

Summary Report: Plebiscitary Politics in European Integration

The research project has investigated the political reasons of governments to commit to referendums on European integration when they are not obliged to do so. Over the course of the integration process, there have been 28 cases of referendum pledges on European issues which have been made – at least partly – at the discretion of governments:

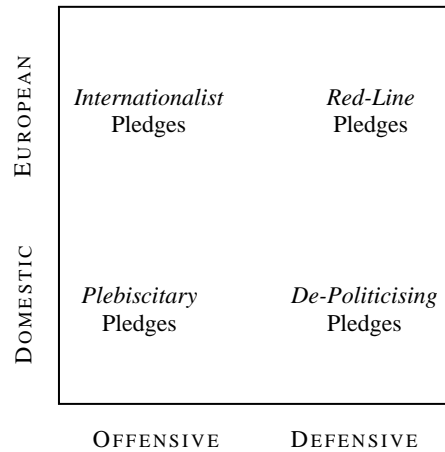
Table 1: 28 Discretionary Cases of Government Pledges on EU Referendums

Treaty Referendums and Referendum Pledges	Accession Referendums and Referendum Pledges	Specific Issues Referendums and Referendum Pledges
<p><i>Referendums:</i></p> <p>Denmark (1986): SEA France (1992): Maastricht Spain (2005): TCE France (2005): TCE Luxembourg (2005): TCE</p> <p><i>Referendums pledged, but not (yet)held:</i></p> <p>Portugal (2003): TCE Britain (2004): TCE Poland (2005): TCE Czech Republic (2005): TCE Britain (2010): Future transfers of power</p>	<p><i>Referendums:</i></p> <p>Norway (1972) Finland (1994) Åland Islands (1994) Sweden (1994) Czech Republic (2003) Malta (2003) Poland (2003)</p>	<p><i>Referendums:</i></p> <p>France (1972): (First Enlargement of EC) Switzerland (1972): Free Trade Agreement Britain (1975): Terms of Membership Greenland (1982): Leaving the EC Italy (1989): Constitution for Europe Switzerland (1992): European Economic Area Sweden (2003): Euro</p> <p><i>Referendums pledged, but not (yet)held:</i></p> <p>Britain (1996): Euro Britain (1997): Euro France (2004): Accession of Turkey Austria (2008): Accession of Turkey</p>

The main results of the project are twofold. On a theoretical level, it has developed an innovative model for analysing the political driving forces behind discretionary government pledges on EU referendums. Empirically, the project has involved a comprehensive expert survey which has collected new comparative data on the political reasons of governments to commit to popular votes on European issues.

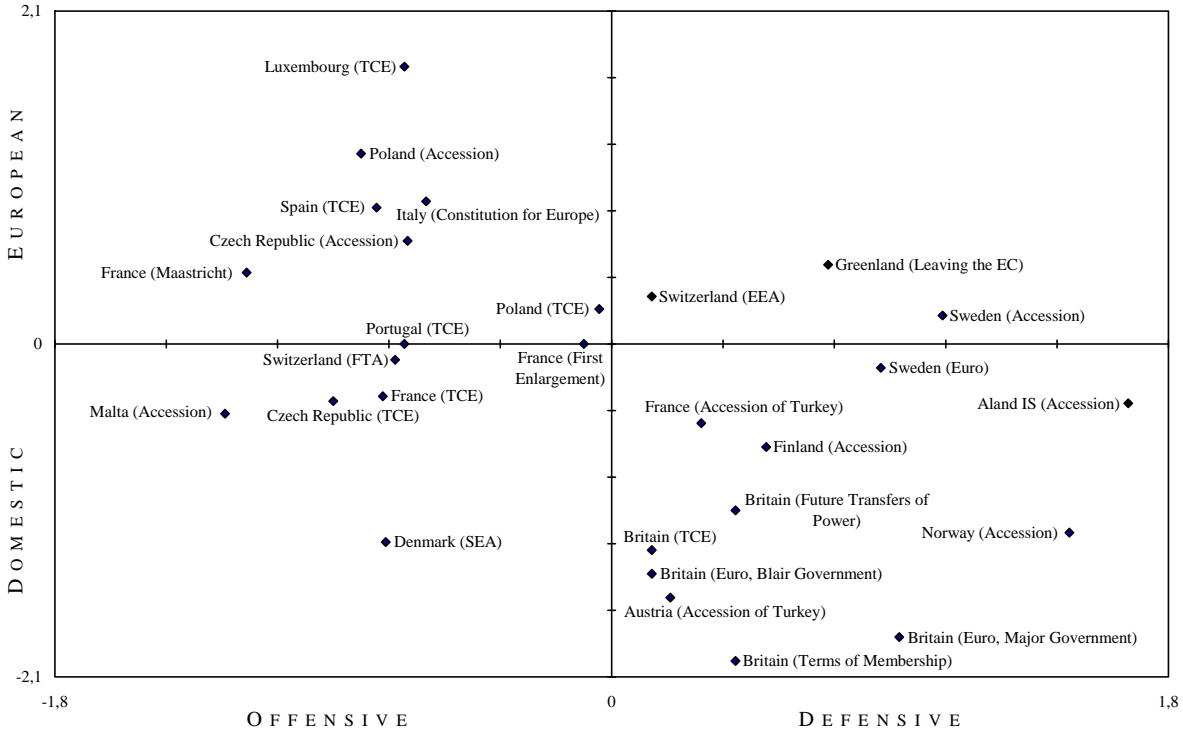
The first result of the project suggests a parsimonious two-dimensional typology for analysing the strategic political reasons of governments to commit to EU referendums. At its most fundamental, the use of typology in this context serves to abstract from the specific peculiarities of each individual referendum pledge and to identify patterns of similarities and differences between them. The first dimension of the typology looks at the political level, at which governments primarily aim when they commit to EU referendums. This dimension distinguishes between votes that were pledged mainly for their domestic-level effects on the patterns of party competition over Europe and those that were triggered mainly for their European-level effects on the agenda and dynamics of the integration process. The second dimension refers to the strategic mode of governments when they commit to EU referendums and it distinguishes between a defensive and an offensive mode. This distinction is adapted from the security studies literature on defensive and offensive (military) strategies in interstate conflicts. Along these lines, the strategic mode of governments is defensive when they pledge EU referendums in order to avoid potential political losses: governments perceive their decision environment in terms of threats to be repelled and employ referendum commitments to prevent a worsening of the status quo and to reactively fend off challenges to their interests. Governments which are in an offensive strategic mode, on the contrary, pledge EU referendums in order to realise potential political gains: they define their decision context in terms of opportunities to be seized and employ referendum commitments to improve on the status quo and to proactively pursue their agenda. In combination, the two dimensions yield four ideal types of discretionary government pledges of EU referendums: the depoliticising, plebiscitary, red-line and internationalist types:

Figure 1: Ideal Types of Government Pledges on EU Referendums



Second, the project offers a classification of all 28 cases of discretionary government commitments to EU referendums in terms of the suggested two-dimensional typology. To this purpose, it has designed and conducted a cross-country expert survey which was sent out by email to 169 acknowledged experts on their countries' European policy in those 15 European countries which have experienced at least one discretionary government pledge on a referendum on European integration. The experts are academics which have published on the European policy of the respective country and ideally on the referendums in question. The survey was conducted from 18 to 22 October 2010, with a follow-up mailing on 22 November 2010. The results of the survey were then brought together with the existing case study evidence, which would suggest the following classification:

Figure 2: The Two-dimensional Space of Government Pledges on EU Referendums



The main impact of the project is a) that it has improved our understanding of the political dynamics behind the post-Maastricht trend towards an increasing frequency of national referendums on European issues and b) that it provides for an analytical framework for assessing the conditions under which EU referendum commitments will or will not be likely to remain a formative feature of European integration in the post-Lisbon environment. These results should be relevant, first and foremost, to analysts of the integration process but also to advisors of decision-makers themselves.