingdom irrespective of the outcome. Participation in the vote was unprecedented – 84.6 per cent of registered voters turned out, an exception to the well-established trend of political apathy that came to typify political life in the UK, as in many other Western states in previous decades. In the two years of campaigning that led to September 2014, the referendum succeeded in capturing the hearts and minds of Scots like few other political events, it dominated conversations not only in the media, but also in homes,

workplaces and pubs, equally among supporters of independence and the union as among those who were still undecided.

Eventually 55 per cent of the electorate decided that Scotland should stay in the UK. Although after the referendum, the debate on Scottish independence continued and it is still a current topic on the political agenda at the time of writing (in the aftermath of the 2016 EU referendum and the Brexit negotiations there is talk of a second Scottish independence referendum), when the 2014 referendum took place it was widely described by politicians on both sides as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to have a say on this issue. There was a widespread sense that even if one had little other interest in politics, the Scottish referendum was too critical an issue on which not to have an informed opinion. Like the 2016 EU referendum two years later, the Scottish referendum was a major event in the constitutional history of the UK. As I will argue in the final chapter of this book, the way that the media approached these two events is not dissimilar.

The question on the ballot paper in 2014 was simple and binary: should Scotland be an independent country? It included no suggestion or implication of what criteria should be applied to choose between answering yes or no. As with most referendum questions its phrasing was negotiated between the key political players, in this case the UK and Scottish governments, and was shaped so as to allow different definitions of what exactly was at stake and what independence would mean in practice. These definitions were to be provided by political actors with a stake in the debate, by the mass media, and by citizens themselves.

During the referendum grassroots groups reinvigorated the debate on social media and challenged the dominance of ‘old’ news platforms (Law, 2015; Buchanan, 2016), but at the same time the press and broadcasting remained central ‘in setting the parameters of official political discourse as well as registering the ways in which social media replicate the established patterns of political discourse as much as it threatens to dislodge them’ (Law, 2015: 7). The issues dominating the debate on ‘old’ media were also the main material for discussion on social media (Paterson, 2015: 23).

In 2014, 92 per cent of UK adults reported watching television almost every day (Ofcom, 2015) and television was the most used source for news (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2015). Newspapers may have had a restricted print readership (the Scottish press had been losing readers at a faster rate than newspapers in other parts of the UK during the previous decade – see Dekavalla, 2015), but they were still read by political elites and by contributors to broadcast and online media, and they often became themselves direct or indirect contributors

to conversations on other platforms. Although digital media were very important in the campaign, at the time studied here ‘traditional media organisations continue[d] to play a pivotal role in British politics’ (Chadwick and Stanyer, 2011: 216) as primary and credible sources of political information, co-creators of public discourse and the main way for social actors to reach a large audience. The continuing relevance of ‘old’ media in the digital era returned into focus in the 2016 EU referendum, where newspapers are said to have reinforced anti-European sentiment in public debate.

UK media operate according to a liberal media system (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). The press is commercial and highly partisan, while both public service and commercial broadcasting has a public service role and is bound by rules of due impartiality. Newspapers take explicit positions in favour or against political actors and causes, as will be seen in detail in chapter 2. In the case of the 2014 referendum, all newspapers adopted a sceptical position towards Scottish independence during the campaign, apart from the *Sunday Herald*, which was the only title that came out in favour of the Yes campaign a few weeks before the vote. Broadcasting, on the other hand, operates under the regulatory obligation to provide a fair opportunity for a range of perspectives to be heard, and cannot take a position in any debate. As will be explained in subsequent chapters, however, the issue of television’s impartiality became a contested one during the campaign. The final section of chapter 2 provides a detailed discussion of the media outlets analysed in this study and their individual characteristics in terms of ownership and positioning.

The next chapter, however, takes a step away from the Scottish case to discuss framing as a broader theory of understanding media content and political communication in general. It reviews key themes in frame analysis and discusses previous work on the framing of political campaigns in different contexts. It also explores existing research on the generic frames commonly found in the coverage of political campaigns, and particularly of elections. Research exploring the conditions that give rise to such generic frames is also reviewed, with a view to establishing what may be learned from this research for the analysis of referendum campaigns.

Chapter 3 returns to the Scottish case and provides a contextual overview of the historic events that led to the 2014 referendum. It offers a summary of how the Scottish constitutional issue developed particularly in the second half of the twentieth century, the movement for devolution in the 1990s, the establishment and the first decade of the devolved Scottish parliament, up until the 2011 Scottish election, which instigated

the independence referendum. It also discusses definitions of Scottish identity and their role in claims for Scottish independence. It then maps out the media landscape in Scotland and the media's ideological positions in relation to autonomy.

Chapter 4 focuses on the key actors who ran communication campaigns during the referendum, aiming to attract media attention to their views. It focuses particularly on the main Yes and No campaigns and the political parties that comprised them, as well as civil society organisations that did not support either outcome but still communicated to the media about issues they felt were significant in the debate. The chapter discusses the frames these participant actors promoted in the public debate. It is based on interviews with communication directors on both sides of the argument and representatives from impartial civil society organisations. It explores how different actors understood and defined what the referendum was about and how these understandings may be organised conceptually into different frames. It looks at similarities, differences and interactions between the frames that different actors proposed and explores whether different sides of the argument had 'ownership' over certain frames.

Chapter 5 looks at which frames were most prominent in the media coverage of the referendum. The frames identified earlier are traced in the coverage of the end of the campaign on BBC Scotland and STV, the two broadcasters that produce dedicated content for audiences in Scotland. This is complemented by an analysis of newspaper articles in ten Scottish daily and Sunday newspapers. The *strategic game* and *policy* frames were the two most dominant frames in both television and newspaper coverage, with the *game* frame becoming more prominent as the referendum date approached. The chapter concludes by discussing the democratic implications of representing the referendum as a strategic competition between political sides and as a decision about policy.

The subsequent chapter attempts to explain the prominence of these frames in the media coverage, based on insights from interviews with broadcasters and their sources. It proposes five factors which played a role in shaping media frames: the influence of political campaigns, professional routines relating to balance, journalists' views of their own role in the coverage of a contested issue, broadcasters' perceptions of what attracts audiences and what constitutes a contribution to public debate, as well as previous experience of covering election campaigns. The discussion is contextualised within broader academic literature about frame-building.

After these four chapters, which explore the particular case study, chapter 6 and the conclusion shift their attention to how the insights

generated from this analysis may help understand the broader issue of the mediation of politics, beyond the Scottish context.

Chapter 6 compares insights from the previous chapters with those from other framing studies in different contexts and discusses the extent to which certain frames may be expected to emerge in the coverage of referendum campaigns in general, as a broader category of political event. Comparisons are drawn to research focusing on the 1980 Quebec independence referendum, the 2000 euro referendum in Denmark and the 2008 Swiss direct-democratic consultation on immigration, which are the other case studies where media framing studies have been carried out. The chapter identifies connections between the similarities these cases share and the characteristics of the media systems where they are located. These similarities form the basis of an frame-building model for referendum campaigns, which is proposed in this chapter to help explain how the media cover referendums in these media systems.

Finally, the concluding chapter revisits the question of whether the mediation of referendum campaigns is distinctive enough to deserve dedicated analysis. It queries the extent to which the referendum analysed in this book bears similarities with the UK's subsequent 2016 EU referendum and how that event was framed in the mainstream media. The chapter argues that the frame-building model proposed in chapter 6 appears to also provide an account for the mediation of that campaign. The chapter concludes with a wider consideration of the contribution of old and new media to our understanding of politics. It considers the changing nature of public debate following Brexit and the 2016 US presidential election and questions the extent to which mainstream media remain key determinants of public discourse. It proposes that future avenues for frame-building research would need to explore frame-building processes on social media, where the gatekeepers and organisational routines that are so central in the frame-building model proposed in chapter 6 are absent. It argues that in order to deliver the complete picture frame analysis needs to engage with the totality of news provision and sharing as this moves towards the internet and news aggregation, propaganda sites and social media.