



**REFERENDUM BRIEFING NO 2
THE MALTESE EUACCESSION REFERENDUM
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**Dr Michelle Cini
Department of Politics
University of Bristol
Email: Michelle.Cini@bris.ac.uk**

Key points:

- The referendum in Malta on 8 March 2003, was the first of the EU accession referendums to be held in advance of the May 2004 enlargement.
- Despite the outcome - 53.6% in favour of EU membership – the main opposition party, the Malta Labour Party (MLP), has not conceded defeat.
- The high turnout (91%) and the relatively narrow margin between the ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ camps reflects the partisan and highly polarised character of Maltese politics.
- The day after the referendum results were known, the Prime Minister called a general election. As the MLP opposes membership, it is the outcome of the election to be held on 12 April much more than that of the referendum that will determine whether or not Malta joins the EU.

Background

Of the ten accession states, Malta is the only one with a major political party opposed to EU membership. A highly polarised political system and an extremely partisan electorate means that Maltese elections tend to be extremely heated affairs. A 51-49% split at election-time is not uncommon, implying that only few thousand floating voters really decide who governs the islands.² The Nationalist Party (PN), a centre-right conservative party led by Eddie Fenech Adami, is presently in government and is strongly in favour of EU membership. The Malta Labour Party (MLP), led by Alfred Sant, is in opposition and opposed to membership. The next election, which

¹ This briefing was completed on 13 March 2003.

² Malta’s population is approximately 390 000 and its electorate is just under 300 000. See Table 1 below.

had to be held before January 2004 (that is, before enlargement) has been called for the 12 April 2003.

The Maltese government first applied to join the EU in 1990. Although the European Commission issued a mildly positive Opinion in 1993, a victory for the Malta Labour Party (MLP) in 1996 led to a freezing of the application. When the Labour government fell unexpectedly in 1998, the newly elected Nationalist government reactivated the old application and successfully negotiated a deal, comprising 77 derogations.³ The referendum question was confirmed on 6 January 2003 as ‘Do you agree that Malta become a member of the European Union in the enlargement that will take place on 1 May 2004?’ and the package was put to the Maltese electorate in a referendum on 8 March 2003.

The Campaign

The referendum campaign was acrimonious, with accusations of anti-democratic behaviour and outright lying thrown about by both camps. The announcement that the referendum would be held on 8 March was made on 29 January which meant that there followed just over five weeks of campaigning. 8 March was also the date set for local elections, to be held in around one-third of localities.

While the Maltese people seemed to be split on the issue of EU membership, support for the ‘Yes’ camp remained pretty solid at around the 50% mark during the campaign. Polls suggested that the ‘No’ camp had a hard core of somewhere between 20-30% of voters, but that around a quarter of the electorate remained undecided.⁴ The outcome was certainly no foregone conclusion.

The campaign was characterised by legal wrangling over names appearing on the electoral register. With the margins between the ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ camps so small in Malta, this was perhaps to be expected. In all, around 2600 applications were made to strike people off the register, with the most high profile concerning Arnold Cassola, the EU spokesman for the Greens (AD).⁵ The Labour leader also filed a writ against the Prime Minister for slander over a claim made in the course of the campaign.

The ‘Yes’ camp consisted of the ‘Iva Movement’ (Yes movement), which had been formed in reaction to the setting up of the anti-EU Campaign for National Independence (CNI, also No2EU) in 1999. While it was hoped to divorce the ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ campaigns from party politics by setting up such organisations, there was little doubt that the ‘yes’ campaign was largely led by the Nationalist Party, while the ‘No’ campaign was strongly shaped by the MLP, even if a number of high profile ‘defectors’ made themselves known during the course of the campaign. The Catholic Church, once an important player in party politics, issued a directive to clergy not to comment, but told their congregations that it was their duty to vote in the referendum.

³ These included: a protocol on abortion, a declaration on neutrality, and a financial aid package and a seven year safeguard on the right of EU workers to seek work in Malta, in case an inflow of workers is likely to destabilise the Maltese labour market.

⁴ See, for example: D. Cronin ‘Maltese opposition strikes a blow in referendum fight’ *European Voice* 27 February 2003, p. 4.

⁵ See: *The Times of Malta*, 5 March 2003.

The 'Yes' campaign was supported not just by the PN, but also by the tiny third party, Alternattiva Demokratika (AD), the Green party. It also had the support of the vast majority of Maltese organisations, from the influential tourism lobby, in the form for example of the Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association, to a grouping of largely white collar trade unions under the banner of the Confederation of Malta Trade Unions. The English language newspapers also adopted a clear pro-EU stance. Towards the end of the campaign, the Prime Minister ran a press conference which brought together over 30 such organisations to persuade the electorate to vote Yes.

The 'Yes' campaign operated at the level of the general and the specific. At the very general level, the argument concerned Malta's European credentials and its future as a modern European state. More specifically, economic arguments focused on the generally agreed need for Malta to restructure its economy, and that this would be more easily achieved inside the European Union.

Alongside the MLP and the CNI, the 'No' camp was composed of the General Workers' Union (GWU), the largest Maltese trade union, and the pro-Labour media, such as the 'Super 1' TV channel.⁶ The 'No' campaign was largely a negative one. The Labour leader, Alfred Sant's more positive notion of a 'partnership' between Malta and the EU (along the lines of the Swiss-EU relationship) aimed to present an alternative to full membership, allowing him to argue that his position was not anti-European. However, the partnership idea was rather vague, did not have the support of the EU, and as such was somewhat lacking in credibility. More successful for the MLP were the negative images of EU membership used by the 'No' camp to warn of: higher food prices, foreigners buying up Maltese property (thereby forcing up house prices and making it impossible for young Maltese to buy their first homes), the prospect of Sicilians or East Europeans taking Maltese jobs, and job losses in the public sector/civil service, to name but a few of the dangers highlighted. Over the course of the campaign Sant produced a cumulative list of the companies that would suffer most from EU membership.

Importantly, after rumours of an out-and-out boycott of the referendum, Sant advised opponents of EU membership to opt for one of three tactics – to vote No, to abstain in the referendum (by registering but not voting) or to invalidate the ballot paper (by writing 'Viva Malta' on it).⁷ He also emphasised that he would not necessarily recognise the result of the referendum, repeatedly referring to it as a '*consultative referendum*'.⁸

The Result

By lunchtime on Sunday 9 March, young people in their cars, honking their horns and waving flags from their car windows ('carcading'), could be heard and seen around the densely populated and largely pro-EU areas of St. Julian's and Sliema. It was not until 4pm, however, that the Prime Minister appeared on television to claim that a majority of voters had opted for EU membership.

⁶ See: www.qwu.org.mt/about.html for a history of the GWU.

⁷ An example of how this should be done was placed on the MLP website.

⁸ See: 'Malte est partagée sur son adhésion à l'UE' *Le Monde* 1 March 2003.

The results, confirmed later that day, were that 53.65% of valid votes counted were in favour of EU membership, while the proportion of the electorate against was 46.35%. A total of 266,722 valid votes were counted: 143,094 in favour and 123,628 against. In other words, less than 20,000 votes separated the two camps. While this might appear a very small margin to outsiders, in Maltese terms it was a respectable victory for the ‘Yes’ camp. Turnout was 91%, again impressive to outsiders, but roughly in line with turnout in recent elections.⁹

Table 1

Results of the 2003 EU Accession Referendum in Malta

	Total	% of Registered Voters	% of Votes Cast	% of Valid Votes
Registered Voters	297 881	100.00		
Not Voting	27 231	9.14		
Votes Cast	270 650	90.86	100.00	
Invalid Votes	3 911	1.31	1.45	
Valid Votes	266 722	89.54	98.55	100.00
Yes	143 094	48.04	52.87	53.65
No	123 628	41.50	45.68	46.35

Source: <http://www.maltadata.com/ref-vote.htm>¹⁰

The data in Table 1 includes not only the number of valid votes for and against accession, but also information on invalid votes and on the number of registered voters who did not turn out on the day. As a consequence of Alfred Sant’s earlier advice to opponents of EU membership, these data are of more than just a general interest.

In what was far from a spontaneous move on the part of the Labour leadership, Alfred Sant also claimed victory in the referendum on the 9 March, telling his supporters to go out on the streets to celebrate. The public order implications of such a decision led the police to close certain roads and to gather around the party clubs, where supporters of each side had congregated.¹¹ There were some scuffles and minor clashes, as supporters and opponents of EU membership crossed each other’s paths on the way to some of the larger gatherings, but no serious disturbances or violence.¹²

Sant, who had himself abstained in the referendum (he registered to vote, but did not do so on the day), claimed victory on the basis that the ‘Yes’ camp had not won a majority. He calculated that only 48% of registered voters had supported membership,

⁹ Note that voting is *not* compulsory in Malta, and that the weather was fine on the 8 March. Note also that turnout in the 1998 election was 93%.

¹⁰ For the results broken down by district, see: N. Fenech ‘No room for doubt about vote – PM’ in *The Times of Malta*, Tuesday 11 March 2003, at www.timesofmalta.com/core/article.php?id=121484. Note that the referendum results that appear on the MLP website are slightly different from those presented above. See: www.mlp.org.mt

¹¹ In the 1970s and 1980s, there was some serious violence at election time in Malta. There were fears that such violence would return given the strength of feeling over the referendum issue.

¹² See: G. Debono and A. Massa, ‘Police act to separate rival revellers’ *The Times of Malta* 10 March 2003.

assuming that one counted those who had abstained and invalidated their ballot papers as 'No' voters, an assumption which was, not surprisingly, ridiculed by the Prime Minister. Sant argued that only a general election could settle the issue.

The day after the announcement of the results of the referendum, the Prime Minister called an immediate general election for 12 April 2003. This was to be expected, even though no election was necessary until January 2004.

While the polarisation of Maltese politics and the partisanship of the electorate helped to keep most of the MLP's traditional constituency loyal during the campaign, there are many in the Party who would prefer to see Labour adopt a pro-EU line in the future. For Alfred Sant, his anti-EU stance is a matter of principle. Only if Sant goes, is there a chance of Labour shifting its position on EU membership. By calling quick elections, the Prime Minister increased his own chances of winning the next election. This is not only an expected consequence of his success in the referendum, but also because it has made it less likely that the MLP will have time to change its leader (with only six weeks to go before the election). Sant has also been able to cling onto the leadership as a by-product of the Prime Minister's decision to call the election sooner rather than later, as well as cleverly claiming a victory in the referendum. However, while Sant may survive, at least in the short-term, Labour's chances of winning the election on an anti-EU platform seem rather slim (though this, of course, remains to be seen!).

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed briefly the background to and the campaign and results of the Maltese EU accession referendum. It has shown how the polarised nature of the Maltese party system, partisanship amongst the Maltese electorate, and internal party politics has shaped the outcome of the 2003 referendum. However, the conclusion is an interim one. The referendum settles very little and for the moment the uncertainty about Malta's accession continues.

The general election, which is to be held on 12 April will decide whether Malta joins the EU in May 2004. Prior to the referendum polls suggested that support for the Nationalist Party has been running approximately 5% lower than support for EU membership.¹³ Clearly, there was some disaffection with the government over its handling of the economy. However, in an opinion poll conducted immediately after the referendum, 49% of the electorate said that they would vote Nationalists and 23.3% Labour (and 23% refusing to respond to the question) only a slightly lower proportion than suggested by EU polls prior to 8 March.¹⁴ While on this basis the outcome of the election looks likely to be in the Nationalist Party's favour, the margins are so slim as to make predictions difficult. Yet if we assume a Nationalist victory on 12 April, this is likely to lead not only to the Maltese EU accession, but also to a change in the Labour Party leadership. Given that a January 2003 poll suggested that Labour Party support would increase by almost 10 points if it altered

¹³ See: 'Voting Intentions in referendum, election' *Times of Malta* 26 January 2003.

¹⁴ See: '67% disagree with MLP interpretation. PN leads with 49%; 88% think EU issue will dominate election campaign' *Sunday Times of Malta* 16 March 2003. Note that the *Times of Malta* is an unequivocally pro-Nationalist, pro-EU newspaper.

its position on the EU,¹⁵ such a development might prove a first step towards a new consensus on the issue of EU membership in Malta.

This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute OERN was established in June 2000 as an international network of scholars studying party politics. The original focus was to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems but the Network has widened its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Units/SEI/oern/index.html>

¹⁵ See: 'Voting Intentions in referendum, election' *Times of Malta* 26 January 2003.