

The Danes said NO to the Maastricht Treaty. The Danish EC Referendum of June 1992

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On the basis of a memorandum of understanding achieved at the end of 1990 between the bourgeois coalition government, consisting of Conservatives and Agrarian Liberals, and the major opposition party, the Social Democrats, the government had reason to believe that the 1992 referendum would be relatively easy to carry. Compared to former referenda on Danish participation in the process of European integration, when there had been major disagreements within the *Folketing*, the Danish parliament, the situation this time was considered comfortable. Parties in favor of the Treaty held close to 80 percent of the seats in parliament. Among the political parties represented in parliament, only the Socialist Peoples' Party and the Progress Party were against the Treaty and recommended their supporters to vote NO.

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subsequent public debate, however, this concept was to become a major issue. But if a comfortable parliamentary majority was for the Treaty, why call a referendum?

Why a Referendum?

Twice before, the Danes had been invited to give their opinion on European integration. The first referendum was held in October 1972, under the terms of article 20 of the Danish constitution. The issue was whether or not Denmark should join the European Economic Community (EEC). After a long and very intense debate (Siune 1979), 90 percent of the Danes took part in the referendum. Sixty-three percent voted YES to membership, 37 percent voted NO. The main argument in favor of membership concerned the expected economic benefits. This was an argument used by political parties and – according to surveys conducted at the time – by a majority of voters as well (Hansen et al. 1973; Petersen & Elklit 1973). The main argument against membership was the fear of losing, at least in the long run, substantial national sovereignty as a result of increasing European integration. Opponents also expected the EC to widen not only in scope but also in depth. In 1972 a majority of the population expressed negative attitudes to political integration, but proponents managed to convince the voters that the issue was all about the economy, and the Danes voted YES according to a so-called “economic logic”.

The next referendum on an EC-related issue was held in 1986. Again it was more or less a question about the economy and in particular about the establishment of a “Single Market” within the EC. Again the Danes voted YES, following the same economic logic as previously described (Tonsgaard, 1987). Critical voices fearing a broader and deeper political European integration were not heard. One of the statements often recalled by the Danes in later disputes came from the Prime Minister, Poul Schlüter, who, during a very short and concentrated 1986 campaign, had argued that “The political union is stone-dead”.

The Danes had thus become accustomed to referenda on EC matters, and politically the Danish government could not have ratified the Maastricht Treaty without asking the voters first. Another matter is whether it was juridically necessary. Legal aspects were debated at the end of 1991 and in the beginning of 1992. The main issue in this debate was whether the level of integration implied by the Treaty was against the constitution. There was also some debate over whether the population knew enough about the content of the Treaty to make it a good idea, or even responsible, to hold a referendum. Still, the referendum was never seriously questioned because the voters expected it. The only serious issue raised was when to hold the

referendum. Should it be before the summer of 1992, or should it be later – the principal problem being the population’s presumed lack of knowledge about the Treaty?

The referendum was finally set for 2 June 1992, and was specified as a binding referendum in accordance with paragraph 20 of the constitution. It was not, in other words, an advisory referendum – a distinction which did not make much difference to the voters, even if it was formally important. According to the terms of the constitution, if in a binding referendum a majority says NO and the majority consists of more than 30 percent of the total electorate, the object of the referendum is rejected and the result has to be respected by the *Folketing*; the result cannot be consequently overruled by a majority in parliament.

The Outcome of the June Referendum

The turnout on 2 June 1992 was just over 83 percent. Of the voters 50.7 percent said NO and 49.3 percent said YES. Only 46 847 votes separated the YES and NO alternatives, but the conditions of the constitution were fulfilled: the recommendation from the majority in parliament to accept the Maastricht Treaty was rejected.

Why was the outcome a NO when “everyone” had expected a YES? One of the immediate reactions was to blame the mass media; another was to refer to the stupidity and lack of knowledge among the electorate; a third explanation labelled the outcome a “protest vote” because the majority had turned against the recommendations of the major parties. Before turning to these explanations, however, let us first consider the profile of those who said NO.

Who Said NO?

The project “Mass Media and Democracy” (Siune et al. 1992) undertook an investigation of who said NO and why.¹ One clear finding is that women said NO more often than men. This difference, moreover, appears to be explained by a fundamental difference in attitudes towards increased integration rather than any other social differences between the sexes. In addition, middle-aged voters said NO more than did young and older people, and this was true of both sexes (see Figure 1).

A sizeable share of voters in all parties also turned against the advice of their party leaders (see Table 1 and Figure. 2). Social Democrats in particular displayed the greatest disagreement with the official party-line. The problem of internal disagreement over EC matters was not new to the Social Democratic Party. But this time the Social Democrats had really

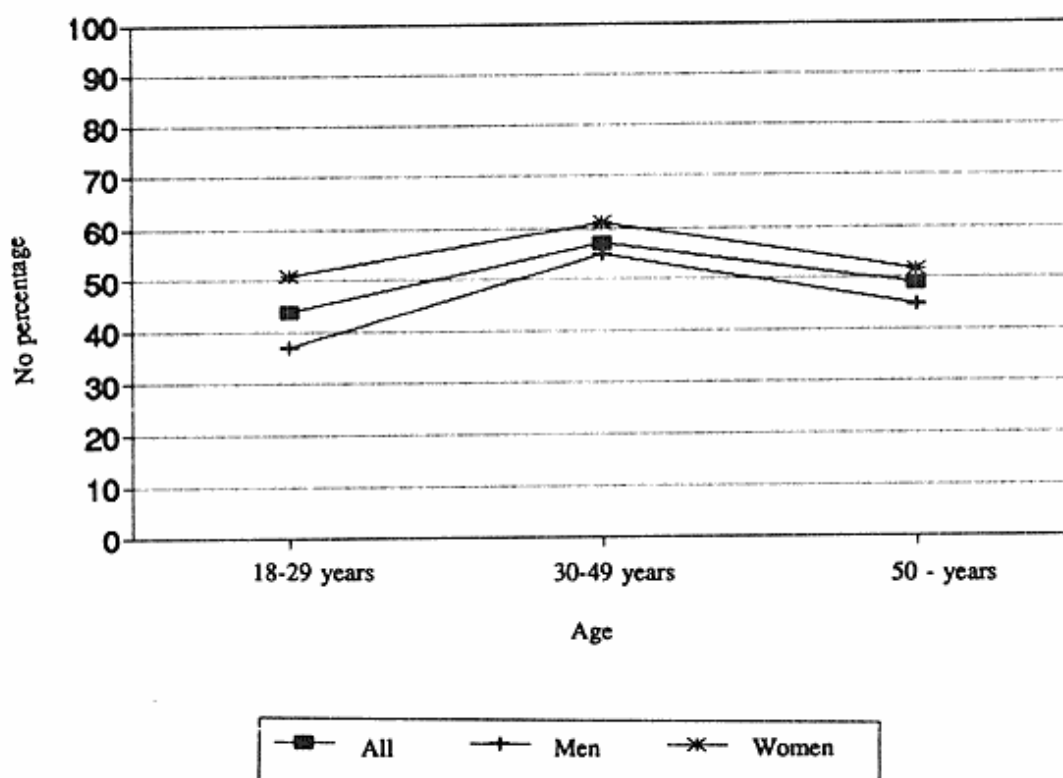


Fig. 1. Age and Percent NO Vote, Controlled For Sex.

Table 1. Percent NO Votes among Danes For and Against a Broader European Integration, Controlled for Party*

	All voters	For EC-Union	Against EC-Union	N
Socialist People's Party	92	(74)	95	78
Social Democrats	64	30	85	205
Conservatives	13	6	(42)	68
Agrarian Liberals	18	7	46	143
Progress Party	55	(36)	-	24

* Figures in the table indicate the percent NO votes. The percent YES votes for any given group may be found by subtracting the percent NO from 100.

tried to express a unanimous and clear opinion in favor of YES. Arguments were especially made with reference to the "social dimension" contained in the Treaty and to the expectation of new Nordic members of the EC. These arguments, it would seem, were not very persuasive among party followers.

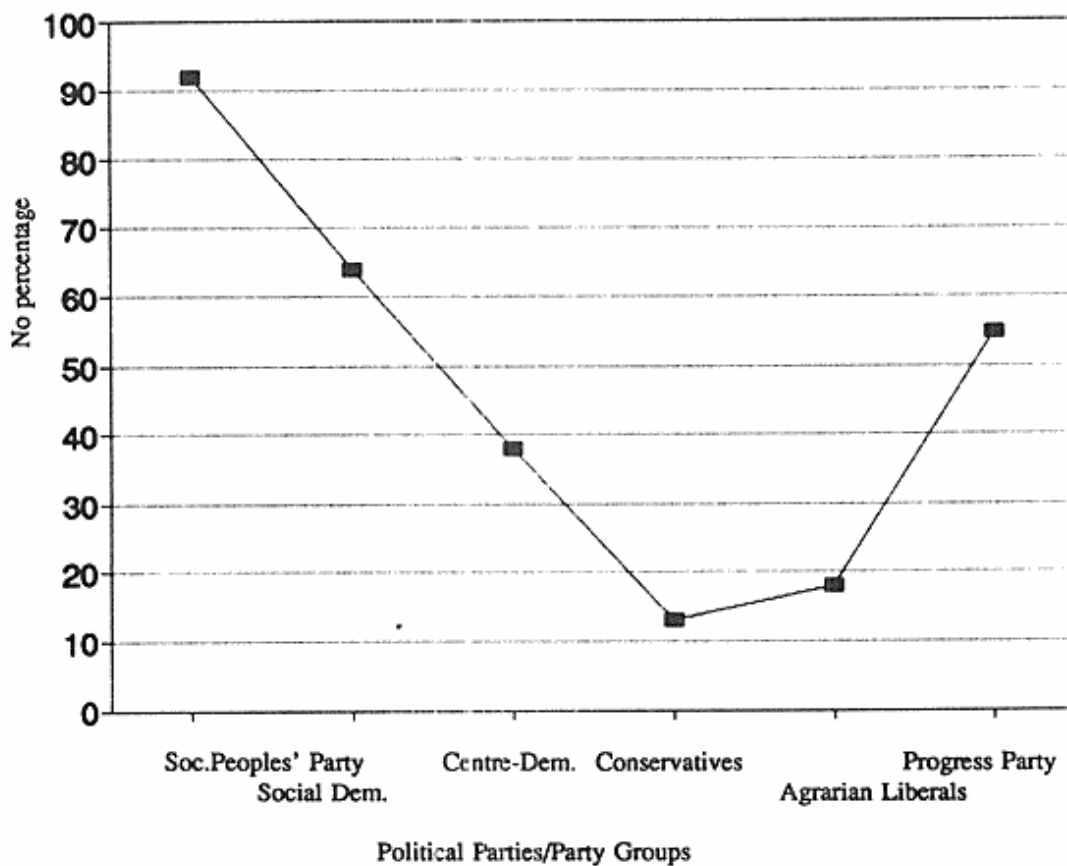


Fig. 2. Percent NO Vote by Political Party.

The immediate surprise over the outcome, and an urgent need to explain why the prognoses used by television on referendum day deviated as much as they did from the final result, lead commentators to focus on changing geographical patterns in terms of YES and NO support compared to the 1972 and 1986 outcomes. There were indeed some new elements in the ecological pattern of voting. Support for a “pro-EC” position, for example, increased somewhat in the Copenhagen area, whereas such support decreased in Jutland. Later analyses, however, showed that these changes were quite small, as Figure 3 clearly indicates. In the overwhelming majority of the electoral constituencies the vote in 1992 was much as it had been before. But why then was the overall outcome a NO this time?

Why a NO?

The most important argument against voting yes to the Maastricht Treaty, was the Danes’ fear of losing their sovereignty. Among those voting NO,

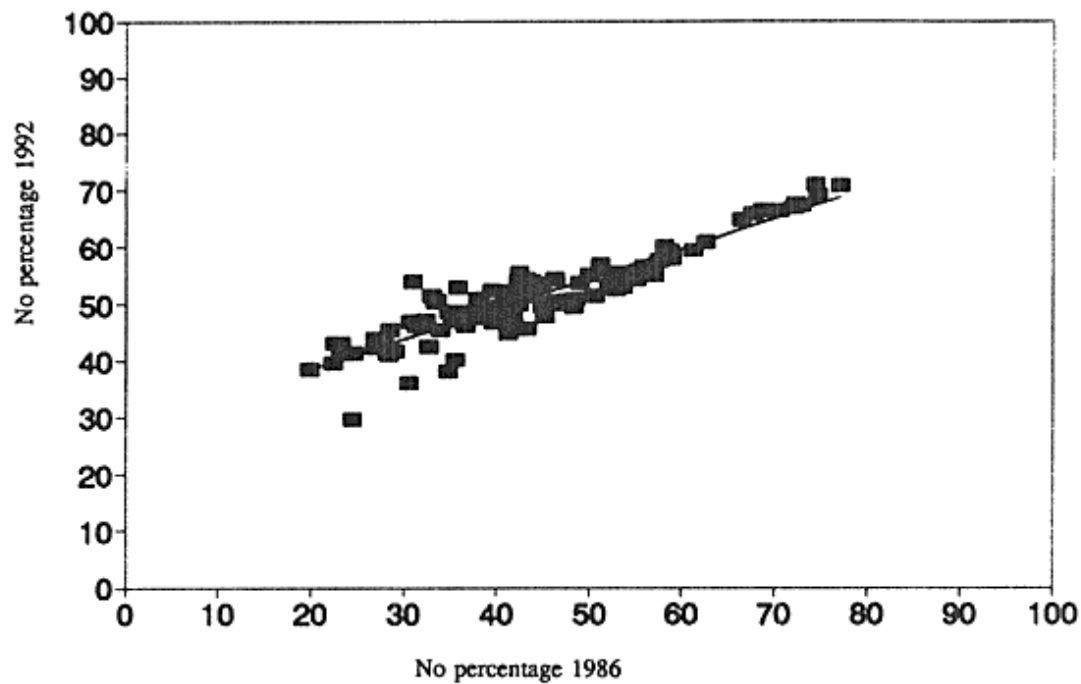


Fig. 3. Electoral Constituencies According to the Percent NO Votes in the 1986 and 1992 Referendums Respectively.

more than eight out of ten preferred political freedom to economic benefit if forced to choose. The situation was quite the opposite among those in favor of further integration; they preferred economic benefits to political freedom. In fact, the yes-sayers' main argument was that Denmark could not "make it" outside the European Community (Siune et al. 1992). Other answers referred more directly to expected economic advantages. In general, the Danish attitude towards the "European Union", as measured by a scale consisting of ten items related to different aspects of the planned political union, explains very well the vote of those who did not follow their party (Table 1). The no-sayers were against establishing a closer European integration, which they considered involved a loss of political freedom. The question, then, is whether the issue of political freedom was more central at this third Danish EC referendum than in the earlier ones?

Since the referendum in 1986, when the European Common Act was accepted by a majority of 56 percent, a clear majority in the *Folketing* has been positive towards stronger European integration. Danish citizens, however, have been divided all along. Until 1992, the basic issue had been defined as predominantly economic, and this was sufficient to carry a majority. The Prime Minister's message from the 1986 campaign – "The political union is stone-dead!" – had often been cited in the media, and

this message was repeated again during the spring of 1992. How, then, can a different outcome in 1992 be understood?

The Campaign and the Role of the Mass Media

From January 1992 until the referendum took place on 2 June, there was an increasingly intensive media coverage focusing on various aspects of the Maastricht Treaty. The Treaty itself, in Danish translation, was made available to all citizens from post offices, and information leaflets issued by parliament were delivered to all households. But in addition to this, the mass media clearly felt a responsibility to inform the public about the object of the referendum. The two Danish television channels, partly because of their public status, in particular felt a stronger formal responsibility than did the print media, which traditionally is privately owned.

Hence the campaign started more as an information drive than as a political campaign, although the object of the messages was indeed political. The government, and especially the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Uffe Elleman Jensen, stated from the very beginning that this time the issue was not about the economy but was rather about a political issue – namely the question of further European political integration. The idea was to make Europe stronger and more able to cope with many problems of political, social and economic character. At the beginning of the campaign, in short, Danes were told to forget about economic considerations.

As the campaign gained momentum, there were many points of conflict, the most significant being over the planned Political Union. What would a political union be like? If the Danes accepted the Treaty, how much sovereignty would be lost in the end? And could the expected influence on European matters outweigh the decrease in sovereignty? An important response to this issue came in March of 1992, when a committee of experts announced that the union, as outlined in the Treaty, would indeed imply a decrease in Danish sovereignty.

A majority of Danes have always been against any kind of joint defense policy and military action within an EC framework (cf. Siune et al 1992). In the beginning of 1992, Ritt Bjerregaard, a former Social Democratic minister, had raised a debate over the role of the “WEU”, the West Union. This debate took place in all branches of the media and served to further increase voter awareness of the defense issue. Joint foreign policy was an equally touchy issue. In reality such policy collaboration was already an established part of cooperation within the EC, but in principle a majority of Danes were still against the idea. This issue and the conflicts it raised were also broadly treated in the media.

By comparison, less attention was given to the planned Economic Mon-

etary Union, even though the question of a joint currency was one of the main issues, especially in the early stages of the campaign. For several years monetary cooperation among the majority of EC member countries has taken place within the European Monetary System (EMS). But the prospect of a common currency gave the opponents a strong argument against the Maastricht Treaty. And it was not just the issue of the ECU; many were also opposed to the plan for a European Central Bank. The reason was its power to dominate national economic policies from a broader European perspective which emphasized such goals as price stability rather than solving national problems such as unemployment. Given the fact that a majority of Danes often mention high unemployment (currently approximately 10 percent in Denmark) as "the most important problem today" and that unemployment has been a lasting concern in Danish public debate (Siune 1991), this matter was of substantial relevance for the campaign.

During the campaign all these issues were intensely debated. Not only politicians but also many citizens participated in the debate and expressed their opinions and their wish for more information about the consequences of a YES or NO at the referendum. The temperature in the debate increased dramatically during the spring of 1992. In April and May altogether more than 40 television programs were broadcast. There was, in addition, extensive coverage in the newspapers. In the period from January to June more than 7500 articles referring to EC-matters appeared in seven of the most widely read newspapers (Siune et al. 1992). The information offered to the Danes about the Maastricht Treaty and EC matters in general was truly enormous; there were more articles in newspapers and presentations on television than at any earlier referendum. Even so, the mass media had problems in handling many questions raised in the public debate concerning the long-term consequences of a YES or a NO outcome.

During the campaign, the political parties were all much more active on television than in the newspapers. By comparison, the YES and NO movements – the majority of which had the character of social movements – were very active in *all* of the media. The NO movement expressed a general fear of losing national sovereignty, whereas the pro-integrationists were much more concerned about establishing a strong Europe.

In the course of the campaign, moreover, the general debate, which started out by focusing on the question of further political integration, evolved in such a fashion as to concentrate more and more on economic aspects. The reason for this was that public opinion polls indicated problems for the government in the form of an increasing number of "NO-sayers". The government, therefore, shifted its strategy. The expectation was that economic arguments had contributed to favorable outcomes at earlier referenda and could do so again now. With the help of well-known econ-

omists, however, opponents of the Treaty were able effectively to counter this shift in strategy.

As expressed in editorials, the majority of newspapers were in favor of the Maastricht Treaty. The bourgeois press in particular carried a greater number of positive than negative statements. News programs and some of the information programs on radio and television also brought more statements from proponents than from opponents of the Treaty. However, many contributions by readers resulted in a significant number of negative statements in all newspapers. The readers' major concern, as expressed in their letters, was one of a potential loss of Danish sovereignty. The sense of uneasiness expressed related to prospects for the future if there was a YES majority and a subsequent increase in political integration. This anxiety was clearly articulated not only in letters from readers, but also in questions from viewers and listeners to television and radio programs as well.

Some contributions to the campaign obviously attracted more attention than others. A case in point was the televised statements made on several occasions by Jacques Delors, chairman of the EC Commission, which were positive to the Treaty and promoted the YES point of view. The message Delors conveyed, however, had a strong negative influence in the Danish context. As indicated in public opinion polls published every week during the months of March, April and May, several voters in fact turned to a NO position in reaction to his statements.

The Impact of Mass Media

But just what was the impact of the intensive mass media coverage? The first interview data collected for the research project "Mass Media and Democracy" (Siune et al. 1992) were gathered in March 1992. This involved a representative sample of the population and the material was gathered before television began a series of specially produced information programs. Then in May, before all parties had their traditional election programs on television, an even wider representative sample was interviewed. This May sample was finally re-interviewed after the election. This design made it possible to analyze changes in the electorate during the campaign.

Among the changes noted was a marked increase in voter awareness and knowledge regarding general EC matters. In the surveys in May and June a question was posed asking respondents to indicate what was the most important problem confronting politicians. In May, 34 percent mentioned the EC as the most important issue while in June, after the referendum, 50 percent mentioned the EC, the Maastricht Treaty or other EC issues.

The political agenda was clearly set by the intense campaign, yet old problems were not forgotten. Unemployment has been one of the dominant political problems in Denmark for years, and was still in the voters' minds in the spring of 1992 (more than 40 percent mentioned it). It is important to underline in this context that unemployment had also been an issue in the 1986 campaign. At the time unemployment had been used by the pro-integrationists as an argument in favor of further European integration. But unemployment had nevertheless increased – contrary to the promises given. This situation must be taken into consideration as one of several explanations for an increasing voter mistrust regarding what the politicians promised in their campaigns for further integration.

Both subjectively as well as objectively measured knowledge increased during the spring of 1992. Newspaper readers, who were in general most interested in politics, increased their knowledge most, and were also those who were most concerned about the Maastricht Treaty. In the early spring of 1992 the Danes had expected to be informed by television, and a substantial proportion (45 percent) actually mentioned television as their main source of information. With the passage of time, however, newspapers became the source most often referred to. When asked in June about their prime sources of information about the Treaty, 50 percent mentioned newspapers, whereas 43 percent mentioned television. The EC paper distributed to all households, by comparison, was referred to by only 10 percent. Almost 100 percent of those questioned said they had received some information about the Maastricht Treaty, and even those who did not feel very knowledgeable about the topic favored having a referendum.

It may reasonably be concluded that the media played an informative role during the campaign. Detailed analyses confirm this conclusion. All of the mass media employed traditional news criteria in their coverage. Hence, conflict was a major criterium of coverage, and if anything is to be criticized in relation to the role of the media, it is this element. But newspapers, television and radio cannot be blamed for lack of informative coverage. Media coverage showed that intense conflicts emerged over the question of European cooperation, and that there were serious doubts as to the outcome of the planned integration. Compared to the former referenda, however, the definition of the situation had changed. This time the political union, whatever that is, was the issue!

It should also be noted that the politicians' lack of knowledge – demonstrated by the printed magazine *PRESS* in March 1992 and widely cited in all newspapers and on television – was a problem for the YES proponents. The Danish voters had often been told by well-known party leaders not to worry about their lack of information, since they, the politicians, knew what it was all about. The revelation of well-known politicians' lack of knowledge about details in the Maastricht Treaty clearly did not increase

the voters' trust in politicians. Surveys show that many voters did not believe the politicians, not even their own party spokesmen (Siune et al. 1992).

Conclusion

The main explanation of the Danish NO in the June 1992 referendum can be found in the new definition of what Danes could expect from the EC. They did not follow their parties, but it was not a protest vote as such. It was an informed NO to the aspects of the Maastricht Treaty which gave more and more political power to the EC. The majority of the political parties had believed that the Danes were ready to accept this. The Danish politicians expected an acceptance of the Maastricht Treaty because they had forgotten the warnings from twenty years of debate on the EC. Voters were less dynamic than the majority of politicians, who had changed their views of what Europe was going to be. The voters still remembered what they – as stated in 1972 and 1986 – did not like, and voted accordingly.

NOTES

1. The project "Mass Media and Democracy" collected panel data from representative interviews with 500 respondents in March, 1014 respondents in May and 715 respondents in June 1992. In addition all articles with reference to the EC in seven of the main newspapers were analyzed together with all programs on the two national television channels. Data from the systematic content analyses and from the surveys are published in Siune et al. (1992).

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