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## Tales of Two Referendums: Comparing Debate Quality between the UK and New Zealand Voting System Referendums of 2011

Alan Renwick<sup>a</sup> and Jack Vowles<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Political Science, University College London, London, UK; <sup>b</sup>School of History, Philosophy, Political Science & International Relations, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand

### ABSTRACT


Two voting system referendums in the same year in two countries with institutional and cultural similarities provide an excellent opportunity for comparison, particularly given the significant differences in how those referendums were regulated and conducted. In New Zealand, a well-funded and balanced official information campaign led the debate; in Britain, the debate was dominated by campaign organisations. Based on content analysis of newspaper coverage of the campaigns, this paper explores how regulatory differences between these two cases shaped the quality of debate as reflected in media discourse. It finds that they made a difference, suggesting that positive interventions to promote better debate can work. It also concludes, however, that contextual factors are crucial too: interventions that work in one context will not necessarily work in another.

### KEYWORDS

Deliberative democracy; discourse quality; campaign regulation; institutional design; public information

The quality and content of debate during referendum campaigns is a matter of concern to many democratic theorists and empirical political scientists. From a normative perspective, referendum participants should be well-informed and able to question and debate (Parkinson, 2001, p. 135; Chambers, 2009, pp. 331–332, 2018, p. 309; Tierney, 2012; Landemore, 2018, p. 322). The potential deliberative value of referendums cannot be gauged entirely by the quality of the preceding debate (El-Wakil & McKay, 2020; Parkinson, 2020), but that quality is an important part of it. Otherwise, referendums can fall victim to misinformation and manipulation of popular opinion by well-funded elites (Barber, 1984, p. 263; Offe, 2017, p. 16). While some political scientists argue that voters need minimal information to make as-if-informed choices (Lupia, 1994), multiple studies have concluded otherwise (Achen & Bartels, 2016, pp. 36–41, 79–85; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001). Indeed, LeDuc (2015, p. 144) notes, ‘Surveys taken in the aftermath of a referendum campaign regularly show that ‘insufficient information’ is one of the most common complaints of citizens about the referendum process.’ ‘Losers’ consent’ to a referendum outcome (Anderson, Blais,

**CONTACT** Alan Renwick  a.renwick@ucl.ac.uk

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Bowler, Donovan, & Listhaug, 2005) may be less likely where there has been low-quality campaign information and debate. Take for example one of the most controversial referendums of recent years, the UK's 2016 vote on membership of the European Union. Many on the losing side did not accept the fairness of the outcome and sought for over three years to overturn it (Nadeau, Bélanger, & Atikcan, 2019).

Notwithstanding this broad consensus, two central questions are under-explored. What does high-quality debate look like in a referendum campaign? And can it be deliberately cultivated? Several studies analyse media coverage of referendum campaigns (Bright et al., 1999; De Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Maia, 2009; Pilon, 2009; LeDuc, 2011; Renwick & Lamb, 2013; Bagashka, 2014; Marquis, Schaub, & Gerber, 2011) or how the character of information affects voters' opinions (Lupia, 1994; Faas, 2015; Vowles, 2013), but none has yet compared campaign discourse in detail across different referendums. Some examine aspects of campaign regulation that might affect debate quality, particularly campaign funding and expenditure (Lutz & Hug, 2009; Reidy & Suiter, 2015; see also Altman, 2010), but do not explore the link to debate quality as such. There is great interest in the use of deliberative mini-publics as means of improving referendum discourse (e.g. Gastil, Richards, & Knobloch, 2014; Chambers, 2018; Landemore, 2018; Parkinson, 2020); again, however, while there have been valuable studies of their impact on debate in the maxi-public (Fournier, van der Kolk, Carty, Blais, & Rose, 2011; Suiter & Reidy, 2020), these remain relatively limited.

We address these two questions by comparing debate quality in two referendums – both on electoral reform, both held in 2011, in New Zealand and the United Kingdom (UK). First, we wish to understand what low- and high-quality referendum campaigns look like and how they differ from each other. Earlier work (Renwick & Lamb, 2013) has analysed debate quality in the UK referendum, which commentators viewed as poor (e.g. Massie, 2011). The results confirmed this expectation, but, with no point of comparison, it was impossible to calibrate the scales for measuring debate quality. As noted there, 'we simply do not know what levels of reason-giving and use of evidence or logic we should expect to find in a high-quality referendum debate' (Renwick & Lamb, 2013, p. 303). By adding comparison with a second referendum – one recognised as providing opportunities for a high standard of informed and reasoned debate (Arseneau & Roberts, 2012, pp. 329–332) – we seek to resolve that problem. We find that high- and low-quality referendum debates do look very different.

Second, we seek to understand the factors influencing debate quality. Here, we focus not on innovations such as mini-publics, but on the regulation of the referendum campaign itself. Our two referendums exemplified two approaches to campaign regulation, which we label 'campaigner-focused' and 'information-focused'. The first, which is close to what Chambers (2018, p. 309) refers to as the 'market model' of referendum conduct, enables the two sides to present their cases. The second, by contrast, seeks to 'furnish citizens with access to fair and neutral information' (Chambers, 2018, p. 309). We posit that the second should have yielded higher quality debate.

We begin by providing background information about the two referendums and laying out our two models of campaign regulation. The second section considers what 'quality of debate' should mean. The third section discusses our methodology, involving content analysis of newspaper coverage of the two referendums. The fourth section presents the evidence on debate quality, while the fifth tests hypotheses about what

determines that quality. We conclude by setting out some conditions necessary to improve the quality of debate in referendum campaigns.

## 1. The Cases and the Model

### 1.1. Two Referendums

Our two referendums are suitable for comparison because, on many potentially confounding variables, they were similar. Both the United Kingdom and New Zealand are steeped in the Westminster tradition – though both have shifted away from the strict Westminster model in recent decades. Both referendums were initiated by governments and held on the same subject – electoral reform – in the same year.

In New Zealand, the government was keeping a promise it had made to give voters an opportunity to express a verdict on their Mixed-Member Proportional (MMP) electoral system, in place since 1996, after five elections. That system had itself replaced the old First Past the Post (FPTP) system following referendums in 1992 and 1993. The vote was enabled by the Electoral Referendum Act 2010, and polling day was fixed in February 2011 for that November. The referendum was held concurrently with the 2011 general election. Referendum turnout was 71.5 per cent.<sup>1</sup> As in the 1992 vote, there were two questions on the referendum ballot paper: to keep or to change the status quo, followed by a choice between four reform alternatives. Following the 1992/93 model, had change won a majority on the first question, a second referendum would have been held between MMP and the most preferred alternative. In fact, 58 per cent voted to keep MMP and only 42 per cent to change it. No second referendum was therefore required and, given the margin, the result was widely accepted (Karp, 2014; Arseneau & Roberts, 2012).

The UK's referendum stemmed from a coalition agreement between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties after the 2010 election and legislated for in the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011. This was the country's first referendum on the issue. The options were the status quo FPTP system and the Alternative Vote (AV): preferential voting within single-member constituencies. The reform choice was a compromise: the Liberal Democrats would have preferred a multi-member Single Transferable Vote (STV) system that could have generated greater proportionality between votes and seats. The referendum was held concurrently with elections to the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly, and Northern Ireland Assembly, and local elections throughout much of England – although not, most notably, in London (Curtice, 2013; Clarke, Sanders, Stewart, & Whiteley, 2013; Vowles, 2013; Lundberg & Steven, 2013). Turnout was just over 42 per cent. With 68 per cent voting against change, and 32 per cent in favour, the outcome was widely accepted as decisive.

Neither referendum was of high salience to voters. The UK vote resulted from elite bargaining, with almost no prior public interest. In New Zealand, there was evidence of some public support for a second referendum, but strong feelings were confined to a minority. Both referendums were government-initiated, though neither saw whole-hearted government support for change. In the UK, the minor coalition partner (the Liberal Democrats) wanted change, while the major partner (the Conservatives) opposed it. In New Zealand, the dominant governing party (the National Party) was lukewarm about reform and took no formal position, although its leadership would have

preferred change to a less proportional alternative. The main opposition party was also ambivalent in both cases: the UK's Labour Party was split; New Zealand Labour also had no formal position, though its leadership had come to accept and support MMP.

### 1.2. Two Models of Referendum Campaign Regulation

While the contexts of the two referendums were broadly similar, referendum campaign regulation in the two countries was based on two sharply contrasting models, which we label *campaigner-focused* and *information-focused*. The campaigner-focused model, exemplified by the UK, as laid out in the Political Parties, Elections, and Referendums Act 2000, provides means by which the campaigners on each side can convey their arguments to voters without mediation. The information-focused model, seen in New Zealand, emphasises the importance of making impartial and accurate information available to voters. We have derived these two models from reflection on the two cases themselves: they are ideal-typical versions of the approaches taken. But we think they are likely to have wider application.

Table 1 sets out, first, the differences between the two models and, second, the relevant characteristics of our cases. The campaigner-focused model channels public funding towards campaign organisations, whereas the information-focused approach supports the dissemination of impartial information. The information-focused approach creates formal mechanisms to test the truthfulness of campaigns: if necessary, false claims can be called out. The campaigner-focused model leaves it up to the campaign groups to react if their rivals make dubious claims. In other respects, both models lead to similar arrangements, though for differing reasons. The campaigner-focused model favours restrictions on each campaign (in terms of how much they can spend and how they can use the media) in order to maintain a level playing field. The information-focused model favours similar restrictions, but does so in order that the impartial information campaign is not swamped.

The two columns on the right of Table 1 show that campaign regulation in the UK and New Zealand matched the models in all but one of the ten comparisons.

### 1.3. Public Information Campaigns

The UK Electoral Commission produced an information pamphlet for delivery to all homes (UK Electoral Commission, 2011a) and a television advertisement to inform people that the referendum was being held. These materials were, however, very brief,

**Table 1.** Two Models of Referendum Campaign Regulation and the Referendums in the UK and New Zealand.

	Models of Referendum Regulation		Real-World Referendums	
	Campaigner-Focused	Information-Focused	UK 2011	NZ 2011
Public information campaign	No	Yes	Limited	Extensive
Adjudication of claims	No	Yes	No	Yes
Public funding for campaigners	Yes	No	Yes	No
Campaign spending limits	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Restrictions on campaign media usage	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

simply describing the two electoral systems, without giving voters tools for interpreting campaign claims.

By contrast, the designers of referendums in New Zealand do not assume that an entirely campaign-driven referendum will produce a quality debate. The relevant Cabinet Paper presented prior to the referendum stated:

In the referendum context, there is the need to ensure that referendum advertisers do not drown out the messages in the public information campaign. In particular, there is a possibility that the complex matters that the public information campaign needs to communicate could be overwhelmed by high levels of referendum advertising (New Zealand Government, 2009, p. 25).

The key point is worth underscoring: at the highest level of government, the New Zealand assumption was that balanced information should have sufficient presence to significantly influence the campaign, preventing the advocacy groups from ‘overwhelming’ it. According to the reported funding data from both countries, the New Zealand Electoral Commission spent about five times per capita more on the provision of balanced information than did its British counterpart.

A further contrast lies in the content of the information. The UK Electoral Commission focused on the mechanics of voting under the alternative electoral systems and did not range into the likely consequences for party representation and types of government. The New Zealand Electoral Commission went much further, setting out five criteria by which voters might assess the options, and giving guidance as to how each system measured up against these criteria (New Zealand Electoral Commission, 2011a).

The New Zealand Electoral Commission also encouraged journalists to use the material it produced as ‘the definitive source of independent, neutral, and comprehensive information about the referendum’. It explicitly adopted the objective of encouraging ‘accurate, balanced, and informative reporting of the referendum’. The two political scientists who worked with the Commission and public relations experts to prepare these materials addressed meetings and were prominent on the Electoral Commission’s referendum website and in a DVD produced and distributed by the Commission (New Zealand Electoral Commission, 2011c).

#### **1.4. Adjudication of Allegedly False Claims**

The New Zealand Electoral Commission actively monitored the referendum debate in accord with its statutory responsibilities for voter education. On one occasion, it made a public statement requesting that a campaign organisation should cease making a claim that the Electoral Commission deemed to be ‘factually incorrect’: that the MMP electoral system required 120 MPs to operate, and would not be effective with 99. It said that its view was ‘supported by independent expert opinion’ (New Zealand Electoral Commission, 2011b).

By contrast, the UK Electoral Commission played no such role. Indeed, following the referendum, it invited the government and parliament to confirm that it should have no role in ‘policing the truthfulness of referendum campaign arguments’ (UK Electoral Commission, 2011b, p. 106).

### 1.5. Public Funding for Campaigners

In New Zealand, there was no public funding for the two campaigns. In the UK, while little was invested in the provision of balanced information, substantial public funds and free television time, amounting to around £9 million, were gifted to the two campaigns. Some of this funding – £287,000 – took the form of direct grants to the principal campaign organisations. The bulk – £8.2 million – was support for posting campaign materials to each elector in the country (UK Electoral Commission, 2012b, pp. 16–18). In addition, the main broadcasters carried a limited number of advertisements by the campaign organisations free of charge. The value of broadcasts on commercial channels was about £450,000; no estimate has been made for broadcasts on the BBC, which does not carry advertising (UK Electoral Commission, 2012b, p. 16). These direct and indirect subsidies dwarfed all other spending by the campaigns (UK Electoral Commission, 2012a, p. 35) and helped spending per head by the two sides in the UK to be about seven or eight times higher than in New Zealand. In New Zealand, other than overall campaign expenditure limits, there were no legal constraints on broadcast advertising during the referendum campaign. In practice this difference was of little significance: neither campaign could afford television advertising, although there was some on the radio.

Comparing these two referendums with our two models in mind, the differences stand out starkly. We expect that these differences in referendum campaign regulation and practice generated a higher quality of debate in New Zealand than in the UK. The next two sections explain how we conceptualise and then operationalise that concept.

## 2. What ‘Quality of Debate’ in a Referendum Means

The ‘debate’ preceding a referendum may refer to discourse in at least three locations: in the claims and counter-claims of campaigners; in media coverage; and in citizens’ face-to-face or online interactions. The last of these has rightly received considerable attention in recent literature: Landmore (2018, p. 322), for example, considers opportunities for ‘carving out space and time for exchanges of arguments between citizens themselves’. Here, however, we focus on referendum discourse in the traditional media. It is through the media that most voters become informed about the issues in the campaign.

In conceptualising media discourse quality, we largely replicate the framework used by Renwick and Lamb (2013). This built on Pilon’s (2009) study of Ontario’s electoral reform referendum of 2007, which itself drew on insights from Steiner, Bächtiger, Spörndli, and Steenbergen’s (2004) Discourse Quality Index and, ultimately, from Habermas (1996). Pilon identified three key features of media discourse:

- (1) The *quantity of coverage* (or ‘coverage intensity’). This is a baseline category. Voters are unlikely to become aware of the issues or arguments if the referendum is little discussed (cf. Marquis et al., 2011, p. 131). This applies both to the referendum as a whole and to each of the options on the ballot paper, and we therefore conduct our analysis at both of these levels.
- (2) The *balance of coverage*. What ‘balance’ should mean is contested (Renwick, Palese, & Sargeant, 2020, p. 524). We take it to mean that, if voters are

to become informed about both (or all) sides of the argument, such that they can make their own free choice among the options, then both (or all) sides should be equally present in the media discourse. Given that most voters access only particular media outlets, we analyse balance within individual outlets as well as between them.

- (3) The *extent and depth of reason-giving*. Reason-giving lies at the heart of deliberation: in discussing an issue, speakers are expected not merely to assert their position, but to give reasons for it. It is here that Pilon (2009) draws most directly on Steiner et al.'s (2004) Discourse Quality Index. Steiner et al. identify four 'levels of justification' for claims: cases in which a claim is made without providing a justification; cases in which 'a reason Y is given why X should or should not be done, but no linkage is made between X and Y'; cases in which a single such linkage is made; and cases in which multiple linkages are made (Steiner et al., 2004, p. 57). Following Pilon (2009) and Renwick and Lamb (2013), we do not distinguish between single and multiple justifications: our focus is on often fragmentary media discourse, not whole parliamentary speeches. We also follow those earlier works in allowing for reasons to be based on either logic or evidence.

These three categories cover much of the important terrain. But many of the recent concerns about the quality of political debates focus on the *accuracy* or *truthfulness* of the claims made (e.g. Chambers, 2018, p. 310; Offe, 2017, p. 18). We therefore think that one should allow for the content of reason-giving as well as its structure. Following Renwick and Lamb (2013), we therefore add a fourth dimension to Pilon's three:

- (4) The *accuracy of reason-giving*. Reasoned debate should be grounded in accurate information: factual claims made by actors should, as far as possible, be correct.

Gauging the accuracy of claims can, of course, be problematic. We discuss our approach further in the methodology section.

### 3. Methodology: Measuring the Quality of Referendum Debate in the Media

As explained above, we focus our analysis of referendum debates upon discourse in the traditional media. Within that, we concentrate solely on newspapers. That is partly because newspaper content is readily available in archives. In addition, newspapers in both countries are subject to no legal requirements to maintain impartiality and balance, whereas broadcast media are legally required to do so. Focusing on newspapers is therefore likely to bring out differences more strongly. Finally, while newspapers may not capture the full debate, they are likely to be broadly representative. Our methodology is the same as that employed in Renwick and Lamb (2013). We focus on major daily newspapers.

However, there are significant differences between the newspaper industries in the UK and New Zealand. New Zealand has a much smaller population: in 2011, 4.4 million compared to the UK's 63 million, leading to less diversity there in daily print news outlets. The market in New Zealand is regionalised rather than national. New Zealand lacks the clear distinction between 'quality' and 'tabloid' styles of news coverage seen



in the UK. Ownership is more concentrated in New Zealand. In 2011, daily print media was dominated by two Australian companies: APN News and Media, and Fairfax Media. Only one regionally significant daily paper, the *Otago Daily Times*, was New Zealand-owned. The *New Zealand Herald* (APN) had by far the largest circulation because of its location in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city (1.5 million people in 2011). Most importantly for our purposes, while newspapers in both countries were voluntary signatories to codes of conduct that included the principle of 'accuracy', the New Zealand code, unlike its UK counterpart, also stipulated the principles of 'fairness and balance' (New Zealand Press Council, 2011; UK Press Complaints Commission, 2011). This last point reflects deep differences in the media cultures between the two countries: most UK newspapers take clear political and partisan positions (Wring & Deacon, 2010), and are not required to be balanced or fair in their coverage of political news (Brandenburg, 2006, p. 166).

We expect these differences in newspaper cultures to reinforce the effects of differences in referendum regulation identified above. Indeed, the two factors are unlikely to be fully separable: they reflect deeper assumptions about how political debate is best conducted. We expect less balance in coverage within individual newspapers in the UK than in New Zealand. There should also be more variation in the UK in the extent and accuracy of reason-giving across the range of newspapers. In New Zealand, we expect higher levels of reason-giving and accuracy.

In the UK, we include all national newspapers with circulation at the time of the referendum over 150,000 except the *Daily Star* (which has limited political content). This means that we include nine newspapers and their Sunday equivalents.<sup>2</sup> In New Zealand, we include all six daily newspapers with circulation greater than 25,000.<sup>3</sup> In proportion to population, that is a higher threshold than for the UK; but smaller newspapers are very local, and their coverage of national stories is largely syndicated. We also include two weekly newspapers: the *Sunday Star-Times* (New Zealand's largest-circulation Sunday newspaper), and the *National Business Review* (New Zealand-owned, allowing us to capture a prominent voice in the business community). Of the six daily newspapers we sample, four were owned by Fairfax, with some sharing of news content across those platforms.

In each case, as the referendums were announced well in advance, we cover the year preceding the referendum. Coverage was very sparse until closer to polling day. We conduct most of our analysis in the final 11 weeks. We developed separate search strings in each country to capture the materials relevant to that referendum (see the online appendix for full texts).

Relevant articles were coded by hand at two levels: whole articles; and individual statements. At the article level, we coded whether each article provided on the whole a positive, negative, or neutral perspective on each of the options on the ballot papers. We used the positive and negative categories only for unambiguous articles, where the author expressed an explicit view or spun the material overwhelmingly in one direction. At the statement level, we identified all statements within the articles that related to the referendum options. For each statement, we coded:

- (1) the actor to whom the statement was attributed;
- (2) the topic under discussion (one or more of the referendum options); and

- (3) the nature of the statement: whether it expressed a view or was purely descriptive, and, if it expressed a view, whether that view was positive, negative, or ambiguous.

In addition, if a statement expressed a view and a reason was given for that view, we also coded:

- (4) the content of that reason;  
 (5) whether any evidence or logic was offered to support the reason;  
 (6) whether the reason offered was accurate or not.

As noted above, our coding of accuracy could be controversial, and deserves further explanation. We employed prior and generally accepted judgements about what statements were accurate. In the UK, we used a briefing paper that was produced in the early stages of the official campaign period by the UK Political Studies Association (Renwick, 2011). We acknowledge that this was written by one of us, which may raise questions about independence. It was written, however, well before the current project was conceived; furthermore, its content was thoroughly vetted by an international panel of electoral systems experts. In New Zealand, in consultation with political scientists, the Electoral Commission produced extensive materials on the referendum options (New Zealand Electoral Commission, 2011a, 2011c). Wherever possible, we used these materials to judge accuracy. In the occasional areas where those materials were silent, we drew on our own judgements about the evidence of political science. In both countries, some statements – including statements that were too vague to be meaningful, and ad hominem arguments – were coded as irrelevant. Further examples of our accuracy coding are available in the online appendix.

## 4. The Quality of Media Debate in the Two Referendums

### 4.1. Quantity of Coverage

Counting the number of articles across all newspapers captured by our search strings, coverage of the New Zealand referendum was well below that in the UK: over the year preceding each referendum, we identified 2705 articles relating to electoral reform in the UK, compared to just 255 in New Zealand. Even allowing for the greater number and publication frequency of the UK newspapers, there were on average 6.7 times more articles per newspaper issue there than in New Zealand. That was partly because attention focused on the issue only for a much shorter period preceding the referendum in New Zealand. In the final month before each referendum, however, there were still 4.6 times more articles per newspaper issue in the UK.

To a degree, that reflected the fact that New Zealand's referendum was held concurrently with a general election, which inevitably crowded out referendum coverage. While there were concurrent elections in the UK too, these were only subnational. As noted above, all New Zealand papers serve regional markets and carry regional as well as national news. The provincial press in New Zealand gave the referendum little attention. If we focus only on New Zealand's most prominent newspaper – the Auckland-based *New Zealand Herald* – we in fact find that, during the final month of the campaign,

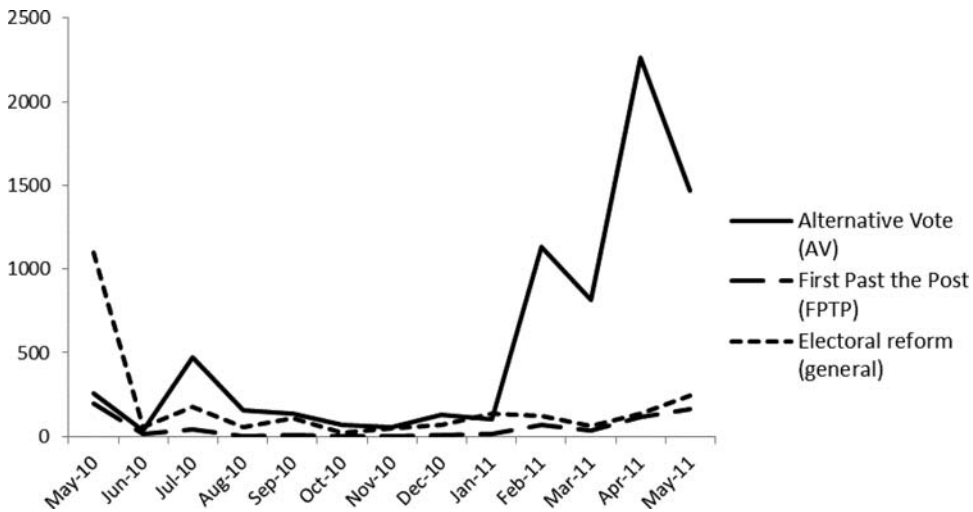
1.37 per cent of its articles (35 of 2,551) mentioned the referendum, a rate that was exceeded in the UK only by the *Independent* and the *Daily Mail*.

In short, while the referendum undoubtedly received less coverage in New Zealand than in the UK, this may largely have been due to differences in the structure of the media market and the context in which the referendums were fought, rather than to features of those referendums in themselves.

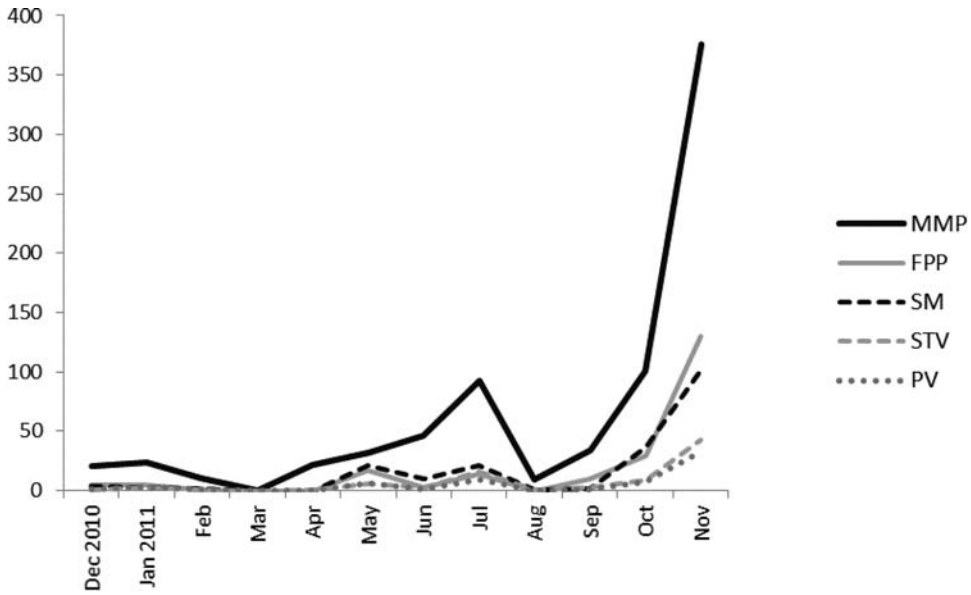
The quantity of coverage criterion applies not just to the referendum as a whole, but also to its individual options. Figures 1 and 2 compare the mentions of the electoral systems on offer during the year prior to each referendum. There is an obvious contrast: in the UK, the primary focus was on the proposed AV system, with much less attention paid to the status quo of FPTP. In New Zealand, where four alternatives to the existing MMP system were put to voters, the primary focus was on MMP, but the other systems still got significant coverage: their combined attention came close to that of MMP. This indicates a remarkably skewed debate in the UK compared to New Zealand.

#### 4.2. Balance of Debate

We turn now to the question of balance, overall and within individual newspapers. We focus here and for the remainder of our analysis on the final 11 weeks before the polling days. As explained above, we coded the material both at the article level and at the level of statements within articles. In each country, we aggregate all articles/statements that were pro-reform and all that were anti-reform. In the UK, this is straightforward, as the referendum presented a binary choice. We aggregate, for example, statements that were in favour of AV, or in favour of the general idea of reform, or against FPTP. The multi-option ballot in New Zealand makes the analysis somewhat more complex, but the campaign nevertheless had a largely binary dynamic, pitting those who favoured retaining the proportional MMP system against those advocating a shift to a less proportional



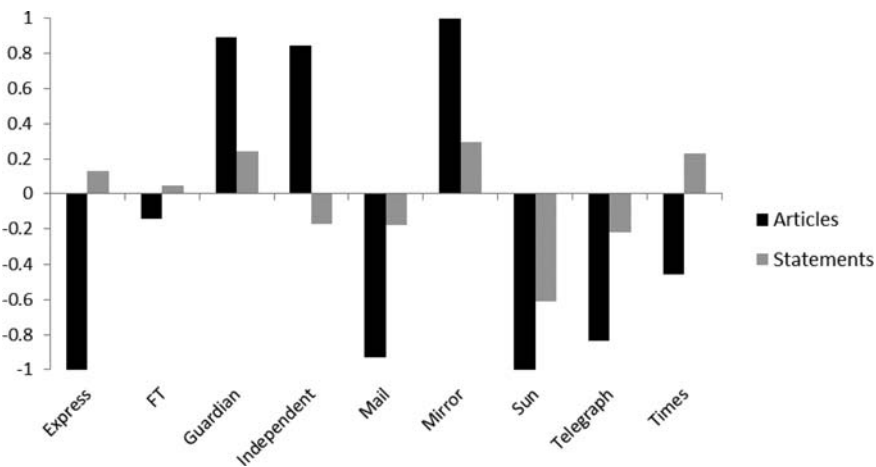
**Figure 1.** UK: Mentions of electoral systems and electoral reform, May 2010–May 2011 (hand-coding). Note: In this and subsequent figures showing the results of our hand-coding, the numbers are weighted to adjust for oversampling of some months.



**Figure 2.** NZ: Mentions of electoral systems, Dec 2010–Nov 2011 (hand-coding).

alternative. We capture the overall balance of the core debate by summing statements that were pro-MMP, anti-FPTP, or anti-SM (supplementary member – the alternative to MMP advocated by the change campaign) and, on the other side, statements that were anti-MMP, pro-FPTP, or pro-SM.

In terms of overall balance in each country, there are no substantial differences at the statement level of coding. In the UK, among statements containing a view, those favouring the status quo outnumbered pro-change statements by 54 per cent to 46 per cent. In



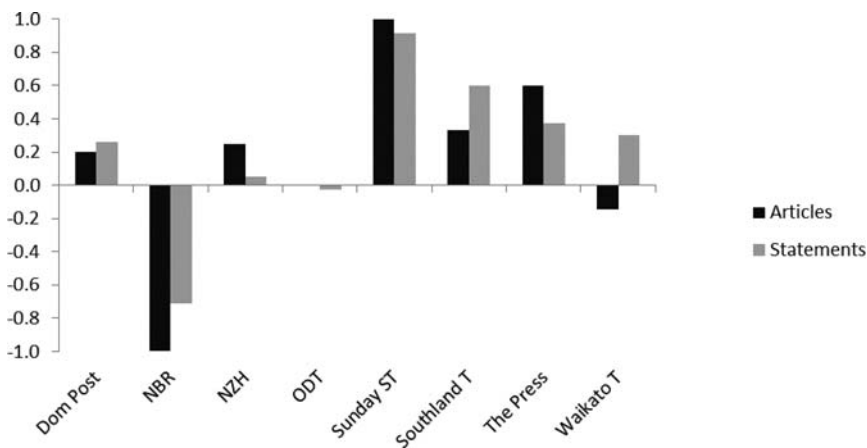
**Figure 3.** UK: Balance indices, last 11 weeks before the referendum, by newspaper. Note: The balance index is calculated by dividing the difference between the numbers of pro- and anti-reform statements or articles by the sum of all pro- or anti-reform statements or articles.

New Zealand, the gap was even smaller: 51 per cent of statements favoured change, while 49 per cent favoured keeping MMP. More differentiated patterns emerge, however, at the level of articles. In the UK, 67 per cent of articles expressing a view were against reform, while 33 per cent were in favour. In New Zealand, 57 per cent supported retention of MMP, while 43 per cent advocated a shift away. We find a more balanced picture at the statements level because many articles contain arguments on both sides: authors explaining why they saw those on one side as wrong or as less persuasive or significant than those on the other side.

Turning to individual newspapers, most UK newspapers had clear editorial positions: the *Guardian*, *Financial Times*, *Independent*, and *Mirror* supported change, while the *Telegraph*, *Times*, *Express*, *Mail*, and *Sun* opposed. [Figure 3](#) shows that these positions were strongly reflected in coverage. It charts two balance indices – based on statement- and article-level coding – for each newspaper. The statement-level coding (the grey bars) shows again that voices from both sides could be heard in most newspapers: only in one (the *Sun*) did one side (opponents of AV) receive more than twice the attention of the other. But the article-level coding (shown in the black bars) indicates that, in the viewpoints they projected through their authors, most newspapers advanced a clear position. For two – the *Express* and the *Sun* – no articles favoured reform; for the *Mirror*, none opposed it. The *Financial Times* was by far the most balanced newspaper. *The Times* also allowed substantial advocacy of both sides.

Overall, then, most UK newspapers took strong positions in the referendum. While most offered space to alternative viewpoints, it was often limited. Readers of many newspapers received very unbalanced information.

In New Zealand, with little or no overt media partisanship, in the judgement of those defending MMP, ‘most media outlets took a benign or pro-MMP line’ (Grey & Fitzsimons, 2012, p. 303). Indeed the highest-circulation newspaper, the *New Zealand Herald*, editorialised in MMP’s favour (*New Zealand Herald*, 2011). As [Figure 4](#) shows, overall the picture is one of balance. The *New Zealand Herald* and the *Dominion Post*, which accounted for the largest part of the statements and articles and had the



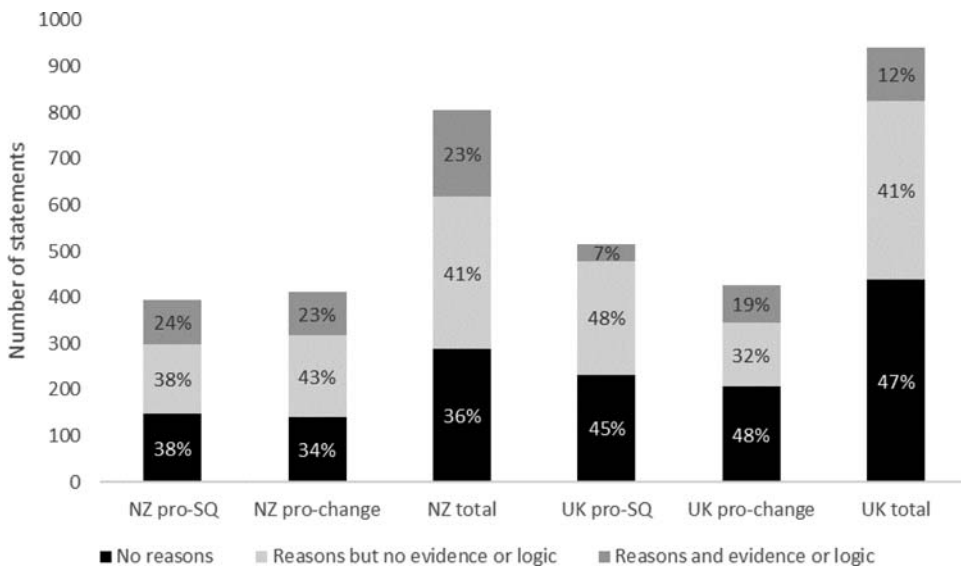
**Figure 4.** NZ: Balance indices, last 11 weeks before the referendum, by newspaper. Note: The balance index is calculated as in [Figure 3](#).

largest circulations, were close to balance. The *National Business Review* and *Sunday Star-Times* were very imbalanced (in opposite directions), but carried very few opinion articles (six and four respectively). Particularly when taking circulation figures into account, the New Zealand debate was, as expected given the differences in newspaper cultures, markedly less skewed than that in the UK.

### 4.3. Extent and Depth of Reason-Giving

We next compare the two referendums in terms of the degree to which reasons were given or not for the positions adopted; and the degree to which those reasons were grounded in evidence or logic. It should be remembered that our analysis relates to newspaper coverage. It might be that actors sometimes justified their views in detail, but that newspapers reported only their position on the referendum question. The data thus show how the debate was conveyed to the public through the media, not necessarily how campaigners hoped to frame it.

At the lowest level of reason-giving, readers are told an actor's stance on the issue, but are given no reason for their holding that position. Figure 5 shows that 36 per cent of statements expressing a view fell into this category in New Zealand and 47 per cent in the UK. At the next level, a reason is provided for the actor's position, but this is backed up by neither evidence nor logic. 41 per cent of statements belonged to this category in both New Zealand and the UK. Finally, the most developed reason-giving occurs when a reason is provided for an actor's position *and* that reason is backed up by evidence or logic. This applied to 23 per cent of statements in New Zealand and 12 per cent in the UK. Overall, the highest level of reason-giving occurred almost twice as often in New Zealand as in the UK, while the lowest level was markedly less frequent.



**Figure 5.** UK and NZ: Reasons and arguments underlying positions, last 11 weeks before each referendum.

Figure 5 also indicates differences between the reporting of the competing sides in the debate in each country. In New Zealand, the extent and depth of reason-giving was comparable across the two contenders, with those advocating change lagging only slightly behind those opposing it, particularly in providing evidence or logic. In the UK, defenders of the status quo were more likely to provide no reasons or reasons without evidence or logic, and less likely to provide reasons with evidence or logic.

#### 4.4. Accuracy of Reason-Giving

Figure 6 compares the accuracy of claims in the two countries. In New Zealand, of all the position-taking statements for which a reason was given, 84 per cent were coded as accurate and just 3 per cent as inaccurate; 13 per cent were not relevant to the Electoral Commission's materials or the scholarly literature.<sup>4</sup> In the UK, 47 per cent of such statements were coded as accurate, 26 per cent as inaccurate, and 27 per cent as not relevant. Admittedly, accuracy coding is imperfect: many statements are technically accurate but nevertheless clearly designed to leave a misleading or exaggerated impression. Still, the outright lying that was widespread in the UK was virtually absent in New Zealand.

#### 4.5. Discussion of the Descriptive Comparison

We thus find clear differences between coverage of the referendums in the two countries. On the one hand, the UK scored higher in terms of overall coverage quantity. On the other hand, debate was more balanced in New Zealand: the large-circulation UK newspapers tended to align more strongly to one side or the other than did their counterparts in New Zealand. And the clearest differences between the two referendums were in both the extent and depth and the accuracy of reason-giving: positions were more likely in New Zealand than in the UK to be backed up with reasons grounded in evidence or logic, and these reasons were much less likely to be inaccurate. Thus, while there was more coverage in the UK, that in New

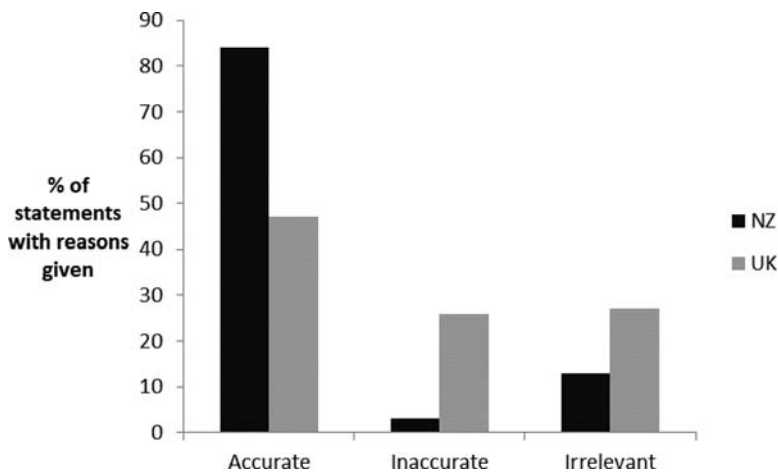


Figure 6. UK and NZ: Accuracy of statements with reasons given.

Zealand was much more information-rich and balanced, and could support voters more effectively in coming to reasoned judgements.

## 5. Explaining the Differences Between the Referendums

We now consider what might explain the differences identified. In particular, can we link differences in debate quality to differences in campaign regulation, as posited above? Was the debate in New Zealand more information-rich *because* the rules favoured accurate, impartial information over the claims of campaigners?

As indicated earlier, the contexts of the two referendums were in many ways similar, and therefore many confounding factors can be ruled out. Nevertheless, we need to be cautious in leaping to causal conclusions. Three key contextual differences did exist.

First, as already noted, the countries had very different newspaper media cultures. The UK press, unlike that in New Zealand, has a tradition of partisanship and political position-taking. Indeed, New Zealand newspapers were signatories to a statement of principles of fairness and balance in their coverage, while those in the UK were not. Most newspapers in the UK took a side in the referendum debate consistent with their partisanship. In New Zealand, with little or no overt media partisanship, newspaper positions were less polarised and reflected individual rather than partisan preferences.

These differences did matter: our findings in terms of balance of coverage are likely primarily to stem from them, rather than from the rules of referendum conduct themselves. As we noted previously, the differences in media regulation and approaches to referendum conduct are likely both symptoms of the two countries' wider political cultures. We reflect on this further in the conclusion.

Two remaining factors might have affected the extent and the accuracy of reason-giving. The first of these is the intensity of party political involvement in the referendum, which was much lower in New Zealand than in the UK. The New Zealand vote was held concurrently with a general election, upon which leading politicians focused their energies, whereas that in the UK coincided with local and regional elections, in which national politicians had no direct personal stake. In addition, New Zealand's politicians had learnt to their cost in the 1992/93 referendums that their interventions could backfire with the public. They therefore kept a low profile. Popular Prime Minister John Key indicated that he favoured change and the SM system, but did not actively campaign. UK politicians had no such concerns and engaged fully. Perhaps the New Zealand debate was more respectful of the facts not because of the referendum rules, but because politicians chose largely to keep out.

Yet lower-profile party engagement in the debate cannot provide a full explanation for the differences in reason-giving, for these differences are stark even if we focus just on the contributions of non-party campaign groups. We coded many statements by campaigners on both sides in New Zealand, but only three were coded as inaccurate. By contrast, inaccurate claims lay at the heart of the campaigns in the UK.

The final contextual difference is that voters in New Zealand had more experience of alternative electoral systems and might therefore have been less susceptible to wildly inaccurate claims. While voters in some parts of the UK had limited experience of preferential ballots, many had none. This made it easy for the No to AV campaign to peddle false stories. In New Zealand, by contrast, the debate was over whether to retain the



system first used just fifteen years previously or to return to the old system or something like it. The facts needed to expose false claims were much more available.

This argument is plausible. New Zealand campaigners did refer to experience before and after the change in 1996, and claims that flew in the face of that experience would have been difficult to sustain. Nevertheless, some arguments might have been made that existing evidence could not readily have been used to judge. Most notably, the campaign against MMP claimed that a shift away from MMP would allow a reduction in the number of MPs – a popular cause supported by four fifths of those voting in a referendum in 1999. Yet we record only four instances in which anyone was mentioned as making that claim. And the reason it was not made more often was that the Electoral Commission said it was factually incorrect: after the Commission intervened on 18 November, the claim was never repeated.

That is one way in which the differences in campaign regulation between the two cases appears to have affected debate quality: the scope for adjudication of claims in New Zealand affected the claims that were made. We can also trace the impact of New Zealand's public information provision. If the Electoral Commission's impartial information campaign was influential in shaping the debate, then we should expect, first, that it would have been explicitly referenced in the newspaper coverage and, second, that the subject matter of the debate would have reflected the content of those materials. That was the case on both fronts. We found 25 explicit references to the Electoral Commission's information materials, and several other articles clearly drew on those materials without acknowledging the link explicitly. By contrast, the only references that we found in the British newspapers to the content of the UK Electoral Commission's information booklet noted that it took much longer to explain AV than FPTP, which anti-AV campaigners portrayed as evidence of the system's undesirable complexity. We found no instance in the UK where the Electoral Commission booklet was referred to as an information source.

Moreover, the New Zealand terms of debate closely followed those set out in the Electoral Commission's materials. In analysis of the reasons given by actors, we coded seven categories of reason at least 30 times. These were (in descending order): effective government (coded 125 times), accountability of individual MPs (104 times), the power of small parties (98 times), proportionality of party representation in parliament (71 times), representation of Māori, women, and minorities (67 times), accountability of government (51 times), and the effectiveness of parliament (45 times). All of these were strong themes in the Electoral Commission's materials. We could classify the accuracy of 86 per cent of all reasons given by using the Electoral Commission materials alone, whereas the equivalent figure for the UK, using the PSA briefing paper, was 73 per cent.

We conclude, therefore, that there is good evidence that the information-focused approach to referendum campaign regulation in New Zealand did shape the quality of debate, particularly in relation to the depth and accuracy of reason-giving. The scope for adjudication of claims affected the claims that were made. Funding arrangements that ensured prominence for balanced public information over the materials produced by campaigners shaped the substantive content of discussion. We do not think that campaign regulation was the sole factor. But it would be implausible to argue that it had no effect at all.

## 6. Conclusion

Few would disagree that the quality and the legitimacy of decision-making is likely be higher if decisions are based more on informed reasoning than on unsupported assertion, not to mention misinformation or outright lies. Poor quality debate makes it less likely that losers will accept they have lost a fair battle, and more likely that referendums will yield ill-considered decisions that even winners may come to regret.

By comparing two referendums, we have shown, first, that a referendum campaign that was widely praised for the quality of its debate and another that was widely criticised do indeed look very different from each other in terms of media discourse. Coverage in New Zealand was more balanced and involved more extensive and more accurate reason-giving than its counterpart in the UK – though the overall quantity of coverage was also lower.

Second, we have examined whether regulatory interventions can be made to improve the quality of referendum debate. New Zealand made well-funded provision for balanced public information, sufficient to have at least equal exposure to that of the campaigns, backed by an ability to adjudicate campaigners claims. In the UK, such information was very limited, and public funding was used instead to fund campaigners. The evidence is that these differences did have an effect, particularly on the extent and accuracy of reason-giving. Besides the overall patterns in the discourse in each country, we have been able to trace specific impacts of the work of New Zealand's Electoral Commission on the media discourse.

On the other hand, we have also noted that the wider media and political culture in which such interventions are made probably does shape their impact. Whether a public information campaign could have operated effectively in a country such as the UK can reasonably be questioned, given its hothouse media environment and abrasive newspaper culture. To counter such a sceptical environment, a strong case can be made for going beyond the approach taken in New Zealand in 2011 and including input from ordinary citizens who are given the opportunity to learn and deliberate, rather than just from experts – drawing, for example, on the experiences of the citizens' initiative review panels that have operated in Oregon since 2010 (Gastil & Knobloch, 2012).

Nonetheless, in the aftermath of New Zealand's 2011 referendum and in the years since, there is no evidence that those who voted to retain MMP have had regrets about their choices. Whether the same can always be said about those who have cast votes in recent referendums elsewhere is another matter.

## Notes

1. Measured by valid referendum votes as a percentage of the master roll. On the same base, valid votes for the general election were 1.4 per cent higher.
2. In declining order of (daily) circulation, these were the *Sun* and *News of the World* (owned in 2011 by NewsCorp), *Daily Mail* and *Mail on Sunday* (Daily Mail and General Trust), *Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Mirror* (Trinity Mirror), *Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph* (Barclay Brothers), *Daily Express* and *Express on Sunday* (Northern & Shell), *Times* and *Sunday Times* (NewsCorp), *Financial Times* (Pearson), *Guardian* and *Observer* (Scott Trust), and *Independent* and *Independent on Sunday* (Lebedev Holdings).

3. In declining order of circulation, these were the *New Zealand Herald* and *Herald on Sunday* (APN), the *Dominion Post* (Fairfax), *The Press* (Fairfax), the *Otago Daily Times* (Allied Press), the *Waikato Times* (Fairfax), and the *Southland Times* (Fairfax). For detail and data from 2008, almost all still applicable in 2011, see Rosenberg, 2008.
4. Of the sixteen statements coded as inaccurate, the majority (ten) were statements hostile to MMP. One favoured FPTP, one SM, and one STV. Two were hostile to SM and one was hostile to STV. Of all sixteen statements, only three were attributed to an official campaign organisation (in all cases, the campaign for change away from MMP).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

**Alan Renwick** is Associate Professor in British Politics and Deputy Director of the Constitution Unit in the Department of Political Science, University College London.

**Jack Vowles** is Professor of Comparative Politics in the School of History, Philosophy, Political Science and International Relations, Victoria University of Wellington.

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