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The Impact of Television on French Referendum Campaign in 2005

From the European Parliamentary Election of 2004 to the
French Referendum of 2005

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Foreword

The question of the democratisation of the European Union is often approached from a theoretical view point: which procedures would make it possible for the citizen to weigh up the choices arrived at or to control the activities of policy makers at European level? Yet procedures are never but an instrument and their efficiency largely depends on the context in which they are to intervene. Thus it is that the absence of a true public European space represents a serious obstacle to effective democratisation.

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This study investigates the role in the European debate of another key actor in the public arena: the media. It is not often that their activities are denounced as they were during the referendum campaign of 2005 on the constitutional treaty. The opponents to the text objected, often vehemently, to the way the press handled these questions. And it would appear that, on the whole, the major French media had taken up an editorial line favourable to the Yes vote; for all that, it did not prevent the rejection of the constitutional project.

To account for this apparent paradox, we have called on Professor Jacques Gerstlé, prominent specialist of the role of the media. The discerning analysis he sets forth in the pages below is illuminating in more ways than one. Placing the televised news under scrutiny, he shows in particular that the influence of the media must be considered more broadly, for it is often brought to bear tangentially. The highlighting of some objects, as much as the actors' declarations, may contribute to influence the perception some voters have of what is at stake in the debate. Thus, in the case of the referendum, the importance given in the news to social issues, specifically the notorious « Bolkestein directive » and the delegitimizing images of the European construction peddled by the "everyday" news fed into the fears entertained by a section of the electorate.

This in-depth study has the great merit to warn us against simplistic notions according to which the quantity of information presented is the decisive criterion against which to measure media impact in a given field. It further, and coincidentally, points out that the effect of political communication is always a gamble. Food for thought for European policy makers ...

Notre Europe

¹ Simon Hix and Stefano Bartolini, 2006

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Introduction

Our paper is intended to bring into light the power of political information in French voters' behaviour on the occasions of the 2004 European Parliament elections to the referendum of 2005.

To begin with, I would like to give some precision about the conceptual and methodological equipment, which is required to make such a comparative analysis about the impact of the media in two different but consecutive campaigns about Europe.

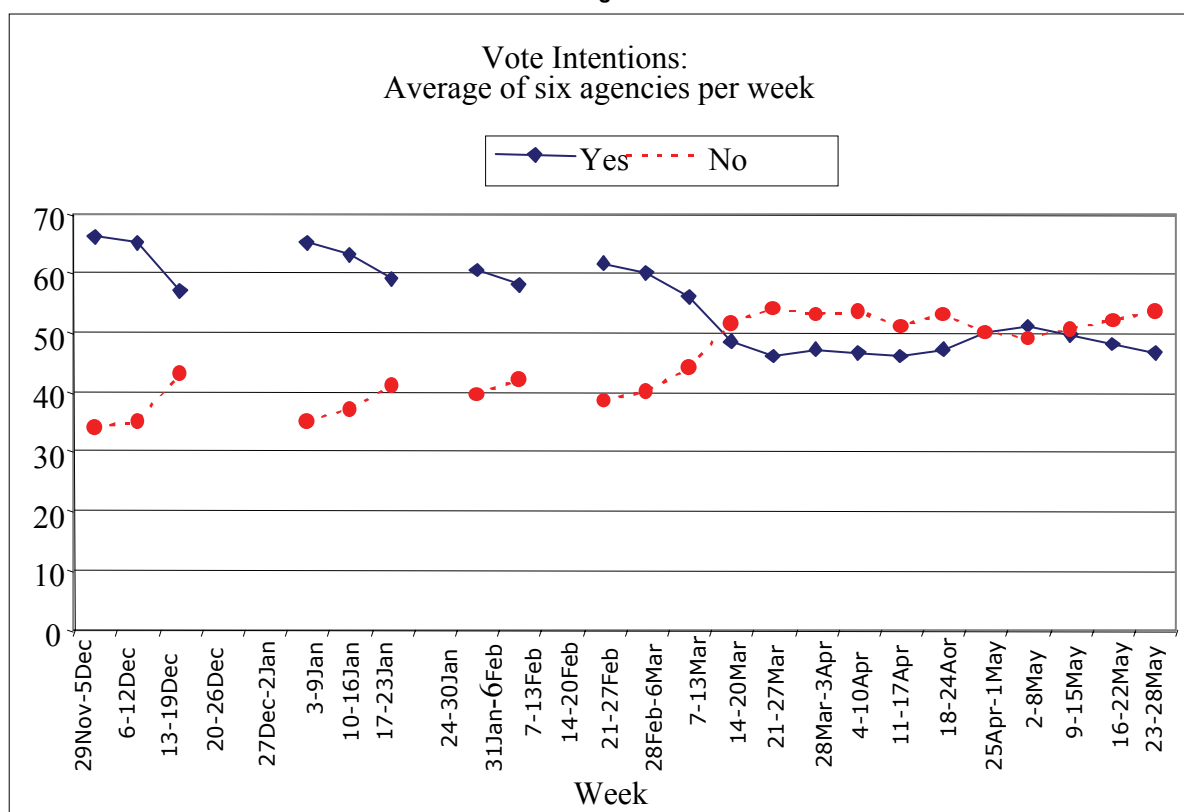
I consider that "every opinion is a marriage of information and predisposition". In this paper, I suggest that media news concerning election outcomes is not neutral because of different phenomena so called agenda setting, framing and priming, create accessibility bias in the news. By "accessibility bias" I mean that news place the emphasis on men, ideas, programs and other political objects and are discriminating them according to their degree of visibility for the general public. Accessibility biases are therefore the result of the way some objects are emphasized whilst others are left in the shadows thus directing public attention. For some scholars, the success of the news media to discriminate between objects is related to the credibility of the media source and not to the accessibility bias that they are generating (Miller, Krosnick, 2000). It is not the object of this paper to tell where the truth lies regarding the origin of this news media impact but to compare if it has the same intensity and gives the same "voting instructions" to the public. In one sense, it is impossible to give the same voting instructions for a European parliamentary election and a referendum which is asking a specific and brief question to the voters and which is not oriented towards the election of representatives. But what is concerned here is to know if it is possible to interpret the election results of the referendum in the light of the parliamentary election as affected by the intervention of the media in the campaign and by the voting process. At which point it makes sense to consider the reasons a media largely committed to a positive referendum outcome yielded a negative result.

To this end, we will rely on an earlier study carried out on the European parliamentary elections (Gerstlé et al, 2006) and the role of the media, on the analysis of the TV news coverage of the two campaigns in question, and on surveys that were conducted during the last referendum campaign. Why TV news? Because in several countries, respondents quote television as the most important source of information about European referendum campaigns. In the former study (Gerstlé et al., 2006), we concluded that it was not the tone of the news but the blend of visibility of the campaign, news framing and voters' predispositions that were decisive. We will check if the same blend was at work in the referendum campaign of 2005 in France.

I – FROM LOW TO HIGH VISIBILITY CAMPAIGN

The salience of a referendum campaign can be conceptualized as the interaction between the cues emitted by competing partisan and non-partisan actors, media coverage and the perceived closeness of the outcome. Concerning the perceived closeness of the outcome, voting intentions are a good indicator of the media construction of the political reality since most of the time they present these intentions by insisting on the YES versus NO votes and ignoring the floating vote. So the weekly averages used in Figure I give a good account of the potential evolution of voting intentions during the campaign

Figure I



“From the controversy about the Bolkestein directive and the first two polls placing the NO before the YES, and for the last two months of the campaign in mid-March, Europe becomes the first subject of our fellow citizens’ conversations, even before work, spare-time activities and family” according to Stéphane Rozès, who relies on a CSA² survey of the subjects of spontaneous conversations to assert this (at the end of April, Europe is at 37%, and then 40% in May).

² The French polling agency

Let's turn to comparison. In 2004, we had a very limited visibility of the election campaign whether we consider the official campaign or the media coverage of this campaign. According to the law of 9 July 1977, official propaganda is regulated as follows for the European parliamentary elections in France: two hours are shared by the five lists set by the parties represented at national level. But in 2004 the 16 other lists shared one hour of free TV if they were presenting candidates in at least five electoral regions. Altogether there were 113 election broadcasts. In 1994 three lists got 40 minutes each and the 17 others had to share 30 minutes, and in 1989 four lists shared 2 hours of free time while eleven lists got only 2 minutes and 45 seconds to broadcast their electoral message.

Besides the official campaign in the media, we have chosen to examine the two main evening news programs in France, broadcast at the same time (8 pm) on *TF1* (the main private channel) and *France 2* (the main public channel in terms of audiences). 138 newscasts were recorded, watched, and coded. This paper focuses on the election coverage, which is made up of all stories that mentioned political actors (government, political parties, President). The content of these reports was coded in different categories to study how television covered European parliamentary elections in 2004. What is important in this connection is the fact that news production is influenced by different people. On the one hand, with news management, politicians and their spin-doctors try to control or, at least, to influence the construction and content of information. They create pseudo-events to attract journalists and try to get coverage in accordance with their campaign strategies. On the other hand, journalists respond to such attempts by observing professional standards regarding manipulation. Thus, election coverage is the result of an interactive process that nobody can completely control (see Gerstlé 2004a).

Our analysis of the 1999 European campaigns in different countries confirmed the conclusion that Jay Blumler (1983) drew from the first elections of 1979: "The 1999 campaign confirms that a certain degree of visibility is required to launch a mobilization process, as Blumler observed twenty years ago: the turnout rate increases in proportion to campaign activity. The intensity of the communication and the support for the European Community constituted the two essential factors for explaining differences among national turnout levels. For instance, in Holland where people widely supported the EC, there was no alternative but to attribute the low level of turnout to the weakness of the campaign. Similarly and in contrast to the British case, in Germany the strong support for the EC and a rather active campaign led to a high level of turnout" (see Gerstlé et al. 2001). Of course, enlargement and the low level of electoral participation in the new member states of the EU brought about what we have called "loose political obligation" campaigns (Gerstlé et al. 2005) which combined the disaffection towards politics and the difficulties for the people in the new member countries of the EU to feel any "political obligation" as political theory understands the concept. This election revealed a gap between the "moral community" and the "legal community" to use Michaël Walzer's terms.

What is especially striking is to find that the TV news coverage of the European election of 2004 was lower than the coverage of the French regional election, which took place two months earlier³: The newscasts covered the European elections during 322 minutes for 69 days and 508 minutes were devoted to the regional elections during the ten weeks before the election day.

By comparison, what is the visibility of the referendum campaign? First in terms of official propaganda, only the political organisations with at least five representatives in the national parliament, or got 5% of the suffrage at the European parliament election can take part. So, between the 16 and the 27 of May, the party political broadcast time to broadcast the election message was 50 minutes for the NO camp (FN, MPF, RPF, PCF) and 90 minutes for the YES camp (UMP, UDF, PS et Radicaux, Verts). To this last amount of time, it is necessary to add presidential broadcast time: the president intervened on three occasions during the campaign. Besides the official campaign, the assessment of the daily TV news reveals the intensity of the media attention. During the six months preceding the referendum the time devoted to the YES campaign reached 796 minutes and only 141 minutes for the NO camp. And this explains the strong protest of the exponents of the NO against the "media tsunami", or the "tele-propaganda" or the "media hype". If we add the total time devoted to the campaign on TV we arrive at this amount (table 1):

Table 1: Time devoted to the campaigns on TV

2004		2005	
Official campaign	News Coverage	Official campaign	News coverage
180'	322'	140'	937'

We can quite obviously speak of a movement from low visibility to high visibility campaign specifically because of the news coverage discrepancy. "In six months, the country went from total indifference towards the referendum on the constitutional treaty to the highest degree of political mobilization the country had ever known since the 1981 Presidential election" according to Stéphane Rozès (2005).

But this unbalanced news coverage conceals a paradox. How is it that the YES cheerleaders, ubiquitous in the news, fail to convince the public? Is it not proof that political communication is not that effective? And the paradox grows if we consider that 44% of the voters (Sofres, May 29) declared themselves to be floating voters during the campaign. In the same way, the Flash Eurobarometer reports that "if the number of voters who made their choice at the beginning of the campaign is added to that of those who decided in the final weeks of the campaign, and even during the last week of the campaign, and to that of those who waited

³ There is a parallel to draw with the interest stated by the French in the European elections (only 25% of the people interviewed declared some interest in the European elections) and in the regional elections (with 44% of people interested).

until the actual day of the referendum, that makes a total of seven out of ten voters". It adds that "the biggest difference between YES voters and NO voters relates to the last few weeks of the Nihoul is spelt wrong in the footnote ⁴. We know (Le Duc, 2002) that referendum campaigns have an especially big impact on the voters with a trend of declining support to the proposition to ratify. And this referendum campaign is a good challenge to the cliché that the more communication there is, the more persuasion will follow.

The basis for this line of reasoning is only quantitative. It rests on a linear view of communication that sees a relation between the quantity of communication and the intensity of attitude change. This conception is old-fashioned and takes us to this paradox that the most visible, the most audible, did not gain control of the major channels of communication. And it is true that this premise was shared by the supporters of the YES who reckoned that Europe was only a question of information deficit and by the supporters of the NO who were convinced that media domination would be decisive. According to Blumler what is good to stimulate electoral participation is not necessarily good to persuade the voters. Sara Binzer Hobolt (2005) suggests that "intensive referendum campaigns provide a favourable informational environment that encourages citizens to absorb and process more information and consequently rely on more sophisticated decision criteria when deciding on the ballot proposal. This implies that in high salience campaigns voters are more likely to rely on their attitudes towards the EU than in a lower intensity campaign environment".

Finally, we can use the salience of the referendum in conversations as registered by IFOP in its monthly chart (table 2):

Table 2: The referendum in French people's conversations

Date	Subject	Row	Percentage
November 2004	Debate on Turkey's membership	7th	51%
December 2004	PS Referendum	10th	41%
January 2005	Preparation of the referendum	12th	26%
February 2005	Turkey's membership	12th	40%
March 2005	Preparation of the referendum	9th	48%
April 2005	Constitutional referendum	4th	66%
May 2005	Constitutional referendum	2d	83%
June 2005	NO victory	1st	92%

To understand how the victory of the NO was possible, we have to look at the content of the news, especially the news framing, and to compare it with the news framing used during the EU parliamentary election of 2004.

4 For the opposite view see G. Ricard Nihoul (2005)

II – The Unexpected effect of Permanent News Framing

To understand the result of 29 May it is necessary to look at the coverage of the campaign news but also to recall what we know about the usual news framing of European affairs. So we are going to consider, first, the ordinary framing of European affairs, then, the framing of the European elections campaigns and finally, the framing of the referendum campaign.

2.1 – ORDINARY FRAMING OF EUROPEAN AFFAIRS BETWEEN ELECTION TIMES

The coverage of European affairs in the daily press and on TV is not as favourable as one may think⁵. Commenting on a 1998 survey about the information the French get on European issues, Christine Ockrent, in charge of one of the programs most open to these questions (*France Europe Express*), noticed that 59% of French people feel very well or quite well informed against only 37% who feel quite, or very, badly informed. She declared herself surprised to see that television is the first source of information (42%), before newspapers (40%), radio (11%) and relatives and acquaintances (5%). We also learn from this survey that newspapers encourage support for the European construction (54%), against 28% on whom it may have the reverse effect). And yet, 69% of French people considered that newspapers treat European issues by always presenting the same point of view, against 23% who consider that the press presents fairly all the points of view. This could be the most interesting answer of this survey if we consider our own analysis results concerning European information in 1999. It would help to know if the notion of "point of view" is understood here either as partisan positions or as national positions. But in both cases, we do understand the bias attached to European information. It either gets blamed for being too favourable to European integration or for being too nationally oriented, which is a contradiction.

The 1999 results, obtained from a comparative analysis of the treatment of information in five countries (Germany, France, Italy, The Netherlands, the United Kingdom), showed that information is invariably oriented toward the elites in a framework seen as state centred with an intergovernmental take on the EU, essentially governed by national issues. They also showed that information is event-focused and dramatized either by the coverage of institutional events (the summits) or by internal crises (due to health crises: mad cow disease, dioxin crisis), associated with stands taken in favour of national interests. In the long run, it appears that media information about Europe is likely to make the European construction less legitimate. Concentration on national aspects, political elites, executives, summits and crises, instead of alternative considerations, is likely to discredit, in the long run, European institutions and the integration in progress by fragmenting the public space, and by cultivating

⁵ Ockrent, Christine, 1999, *L'Europe à travers la presse*, pp 121-132, in O.Duhamel, Ph.Méchet, *L'Etat de l'Opinion-Sofres*, Paris, Seuil.

the feeling of “democratic deficit” and of disconnection with the European leadership⁶. In other words, sector-based logics of information production and the national logic for setting the political agenda result in an emerging effect of delegitimation of the European construction.

2.2– THE FRAMING OF THE 2004 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS CAMPAIGN

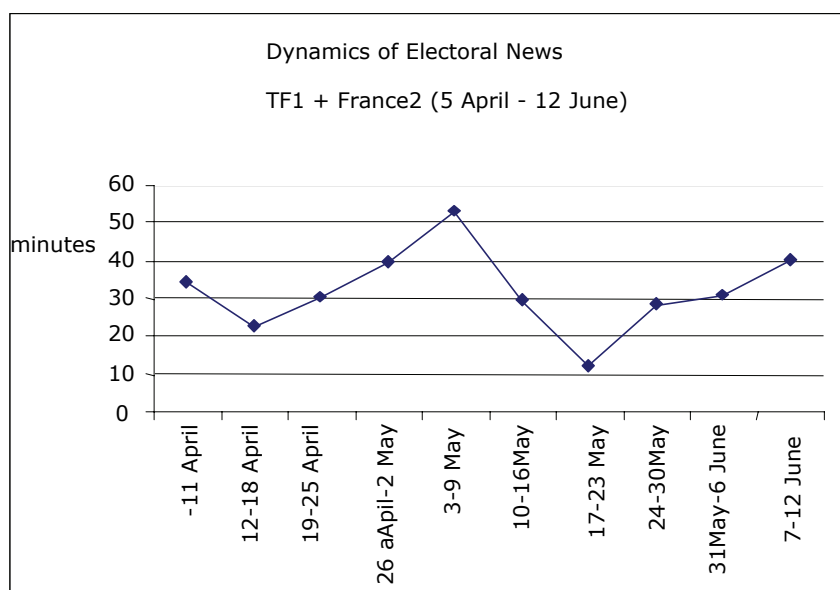
To explore the content of the news, it is necessary to make the difference between background, general news and European election news. We will first examine the background news and the election news and then the news devoted to European affairs to check if this can sort out political actors according to their issue ownership, that is the sectors where they traditionally perform well (e.g. The French Left is reputedly more likely to fight inequalities whereas the Right will more readily defend business). Table 3 shows the subjects covered by the background news for the 10 weeks the campaign lasted.

Table 3: Subjects selected by the newscasts

	TF1 mn	France 2 mn	Total length	TF1 stories	France 2 stories	Total stories
International	454 minutes 28	507 minutes 48	962 minutes 16	204	227	431
Justice	274 minutes 22	238 minutes 12	512 minutes 34	131	119	250
Social	200 minutes 53	133 minutes 27	334 minutes 20	102	73	175
Elections	124 minutes 08	197 minutes 44	321 minutes 52	37	72	109
Law & order	153 minutes 33	137 minutes 02	290 minutes 35	75	68	143
Health	143 minutes 18	132 minutes 14	275 minutes 32	77	63	140
Transports	117 minutes 23	104 minutes 20	221 minutes 43	63	54	117
Environment	135 minutes 04	66 minutes 46	201 minutes 50	77	34	111
Societal issues	90 minutes 32	80 minutes 58	171 minutes 30	46	40	86
Economy	75 minutes 51	88 minutes 38	164 minutes 29	42	45	87
Education	60 minutes	54 minutes 47	114 minutes 47	32	29	61
Agriculture	44 minutes 33	30 minutes 38	75 minutes 11	24	15	39
Total	1874 minutes 05	1772 minutes 34	3646 minutes 39	910	839	1749

⁶ Gerstlé, Jacques, L’information, entre fragmentation et intégration des espaces publics européens, pp 129-143 in A. Bockel, I. Karakas, dir., Diversité culturelle en Turquie et en Europe, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2004.

The dynamics of election news is shown by **figure 2**:



If we consider the whole information devoted to the EU in the news casts, the figure shows that the highest point was reached during the week of the Enlargement to the ten new members. And then it restarted during the last three weeks without getting the same visibility. In terms of European affairs, the news coverage put the emphasis on Enlargement (52%) and institutional aspects (20%). The more visible actors were the national ones (88%), much more than the supranational ones (12%), and especially the European Council (56%), which got a higher visibility than the Parliament and the Commission.

If we look at the issues in the table 3, we see that Europe comes first but still 70% of the issues remain national or international ones.

Table 4 : Issues in the election news (TF1 + France 2)

Issues	Percentage
Europe	30
Economy	23
Social	19
Same-sex marriage	7
International	5
Anti-Semitism	4
Laïcité confessional/secular issues	3
Law and order	2
Decentralisation	2
Justice	2
Environment	1
Health	1
Education	0.5
Transports	0.5
Total	100

During the ten weeks preceding the Parliamentary election, the media agenda was characterized by international problems (Iraq, enlargement, Israel-Palestine conflict). The social questions, which were embarrassing for the government, came third. The campaign itself represented only 9% of the total news, and was most visible on the public channel.

The coverage (dynamics and content) of European affairs during the campaign is described by the figure 3 and table 5.

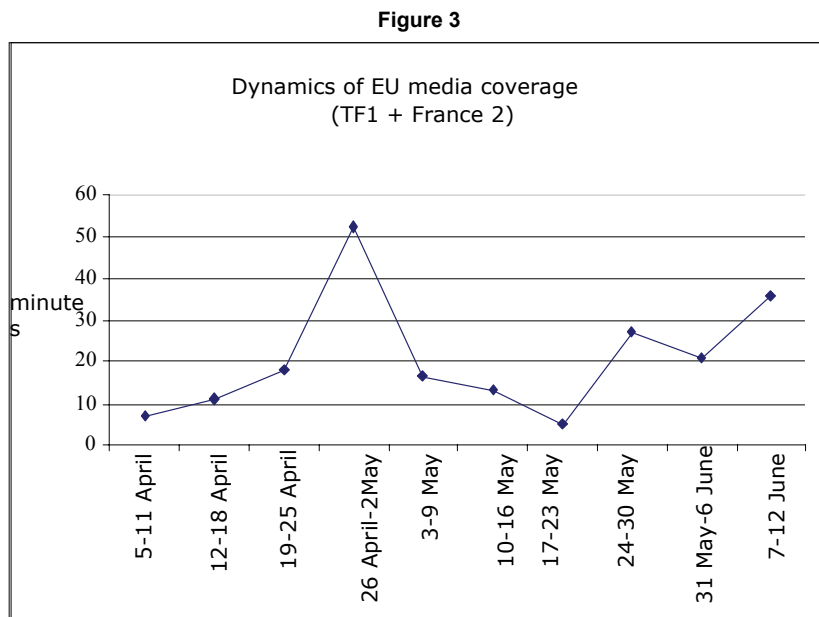


Table 5: Issues arising from European Affairs (TF1 + France 2)

EU issue	Percentage
Enlargement	52 %
Constitution	20 %
Turkey	7 %
Economy	6 %
Societal	5 %
Ballot system	4 %
Foreign & defence policies	2 %
Agriculture & fisheries	2 %
Transports	1 %
Immigration	0.5 %
Environment	0.5 %
Total	100

We can see that in the 138 newscasts of the 2004 parliament election the coverage was framed as follow:

2.2.1 A NATIONAL RATHER THAN EUROPEAN FRAMING

The poll could be presented either as focusing more on the European construction, or, on the contrary, as focusing more on France's internal situation. So, in our content analysis we have divided the material in two mutually exclusive parts. The national framing is made up of all instances concerning French politics, but unrelated to European construction, while the European framing is made up of all those specifically dealing with the European debate.

2.2.2 GAME FRAME RATHER THAN ISSUE FRAME: GAME AND STAKES

Besides the national or European frames, "European information" could be divided in two other sets, two very different ways for journalists to cover the elections and so to construct the reality of the campaign for television audiences: the "game frame" and the "issue frame". The "game" puts the stress on the contest between the actors and the strategies implemented to maximize votes. On the contrary, the "issues" focus on problems of public interest and that should be collectively solved by the election.

Table 6 shows the main results of these breakdowns. We note that France 2 devoted more actual time and stories to the campaign as well as stories than TF1. Moreover, we notice that both channels tended to focus on the national frame rather than on the European frame. On the other hand, the two channels could differ in the stress put on issues for TF1 and on electoral game for France 2.

Table 6: Coverage of the European Parliamentary Campaign by both main evening news programs (5 April – 12 June)

	Coverage of European election (minutes)	Number of stories	Game frame	Issue frame	National frame	European frame
TF1 (private channel)	124 minutes (7% of total news coverage)	37	29 minutes (23% of election coverage)	95 minutes (77% of election coverage)	71 minutes (57% of election coverage)	53 minutes (43% of election coverage)
France 2 (public channel)	198 minutes (11% of total news coverage)	72	102 minutes (52% of election coverage)	96 minutes (48% of election coverage)	126 minutes (64% of election coverage)	72 minutes (36% of election coverage)
TOTAL	322 minutes (9% of total news coverage)	109	131 minutes (41% of election coverage)	191 minutes (59% of election coverage)	197 minutes (61% of election coverage)	125 minutes (39% of election coverage)

2.3– THE FRAMING OF THE REFERENDUM CAMPAIGN

We decided to observe the referendum campaign and its preliminaries thus counting the news since the end of November 2004 until 28 May. Therefore the material is composed of 362 newscasts analyzed with the same content framing grid. So we had a National versus European Frame, a Game versus Issue Frame and we just added a YES versus NO Frame according to the main orientation given to the information. The results are given in table (7).

Table 7: Coverage of the Referendum Campaign by both main evening news programs (November 29th –May 29th)

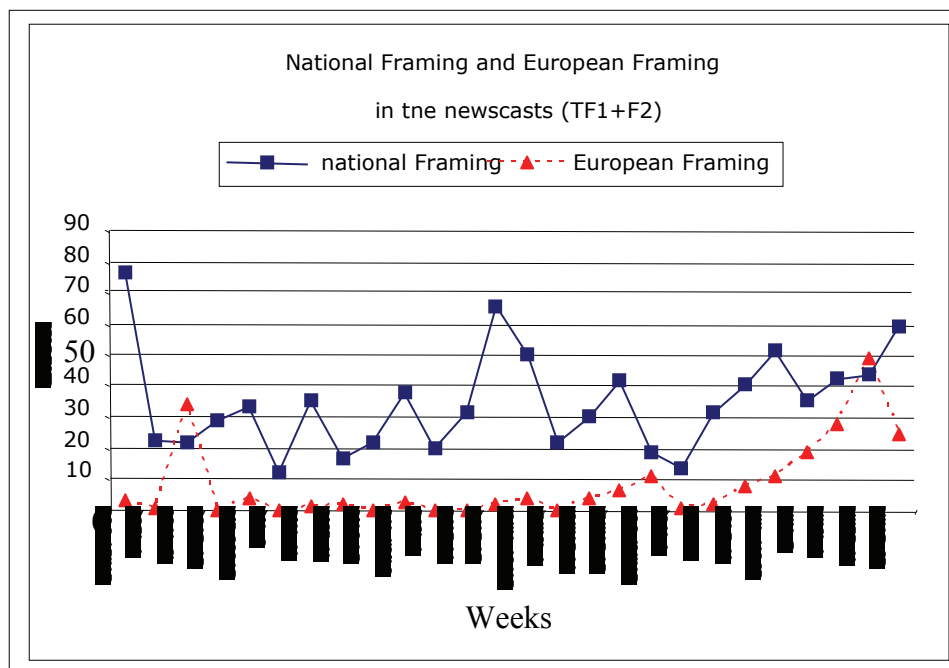
	Coverage of the Referendum	Game frame	Issue frame	National frame	European frame	YES frame	NO frame
TF1 (private channel)	524 minutes	266 minutes* (52 % of referendum coverage)	250 minutes (48 % of referendum coverage)	402 minutes (77 % of referendum coverage)	122 minutes (23 % of referendum coverage)	380 minutes (87 % of referendum coverage)	59 minutes (13 % of referendum coverage)
France 2 (public channel)	590 minutes	359 minutes** (62 % of referendum coverage)	224 minutes (38 % of referendum coverage)	498 minutes (84 % of referendum coverage)	92 minutes (16 % of referendum coverage)	417 minutes (83 % of referendum coverage)	83 minutes (17 % of referendum coverage)
TOTAL	1114 minutes	625 minutes (57 % of referendum coverage)	474 minutes (43 % of referendum coverage)	900 minutes (81 % of referendum coverage)	214 minutes (19 % of referendum coverage)	797 minutes (85 % of referendum coverage)	142 minutes (15 % of referendum coverage)

* Eight minutes couldn't be coded within the game/issue split for TF1.

** Seven minutes couldn't be coded within the game/issue split for France 2.

It clearly appears that the differential of visibility between the two channels has decreased: a 66 minutes gap in six months instead of 74 minutes in ten weeks. Furthermore, the national frame greatly dominates the European frame: 900 minutes against 214. The national frame even rose in comparison with the European elections since it grew from 61% to 81% of the information whereas the European frame fell from 39% to 19%. Even from a dynamic point of view (Figure 4), the national frame almost always takes precedent on the European frame. So that in referendum priorities, the European dimension dominates for only two weeks out of twenty-six: from the 13 to the 19 of December, during the debate about Turkey's membership, and, very slightly during the last but one week of the campaign. During the last week, when we could have expected a predominance of the European questions in the deliberative process, the gap grew wider to the benefit of the national frame.

Figure 4



Thus is raised the question of the effect of this framing, which means the question of the possible steering towards a particular perception and interpretation of the referendum by the voters. Indeed, by focusing attention on one part of the political reality, the frame may influence the considerations, the cognitive structures that will be used by the voters in the process of electoral decision. And yet, even if it is still discussed in the scientific community, the most likely hypothesis is that voters with a weak political competence are more sensitive to the framing effect⁷. The interest in the campaign was higher among the YES voters than the NO voters, if we trust the CSA exit poll (56% admit a lot or some interest for 43% who admit little or no interest).

The NO partisans' sociological profile makes one think that they are indeed in this case of lesser political political competence. Consequently, the broadly national frame of the referendum may have made national considerations more important than European considerations in their choice process. In other words, it may have prompted them to rely on their opinion about the national situation rather than on their opinion about the European construction to make a choice. However, it can be noted that on 1 December, the Socialist

⁷ This is what we showed in a previous study about the European parliamentary elections of June 2004. A part of the electorate on the Right, more sensitive to the national frame of the poll, swung to the Left, following a process we may qualify as « deflection – sanction ». And, this segment of the electorate, decisive key to the great defeat of the majority, is characterised by a weak political competence and a strong exposure to the media. Jacques Gerstlé, Raul-Magni Berton, Christophe Piar, « Information et vote dans le cadre des élections au Parlement européen », communication au colloque La construction européenne au prisme des élections au Parlement européen de juin 2004, Strasbourg, 18-19 novembre 2004.

internal referendum did not prevent 60% of them from voting YES whereas the framing of the information was very national. It can be objected that the campaign had not really started then or that it was just getting started.

This hypothesis seems confirmed by the CSA exit poll. This survey helps get an idea of the most salient considerations in the decision of people surveyed right after they voted. According to this poll, 52% of the electors who voted NO came to this choice thinking of national problems rather than of the construction of Europe (against 42% who thought of Europe first). On the contrary, 81% of the electors who voted YES were motivated by the European construction rather than national problems⁸. The TNS-Sofres post-referendum survey carried out between the 30 and 31st of May for EOS Gallup Europe and provided in the Flash Eurobarometer 171 reports that "the majority of the YES supporters focused their decision on the European dimension (52%), while the NO camp was more motivated by France's economic and social situation (47%)".

Pretending that a part of the electorate did not really answer the question that was asked obviously calls the premises of public ideal into question. But one must admit, rejecting any value judgment, that in a political knowledge environment where the average is weak and the variance strong, according to Philip Converse, competence is a basic variable to understand the results of the elections⁹. Unless an alternative yardstick be taken into consideration as shrewdly suggested by G.Ricard-Nihoul (2005) when she observes that "the 2005 vote has the added interest that it may be the first vote on European matters having fully taken on board globalisation issues even if it translates today a perception, something felt than a true grasp of the facts".

If we insist on the channel effect, we still note that

1. The first outcome is the domination of the YES frame on the two channels that reveals the agreement of the political and media elites about the expected outcome of the election.
2. The second is the domination of the national frame over the European one on both channels. It is more pronounced for the public channel than for the private one, with a gap of 69 points for the former and of 53 points for the latter.
3. The third outcome is the gap denoting the use of the game frame (62%) over the issue frame (only 38%) on the public channel. On the private channel, the same gap is less pronounced (52% vs 48%). If we compare with the coverage of the 2004 European parliament election, we can observe that TF1 has returned to a more balanced coverage, while France 2 increases the differential between the two frames from 4 points to 24 points in favour of the game frame.

⁸ Survey conducted on May 29th, 2005 (N = 5216)

⁹ See S. Althaus, *Collective preferences in democratic politics: Opinion surveys and the will of the people*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003. The author shows that if every elector had the highest level of political competence, the electoral outcomes would be very different.

There appears to be a shift of position between the two channels from one election to the other in terms of game framing and issue framing. In some way, it could be said that the covering of European matters has homogenized since 2004 on a pro-YES line, with a distinct domination of the national framing and a domination of the political game framing however more obvious on France 2.

The breakdown between TV information units focused on the game (campaign, declarations, political scandals, analysis, surveys), and those on the public political issues is given on table 8.

Table 8: Construction of the referendum campaign in TV evening news programs (TF1+France2)

Campaign	Statements	Political scandals	Analyses	Surveys	Total "game"	Total "issue"
290 min 26 %	164 min 15 %	104 min 9 %	49 min 4 %	18 min 3 %	625 min 57 %	474 min 43 %

As table 7 shows, with 57%, the game overshadows the issues. The game is made of several categories, one of them being the *campaign*, formed of all the sequences when the political actors mingle with the crowd and shake hands for example (26%). The competitors' *statements* express attacks (negative), supports (positive), and reactions (neutral). These represent 15%. The game also includes the *political scandals* (9%) and the *analyses* (4%), which indicate the evaluations made by journalists¹⁰. At last, 3% of the treatment is devoted to *surveys*. The second set, the issues (43%), is made up of the protagonists' stands about questions of public politics. The "issue frame" deals with the campaign as a debate for the settlement of collective problems.

the dominance of the game brings to the fore, besides the PS internal divisions, political actors' statements and journalists' analyses concerned with the executive and specifically the future of Raffarin's government. The government, whose unpopularity level was obvious, is thus at the centre of the campaign, along national frame lines, the more so since it dominates the pro-YES coverage .

10 Analyses are often made at the end of a report, or on the set, by experts of this kind of commentaries : François Bachy on TF1 and Gilles Leclerc on France 2.

2.4– THE FRAMING OF POLITICAL FORCES DURING THE REFERENDUM CAMPAIGN

In order to examine the way the different actors handle the question, we have banded them into four forces¹¹, the framing of which seems selective at first as they are unequally represented as far as quantity is concerned, but also in terms of game and issues, as table 9 shows.

Table 9: Selective framing of the political forces (Total TF1 + France 2)

	Campaign	Statements	Political scandals	Analyses	Surveys	"Game frame" total	"Issue frame"	Total
Right wing YES	124 min 03 19 %	77 min 06 12 %	74 min 51 11.5 %	34 min 25 5.5 %	40 sec -	311 min 05 48 %	338 min 55 52 %	650 min 00 100 %
Left wing YES	58 min 48 40 %	49 min 41 34 %	1 min 30 1 %	9 min 09 6 %	3 sec -	119 min 11 81 %	27 min 44 19 %	146 min 55 100 %
YES total	182 min 51 23 %	126 min 47 16 %	76 min 21 9.5 %	43 min 34 5.5 %	43 sec -	430 min 16 54 %	366 min 39 46 %	796 min 55 100 %
Right wing NO	11 min 05 20.5 %	11 min 30 21 %	18 min 21 34 %	1 min 26 2.5 %	-	42 min 22 78 %	11 min 49 22 %	54 min 11 100 %
Left wing NO	35 min 58 41 %	26 min 02 30 %	9 sec -	2 min 23 2.5 %	-	64 min 32 73.5 %	23 min 13 26.5 %	87 min 45 100 %
NO total	47 min 03 33 %	37 min 32 26.5 %	18 min 30 13 %	3 min 49 3 %	-	106 min 54 75.5 %	35 min 02 24.5 %	141 min 56 100 %

Table 9 shows that the "right-wing YES" was the only one to be treated more in terms of issues (52%) than game (42%). This is due to a kind of journalistic deference to the executive power, which can be found in each campaign; but it is also due to the control this power actually exerts on public politics issues. Its very strong visibility (650 minutes) was not likely to convince the decisive segment of the Socialist sympathizers. With 147 minutes, the "left-wing YES" is the second force. But, with 81% for the game versus 19% only for the issues, this "left-wing YES" does not succeed in putting these issues, and specially the European ones, at the centre of its media representation. That is why, strategically, the left pro-YES campaign is a failure. It is, so to speak, vampirised by the widely reported disagreements within the Socialist camp. Finally, with nearly 88 minutes, 73,5% of which to game and 26,5% to issues,

11 The "right-wing YES" covered the government, the French President, UMP and UDF. The "left-wing YES" covered the Socialists and the Greens. The "left-wing NO" covered Socialist and Green dissidents, MRC of JP Chevènement and the far-Left: CP, LCR, and LO. Finally, Ph. De Villiers' MPF, FN, Charles Pasqua's RPF and the UMP Eurosceptic element formed the "right-wing NO".

the "left-wing NO" precedes the "right-wing NO", which is only given 54 minutes, (78% for game and 22% for issues).

Table 10 allows to detail the subjects on which these same four forces got coverage, as far as exclusively European issues were concerned. For it is well known that one of the key points of the strategic management of information consists in focusing on some subjects, in order to try to impose them as a decision criterion on the campaign targets (priming strategy)¹².

Table 10: European issues breakdown according to political forces (TF1 + France 2)

	Right wing "YES"	Left wing "YES"	Right wing "NO"	Left wing "NO"
Economy	24 %	3 %	24 %	8 %
Societal	22 %	59 %	11 %	73 %
Turkey	20 %	4 %	27 %	1 %
Institutions	19 %	17 %	19 %	9 %
CFSP	5 %	4 %	6 %	7 %
Peace	5 %	4 %	-	-
Abortion	2 %	-	-	-
Enlargement (besides Turkey)	1 %	-	-	-
Agriculture	1 %	-	-	-
Loss of sovereignty	0.4 %	-	8 %	-
Law & Order	0.2 %	9 %	4 %	2 %
Culture	0.2 %	-	-	-
Environment	0.1 %	-	-	-
"Laïcité"confessional/secular issues	0.1 %	-	-	-
Technocracy	-	-	1 %	-
Total	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %

The "right-wing YES" insists, as it did in 1992, rather on economic subjects (24%), which comes slightly before social subjects (22%, versus 1% only for Maastricht). But the "right-wing YES" camp feels compelled to take a stand on social matters because of current events. The third place of Turkey (20%) must be noted, as it is a bone of contention between the President and his UMP party. To be noticed too: the decline of the Turkish question salience. A top campaign issue when this campaign started, it will come last but one at the end, with only

12 This is well illustrated by this extract from a speech of Laurent Fabius for the European elections of 2004 : « I only know one rule in politics. It is that those who chose the subjects and impose them are those who win the election ».

14% of French people having taken this question into account to make up their minds on 29 May. The CFSP only represents 5% in 2005, whereas it was quite important in 1992 (24%)¹³.

The "left-wing YES", whose favourite theme in 1992 was economy, and particularly the debates about single currency, now insists on completely different issues. Social Europe, (which, according to the majority PS posters, "hangs on a YES") is far ahead with 59%, before institutional matters (17%).

In 1992, the "right-wing NO" had made much of its refusal of the single currency. Now, it is strongly opposed to Turkey's joining the EU (27%). As far as economical subjects are concerned (24%), it defends the idea of a "Community preference".

At last, the "left-wing NO", whose campaign can fairly be described as "single issue focuses on social matters (73%). Its discourse can then perfectly match general news, in which social problems are omnipresent. We find here the theses we had put forward, about the effects generated by the conjunction and disjunction of information and controlled communication. When the former somehow validates the arguments of the latter, a homogeneous information flow is created, which favours the emergency of a dominating representation¹⁴.

13 This can be explained by the fact that the 1992 referendum occurred during the Yugoslav crisis.

14 Gerstlé, Jacques, *La communication politique*, Paris, 2004.

III – The Omnipresence of Social Problems and judgment

Priming

General news around the referendum campaign were characterized by the overwhelming presence of social issues, much more than during the regional and European campaigns of 2004, even though they were already present at the time. And the media representation of the European Union is also marked by this phenomenon.

3.1 – MEDIA SPOTLIGHT ON SOCIAL ISSUES

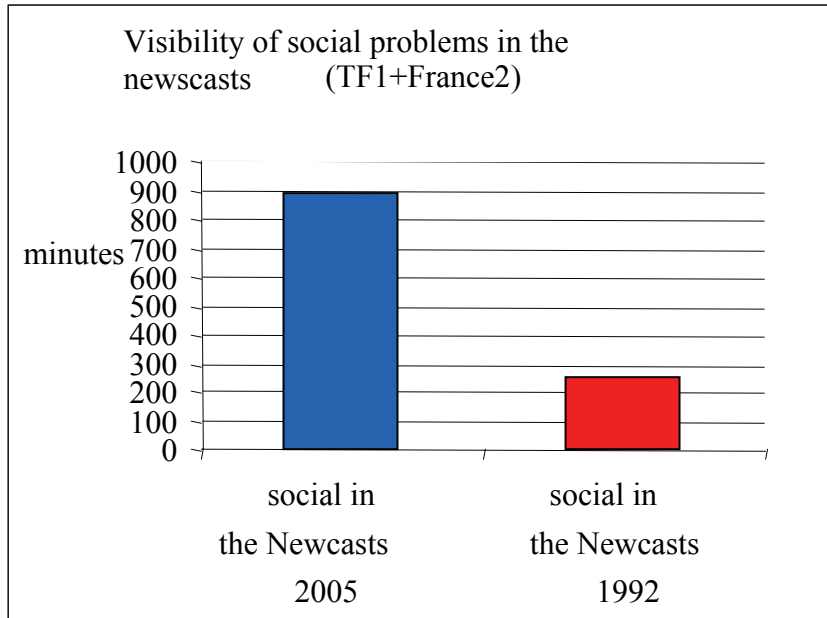
From mid-March and the Bolkestein directive on liberalization of services, which provides for the application of the social laws of the country of origin, the European construction question was rekindled and dramatized, through enlargement. According to Stéphane Rozès, “in one week, the threat represented by the proposed directive was to create a short circuit between French daily life and the European debate”. This fuse blown, a drop of 14% in favourable voting intentions was recorded in 20 days between French daily life and the European debate”. This in-draught, or more accurately air pocket, translated into a drop of 14% in favourable voting intentions in 20 days. “The lower classes’ intention to abstain crumbled to solidify into a NO Vote. Since this electoral turning point, the thaw of the abstention rate, from 53% to 33%, comes essentially from the popular classes”. “From then on, the social question will be the first criterion to define what is desirable in France and in Europe”.

Figure 5 allows us to compare the level of social issues covering in 2005 and in 1992 in the news. For the six months preceding each referendum, social matters represented 889 minutes in 2005, against only 250 minutes in 1992. It is a fundamental data to understand the 29 May result . Indeed, as paradoxical as it may appear, the unemployment rate was similar in these two periods¹⁵. Of course, we cannot reduce social matters to unemployment rate only. However, it appears to be quite a powerful indicator. The presence of social issues in the media was three times stronger in 2005 than in 1992 (in the middle of the Yugoslav crisis, which occupied a great part of the news), whereas, objectively, the social situation was comparable. So one can assume that this impressive difference might not be neutral in terms of impact on polls outcomes (YES victory in 1992, NO victory in 2005). For some authors, the perception of the collective situation (for example, the national situation) correlates more with opinion than the personal situation does. This is known as Impersonal Influence, which gives a greater importance to sociotropism, that is the superior impact of collective considerations

15 Unemployment rate was 10.4 % in September 1992, and 10.2 % in April 2005, according to the Ministry for Employment.

over egocentrism¹⁶. According to this theory, the media play a central role, because they are the most appropriate channel to perceive and evaluate the collective situation¹⁷. We might add that, in this process, information can also draw the people's attention to elements of their own situation, when this personal situation is in some way "shared" with others.

Figure 5



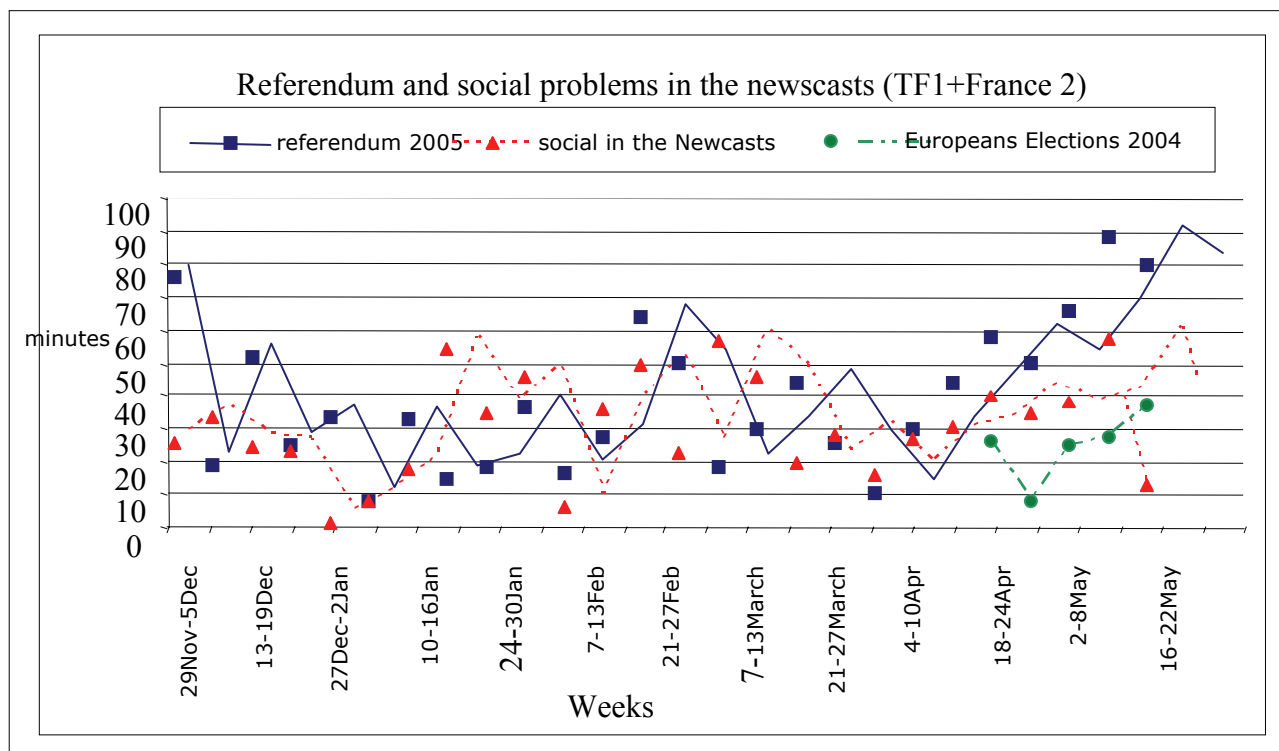
So, as an issue floods the daily news, it holds public attention (agenda effect) and it establishes itself as a criterion to assess political objects (priming effect), which means it will be used to judge politicians, ideas, programmes, etc. And, as already mentioned in part 2, during the referendum campaign about the constitutional treaty, TV news broadly covered economic and social issues in a national frame.

It is observable in figure 6 that times of socially dominant news are matched by the progression of the NO or regression of the YES much as the first overtaking of the YES by the NO in the second period (7/20 March) can be seen from the synthetic chart on the evolution of voting intentions provided in annex

16 D. Mutz, *Impersonal influence. How perceptions of mass collectives affect political attitudes*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998.

17 In the book quoted above, Diana Mutz takes the example of the perception of insecurity in the US. In the nineties, Americans reckoned that criminality and delinquency had increased over the last 20 years. But this perception was wrong. Figures were even slightly lower. What is true though, it is that the media coverage of these issues tremendously increased, altering the perception of reality by individuals.

Figure 6



Among news items, we can cite unemployment, precariousness, purchasing power, the 35 hours working week, the strong social mobilization of 10 March, the fears aroused by the Bolkestein directive, the announcements of social redundancy plans and relocations, proposals for workforce reclassification in Romania or Mauritius, and, finally, social movements against the suppression of the Whit Monday bank holiday. The national mobilization day about salaries, employment and the 35 hours working week gathered between 570 thousand and one million people, whether using police or the trade unions sources, and was especially spectacular. The March demonstrations gathered.

A broad church from railwaymen to postmen, and including gas and electricity workers, office staff, teachers, ER medics, public sector scientists and radio technicians, fishermen, all gathered to defend public services. There was a real flood of social issues that overwhelmed TV news, much as insecurity overwhelmed the 2002 presidential campaign. Social issues brought about a re-nationalisation of the European debate. The "European constraint" was blown apart and released a force repressed for a long time, and which defines "what is nationally desirable by adjusting the debate about European aims to French needs" to talk like Stéphane Rozès. This democratic appropriation "relativized the lack of leadership in the NO camp".

This news, with strong social connotation, may have activated a priming effect. According to civic ideal, citizens, invited to vote on the constitutional treaty, should have judged each article, and evaluated the whole text based on these judgements. But political psychology shows that citizens, when they have a decision to make, satisfy themselves with a choice

based on the most accessible criterion. Since social questions were under media spotlights during the campaign, these questions were then particularly accessible.

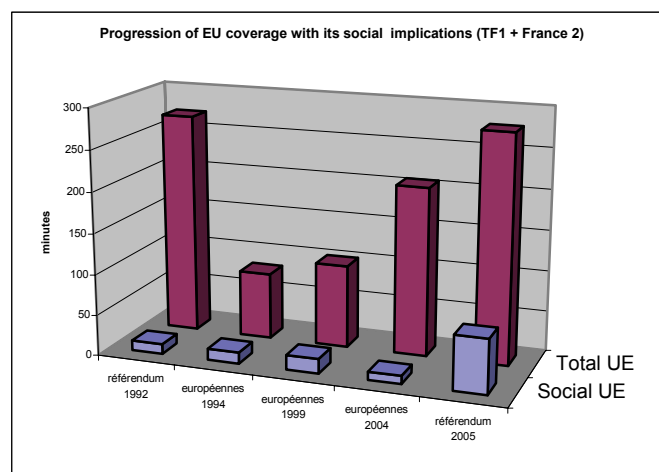
The impact of the priming depends on both the issue and the voters' ideological trend. It is stronger for right wing voters when these issues concern insecurity for example, and it is stronger for left wing voters when social matters dominate the news. What we are talking about here is what English speaking research calls "the issue-ownership", which means that a political party is known for having a stronger credibility on some issues than on others. In this case, left wing voters, who voted NO at more than 62% and who were the majority of the NO camp, the most susceptible to news leading to a socially driven choice.

This hypothesis seems confirmed by the CSA exit poll quoted above. To the question "At the time of the vote, what issues were the most important to you ?", France's social situation is a strong first among NO voters (55%) against only 23% for YES voters. For the latter, that is Europe's place in the world with 50% that came first against only 4% for NO voters.

3.2–SOCIAL PROBLEMATIZATION OF THE EUROPEAN CONSTRUCTION

Figure 7 bands the global visibility of European questions and the proportion the social themes hold in these questions, during the ten weeks before the 1992 referendum, the 1994, 1999 and 2004 European elections and the vote of 29 May¹⁸.

Figure 7



The coverage in minutes of the European Union in 2005, is broadly similar to the 1992 coverage. It was much lower in 1994 and 1999. In 2004, the election took place a few weeks after the enlargement, which implies a more sustained attention by comparison with the preceding European elections. But the most striking fact is the evolution of the place given to

18 In electoral (or referendum) news and in daily news treated in TV news evening programs on TF1 and France 2.

social subjects. These only represented 4,5% of the treatment of the European construction in the evening news in 1992, but 24% in 2005. The link established between Europe and social matters could only reduce the possibility of ratification, considering the prevailing mood.

During the campaign, the NO campaigners greatly reproached the media for favouring the YES. From a quantitative point of view, there can be no question. It is conspicuous in the evening news that the YES campaigners were constantly more visible than their opponents. Yet, this did not prevent the latter from winning. Such accusations are a good example indeed of a rather naïve and old-fashioned vision of persuasion. For persuasion obeys more complex mechanisms. Current events have played a part against the ratification, not so much by favouring a position to the detriment of another than by focusing public attention on a national (and European) situation where social problems were omnipresent, and thus validating the arguments in favour of the NO. Because, "the general conclusion here is that judgment and choice are inevitably shaped by considerations that are, however briefly, accessible. And when it comes to political judgment and choice, no institution yet devised compete with television news in determining which considerations come to light and which remain in darkness" (Iyengar et al., p 120).

All in all, the very homogeneous coverage in favour of the YES came over as dissonant in comparison with the ordinary coverage of European affairs on both channels, and thus was quite unconvincing. The dominating national framing and the game framing widely helped them in the political public space around the national community preferably to the European community. Anxiety about social matters and discontent towards governmental politics focused public attention, and led to the rejection of the ratification, become somehow redundant in this referendum about the management of French affairs.

This diagnosis on the reasons for the rejection of the ratification fits in with diverse analyses accounting for the NO vote and focusing on social themes.

The analysis of the IPSOS exit poll on 3355 people shows that the discontent with current economic and social situation in France comes way ahead (52% of those who voted NO, particularly among blue collar workers -(56%) - office workers - (60%)- and mid-management -(52%)). Then come the criticism of the too liberal nature of the project (39%) and the opposition of the Turkey's entry into the EU (35%, mostly among elderly people and among right and far-right voters who voted NO). In the same way, the SOFRES stresses the risk of increasing unemployment (46%) then the widespread discontent (40%) and the need to re-negotiate the treaty (35%) as the main motives to vote NO.

Three hypotheses were tested by S. Brouard and N. Sauger¹⁹ (2005) to understand the victory of the NO: partisan proximity, economic trends and attitude towards Europe, and more precisely fears raised by the European construction: namely that France might pay for the

19 From two TNS-Sofres pre-electoral surveys, made in April, 13 – 21 and May, 11 – 17, for a project "European stakes and referendum".

other countries, that there might be less social protection in France, that we might lose our national identity and our culture; that France might play a lesser part in the world; that the number of immigrants might rise; that unemployment might increase. The question about Turkey's membership was not central at the time of the vote. "On the other hand, the vote about the European constitutional treaty seems to have focused on the "social question", to echo one of the main themes of the campaign... So the 29 May vote greatly turned on the estimation of the possible negative consequences the ratification of the treaty would imply" (Brouard et al.,2005). In the logistic regression they carry out, the authors show that two variables play a central part: on one hand, the estimation of economic and social effects that could be produced by the ratification of the European treaty (the guarantee of social rights in Europe, the evolution of unemployment in France, the evolution of the level of social protection in France); on the other hand, the attachment to European institutions, as defined from the level of fear evolved from six fears associated with the European construction. In conclusion the authors assert that "social fears and the rejection of the European project were the main basis for the refusal of the European constitution... to which can be added the unpopularity of the executive and the opposition to the enlargement of the EU". In the same way, for B. Cautrès (2005), "the social anxiety was the true key to the vote", and for Gaetane Ricard-Nihoul (2005), "discontent or fears regarding the economic and social situation seem to dominate the explanations of the NO vote".

IV – Media and Perception of the Campaign

If it is true, as H. Portelli (2005) says, that the “NO voters leaned to the left and YES voters leaned to the right” it is less surprising to see 51% of France 2 (public channel) viewers vote NO as against 56% for TF1 (private channel). And yet Table NO voters leaned to the left and YES voters leaned to the right 10 clearly shows the share of “social” information on TF1 to be superior to the one on France 2 by 70 minutes and that therefore the conditions are met for a “priming” effect favouring the NO. Percentages show 53% of NO voters watching TF1 and 39% of YES voter watching France 2. The heavy social bias in background news totally blurred the positive message on the ratification of the constitution project. With only 45 minutes more for the referendum than for social news of a national nature TF1 gives more of a steer than France 2 with a 180 minutes disparity between the two types of information. (See table 11) As a matter of interest, during the regional elections of 2004, out of 100 TF1 viewers, 29 had voted for the left, 40 for the right and 21 for the far right against 48% of France 2 viewers voting left, 30% right, and 11% far right.

Table 11 coverage for “referendum” and for “social problems” in general news in the evening news on TF1 and France 2 (29 November-28 May) broken down in weeks:

Weeks	TF1		France 2	
	Référendum	Social Background	Référendum	Social Background
29 November - 5 December	35 min 09	20 min 09	44 min 46	9 min 02
6 December - 12 December	11 min 13	21 min 45	11 min 31	15 min 40
13 December - 19 December	34 min 43	13 min 31	20 min 44	14 min 45
20 December - 26 December	14 min 51	19 min 01	14 min 02	7 min 51
27 December - 2 January	18 min 31	3 min 32	18 min 50	1 min 45
3 January - 9 January	6 min 27	1 min 20	5 min 37	10 min 44
10 January - 16 January	12 min 25	13 min 16	23 min 56	8 min 32
17 January - 23 January	6 min 31	27 min 18	11 min 45	31 min 00
24 January - 30 January	11 min 00	26 min 26	10 min 56	11 min 40
31 January - 6 February	19 min 11	23 min 53	21 min 06	26 min 05
7 February - 13 February	7 min 42	4 min 02	12 min 30	5 min 55
14 February - 20 February	10 min 18	22 min 55	21 min 00	16 min 38
21 February - 27 February	33 min 15	25 min 39	34 min 26	27 min 28
28 February - 6 March	23 min 33	18 min 48	30 min 21	7 min 45
7 March - 13 March	9 min 35	32 min 02	12 min 25	28 min 16
14 March - 20 March	15 min 47	25 min 19	17 min 32	24 min 28
21 March - 27 March	23 min 17	11 min 38	24 min 34	11 min 40
28 March - 3 April	7 min 57	15 min 20	21 min 13	16 min 20
4 April - 10 April	2 min 27	6 min 48	11 min 58	13 min 04
11 April - 17 April	14 min 53	12 min 39	18 min 39	18 min 04
18 April - 24 April	26 min 27	19 min 23	21 min 38	14 min 57
25 April - 1er May	30 min 52	24 min 03	30 min 45	19 min 40
2 May - 8 May	30 min 14	23 min 21	23 min 28	15 min 15
9 May - 15 May	27 min 37	23 min 31	41 min 45	18 min 40
16 May - 22 May	44 min 41	32 min 11	46 min 58	28 min 56
23 May - 29 May	45 min 52	11 min 22	37 min 15	5 min 19
Total:	524 min 28	479 min 12	589 min 40	409 min 29

4.1 – RELEVANCE TO THE CAMPAIGN AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION

In 2005, out of 100 people who declared they didn't watch TV news, 54% voted NO and 46% YES. However, and contrary to the 2004 elections, the interest in the campaign was proven, as 69% of the people interviewed declared they were interested in the referendum, against 25% for the European elections and 44% for the 2004 regional elections: "French people have seized the question they were asked" (Tiberj 2005). "As it stood, the campaign for the 2004 elections couldn't rally any part of the French electorate, not even the highly politicised voters... With such a low level of interest in the campaign, it is even surprising to note that the final turnout reached 43%. After all, it could have been worse." (Cautrès, Tiberj 2005). Let us remember that the turnout for the referendum was 69,74%, much the same as Maastricht in 1992 which was 69,79%.

In terms of French people's conversations about the ratification referendum, it must be noted that they regularly increased from January 2005 (26%) to May 2005 (83%), with 26% in February, 48% in March, 66% between 31 March and 1 April . The NO victory comes first (92%) in June 2005, and 4th in 2005 as a whole. Moreover, the propensity to mention the 29 May referendum in one's conversations is not linked to any generation or proponent distinction. A socio-cultural distinction linked to the level of education is just about worth citing.

It seems however that the lack of information influences the turnout but not the direction of the vote. Indeed, if among the people questioned, two thirds consider that they had sufficient information to make a decision before voting in the referendum (66%), it is so for 70% of the people who actually went to the polls, while the corresponding percentage for those who abstained is only 46%. In other words, more than one in two voters who abstained think they did not have enough information to make their mind up on how to vote. On the other hand, the level of information of the YES or NO supporters is comparable. If abstention is strongly correlated to a feeling of a lack of information, it is not so for the "NO". "The fact that voters did or did not feel that they had sufficient information clearly did not play a decisive role. Whether or not voters considered themselves sufficiently informed, they voted in the same way: around 55% for the "no" vote" according to the Flash Eurobarometer.

A further comparison of the answers to this question with perceptions at the time when the debates on the European constitution started highlights that 75% of the French who think these debates started at the right time claim that they had all the necessary information to take a decision on the day of the referendum itself. Moreover, most of the French who think that these debates started too late (54%) or too early (69%) still believe that they had the necessary information to decide how to vote. However, 45% of the citizens who believe that these debates started too late consider they did not have sufficient information to make up their mind.

4.2– UNDETECTED MEDIA INFLUENCE

Questioned 20 days before the vote²⁰ about what would have the biggest influence on their decision, voters put "the way the media report the campaign" (16%) and "the stands taken by politicians" (27%) last. They prefer "the text of the constitution" and the "conversations with their relatives and their colleagues" (32% each), as well as their "own situation" (35%). There is here an obvious contradiction with our explanation of the dynamics of the campaign as strongly marked by its media treatment; it provides one more illustration of what is conventionally called, in communication sociology jargon, "pluralistic ignorance". The denial of media power is a sign that a lot of people share the same cognitive mistake about the formation of political judgement. With time, the mistake might get corrected as a January 2006 survey shows: the French were asked whether the media account of the referendum about the constitutional treaty had been fairly good or fairly bad, 42% of them thought the former, 46% the latter, and 12% had no opinion (TNS-Sofres). In a survey made from 16 to 23 January, 2006, i.e. 8 months after the referendum, 63% of the French do not feel well informed about the EU. They point out that politicians (83%) and media (80%) should talk more about the EU. Besides, the French who chose to vote "NO" feel less well informed than those who voted "YES" (-14 points difference). It will be observed, and this detail is important, that they feel less well informed about French political life too(-14 too). In other words, we have a population with a weaker political competence.

4.3– INFORMATION IMPACT AND POLITICAL COMPETENCE DEFICIT

Coincidentally, the effectiveness of the exposure to some media is clearly shown in the analysis of the referendum campaign concerning the adoption of the Euro in Denmark in 2000, which showed clearly that information influenced the outcome. "The results indicate that exposure to public television news and the YES press was significantly and negatively related to voting NO; in other words, it contributed to crystallizing opinion towards a YES vote". In the same way, a study carried out over eight referendum campaigns in Denmark, Ireland and Norway, has confirmed that the information released in the context of the campaign weighs on the choice criteria used by the voters, and that more "politically aware" people tend to rely more than the others on their attitudes towards the European construction. In the case of the 2005 French referendum, this would mean that the less informed and the less interested were more dependent on immediate information provided by the media, by the negative social climate pervading the "background news". According to the IPSOS exit poll, regarding the level of education, there were more YES voters among people at degree level (bac +3) or above (64%). Opinions are more divided among people at HND level (bac +2": 54% voted YES, 46% voted NO). The lower the level of education one has reached, the more one tends to vote NO: 53% for those who passed the "baccalauréat" (A levels), 65% for those with NVQ1

20 CSA-Marianne survey, May 7th and 11th, 2005

equivalents, 72% among those who have no qualifications. It is tempting to connect this lack of education and the hidden lack of qualification (in more ways than one) for the franchise created by a political competence deficit resulting from a sum of social constraints. As Gilles Ivaldi states: "in sociological terms, there was strong empirical evidence of the impact of the occupational element in the propensity for voters to reject the European Treaty at the polls, with a clear-cut class cleavage opposing the haves and the have-nots in contemporary French society. Since the 1992 referendum, the gap between rich and poor seemed to widen further in the 2005 ballot. On the latter occasion, nearly two-thirds (65%) of professionals, executives, businessmen and managers supported the European Charter whereas 67 and 79% of the less skilled routine non-manual and working class voters respectively cast a NO vote in the referendum. The appeal of the NO was particularly strong among the economically disadvantaged and those at the bottom of the social ladder, as demonstrated by the 71% score for the unemployed in 2005".

According to Ivaldi the interpretation of the rejection is due to "the rejection of a retrospective vote on the EU model of social and economic governance and of the reinterpretation at European level of salient domestic issues as based on the traditional left-right axis of competition. Macroeconomic and social issues – such as unemployment, the risk of social dumping, public services, competition with the new member states and more generally fears about globalisation - were clearly central to the referendum campaign".

It seems clear that the insistent framing by the TV news of social problems and the words of those they afflicted broadly favoured a rejection of the ratification.

Conclusion

So, if we return to the initial question about the comparison of the effect of information between the 2004 European elections and the 2005 referendum in France, one has to admit that:

in both cases, we have clearly identified these information effects that result in different behaviours according to the nature of each consultation.

In regard to the European elections, we have noted that the information variables were responsible for abstention, by explaining how the Right wing voters, disappointed by their leaders and went into second-order election mode to punish them.

In regard to the referendum, we have insisted on the analysis of information framing over the six months preceding the poll. This showed convincingly that the insistence on economic and social information created a political climate, which could but chime in with the expectations of the social classes that, due to their perceptions of it, felt the most threatened by the EU. All told, Sara Binzer Hobolt's hypotheses seem confirmed. The salience of a campaign weighs on the criteria that voters use to make a choice, and those who are the most politically aware tend to rely on their attitudes toward Europe.

In our first research paper treating of the 2004 European Parliamentary elections, we concluded that it was not the general tone of the information but the mix of campaign visibility news framing and electoral predispositions, which played a key role. This mix had yielded a result consistent with what can be expected from second-order elections whereby it is possible to get at the executive without serious consequences on the balance of power at national level. In the case of the referendum campaign, the same mix (the visibility of the YES support excepted) precipitated a vote based on ominous perceptions of Europe and the dreaded consequences of the ratification on the fate of the national community.

The question which now needs addressing is how to understand the failure of this promotion of a YES overwhelmingly present in the news during the referendum campaign or how do we explain the failure of persuasion of the YES campaign.

This non-persuasion clearly appears as the result of the convergence of two factors, one situated before the reception of the campaign messages, and which is linked to the variety of the campaign sources, the other being situated after the reception by people, and which shows their resistance to the arguments for the YES.

Before comes the distinction between communication controlled by the political actor and daily information controlled by the media. On this account, one can only point to the conflict between the dominant representations, undermining the European construction, given by ordinary news and the unavoidably hyped message of the YES Campaign. Before again appears the importance of the national framing which is selective and relegates the European community behind the demands of the national community. And still before, we must underline

what a fragmented representation of the European public space is given by European news, this European public space being entirely subject to the demands of national political agendas.

After reception, the differences of political competence must be considered as likely to filter the European message. In the same way, the dispersion of the political outlooks and leanings can only make the diffusion of the YES difficult, all the more so when the information environment is very "noisy" and disparate, and can, as such, create a polarised space, as Zaller says.

Finally, the accumulation of these factors (before and after) makes the victory of the NO easier to understand, as it challenges a linear conception of persuasion as depending on the sole quantity of transmitted information (Gerstlé, 2006).

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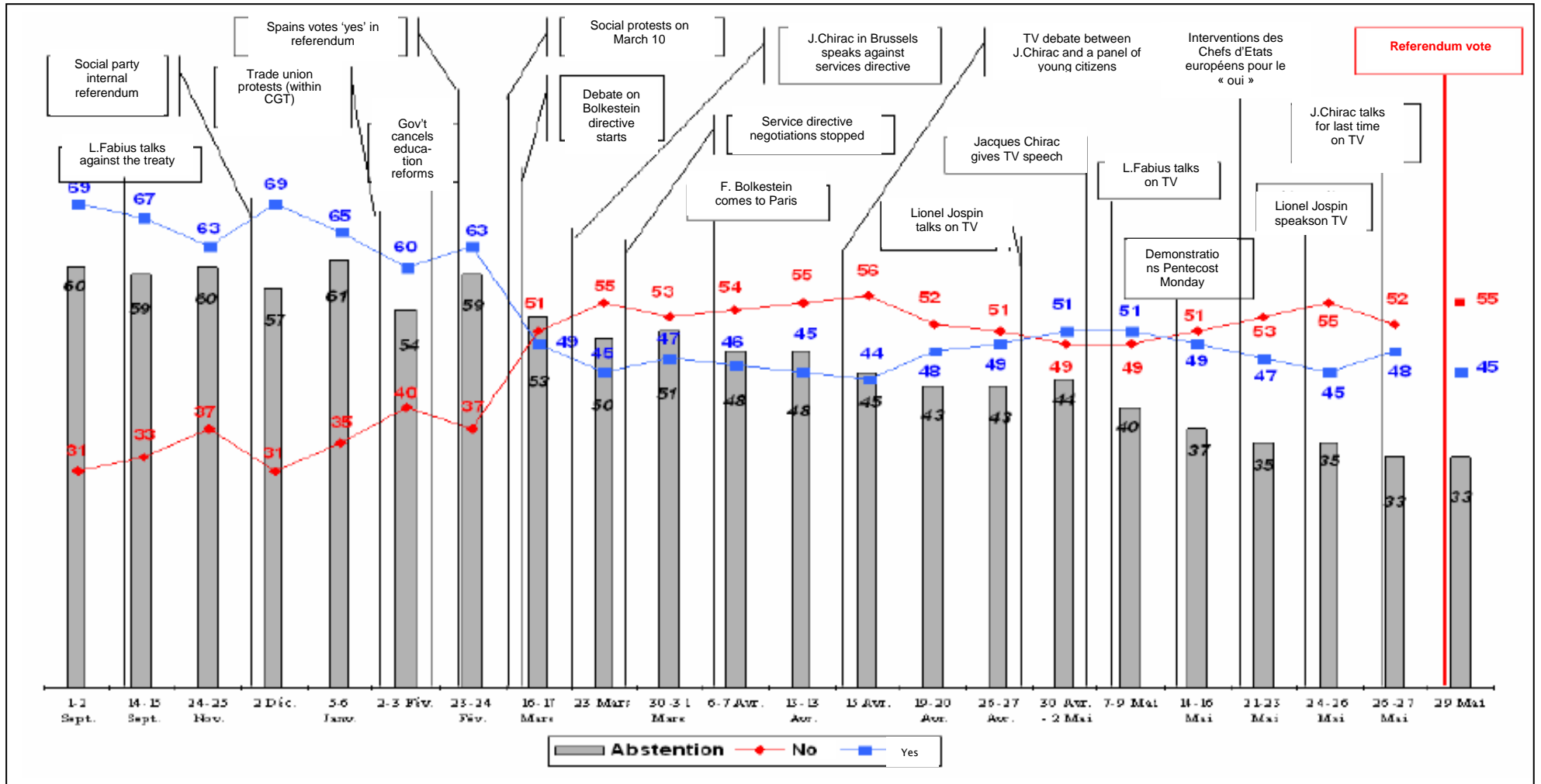
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Table 12: Change in voting and abstention intentions (%)



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