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Voting on Europe, again and again: Stability and change in the Irish experience with EU referendums



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ABSTRACT

This article is about comparative voting behaviour in referendums on the EU and explores variation within one country rather than variations across countries. This enables us to control for broad national context while allowing variations in the immediate referendum context, in terms of campaign intensity and incumbency. It analyses voting behaviour in the many referendums that have taken place in Ireland. The major part of the analysis deals with the five referendums since 2001, as this allows the use of the same measurement of EU support and the use of post referendum surveys. Most attention is paid to attitude to the EU, party support and satisfaction with the incumbent government, reflecting the main debates in the literature on the issues and party cues. The relative importance of each is said to depend on contextual factors such as campaign intensity and economic strength. We find both party cues and issues matter consistently, and suggestive evidence that incumbency matters to the effectiveness of cues given by the two main pro-EU parties but the major finding is that variations in the factors driving voting behaviour in different Irish polls on Europe are slight and barely significant.

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1. Introduction

The decision to introduce direct elections to the European Parliament was justified initially as a way of addressing the 'democratic deficit' within the EU, or at least of ensuring a closer connection between voters and elites. Of course some were sceptical at the time, but in the more than thirty years since that decision was made, the experience of direct elections has not realised the ambitions people had for them and instead has tended to confirmed most of the views of the sceptics (Marsh and Mikhaylov, 2010). In this context some feel that Europe needs even more direct democracy. A recent paper argues that the experience of the Constitution Treaty, rejected in France and the Netherlands in referendums (though approved in Luxembourg and Spain) exemplified the advantages of the

referendum process and arguably its superiority relative to EP elections (Glencross and Trechsel, 2011). The wider literature on EU referendums has explored the nature of voters' decision making and considered how far decisions are made on the basis of what might be broadly termed the 'issues' and how far the domestic structure of party competition – separate from such issues – explains voting patterns. Even if there are variations in the weight of such factors across countries we might well expect referendums in a particular country to follow much the same pattern across time. This has been the broad thrust of much work on electoral behaviour in legislative elections. However, recent research has argued that the bases of referendum decision making is conditional on the broader context of the vote. This follows work on a wider group of referendums and also addresses the considerable volatility often seen in opinion during the course of campaigns. In general this means looking at the campaign itself, in terms of

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intensity and the line-up of pro and anti forces, but also at the wider context, such as the state of the economy.

The search for contextual variation – or its absence – of course requires a research design that goes beyond studies of single votes, but the need for survey data to explore voting behaviour limits the number of countries and referendums that can be included in any comparison. Important studies of the importance of context have all taken cases from different countries and so have concentrated on variation between countries rather than variation within any country. Yet a within country focus is valuable. Holding constant the broader national context allows a focus on changes between different votes and makes it a little easier to find comparable data. This paper restricts itself to just one country, Ireland, and examines aspects of the referendum experience there. There have been nine votes in all, including that on accession in 1972. (Referendums are necessitated by a Supreme Court ruling on the Single European Act: see [Gallagher, 1988](#)). Our primary interest is in exploring the variation across different referendums in terms of the weight of the different factors in the voting decision. In particular we are interested in the extent to which issues may matter more when campaigns are more intensive; and in the consequences of being in government or opposition for the ability (or willingness) of parties to persuade their supporters to follow their recommendations. The major contribution of this paper makes is to provide the most extensive study to date of variations over a single type of referendum within a single national context. It also allows us to examine the consequences of such successive votes on behaviour. It follows [Svensson's \(2002\)](#) study of several Danish referendums. This argued that issues were always the dominant factor but reservations have been expressed, both about the conclusions and the extent to which generalisations can be made from the Danish case precisely because of the number of votes on Europe ([Franklin, 2002](#)). Arguably too, as a country that has typically seen a significant anti EU party in European Parliament elections, the European issue is particularly salient in that country.

2. Issues, parties and context

The positive report from Glencross and Trechsel on the European Constitution referendum experience stemmed from their findings that 'issues' were by far the strongest factor in the voting decision: 'voting on European integration without the distorting film of domestic party politics – was the primary dimension in these four votes' ([Glencross and Trechsel, 2011](#): 768) in all four countries voting on the ill-fated Constitution. Another scholar with a positive view of referendums concluded similarly on the basis of his analysis of five Danish votes: 'ordinary citizens can develop beliefs and attitudes on political matters and bring them to bear on actual political decisions Consistent values may be developed on a salient issue and may become the basis for voting behaviour in one or more referendums' ([Svensson 2002](#)). This echoes findings in referendums in many countries on a wide range of matters, not simply EU treaties, as well as the broader study of electoral behaviour (The most comprehensive analysis is [Hobolt, 2009](#)). Of course, there is still the matter of what particular issues are relevant to an

assessment of the treaty. Glencross and Trechsel include assessments of the treaty itself, as well as more general views on the European Union and membership of the Union for the respondent's country. One might also consider some more specific issues related to any treaty, such as its implications for sovereignty in particular policy areas. Following [McLaren \(2006\)](#) some have explored the importance of perceptions of threats to national identity in EU policy generally and in provisions of treaties in particular ([Lubbers, 2008](#)). Even if 'Europe' matters most in terms of its impact of the voting decision, it is worthwhile to dig a little more deeply, if possible, and see what elements of 'Europe' are critical. Campaigns around Irish votes on EU treaties have raised concerns about issues as various as abortion, neutrality, corporation tax, workers' rights and conscription (see e.g. [Garry et al., 2005](#); [Garry 2012](#); [Hayward 2002](#); [Sinnott 2002a, 2002b](#)).

Such issues are sometimes described as 'first order' in contrast to factors that stem from domestic political competition, the 'second order' factors ([Franklin et al., 1994a](#); [Franklin et al., 1994b](#); [Franklin et al., 1995](#); see also [Pierce et al., 1983](#)). In its simplest version, this would see referendums as no more than an expression of support for the government of the time the vote is taken, although this is arguably a straw-man construction of the second order thesis ([Franklin, 2002](#)) which has found theoretical and empirical support elsewhere (e.g. [Schneider and Weitsman, 1996](#); [Ray, 2003](#); most extensively [Hobolt, 2009](#)). More seriously it can be argued that voters will take their cues from parties they support, particularly where they have no well-formed attitudes towards the subject of the referendum. However, some parties may give stronger cues than others, with opposition parties in favour of a treaty perhaps less inclined to encourage supporters to vote yes than they would do if they were in government. In addition, some parties may well be divided on Europe, which is typically not a foundational issue in most party systems, and so opt to stay on the sidelines. [Petithomme](#) outlines these dynamics and provides some support for them on the basis of EU referendum campaigns in eight countries. In particular he finds that mainstream opposition parties can be unreliable campaigners for the 'yes' side ([Petithomme, 2011](#): 106). How well formed attitudes on the EU actually are seems likely to vary, but even where attitudes to the EU are relatively stable, the particular constructions placed on a treaty may vary and with it attitudes to the treaty. In the absence of good information about what is in, or not in the treaty, party cues can obviously be relevant even if a more general orientation to Europe is stable. [Franklin \(2002\)](#) suggests that where there are several votes on Europe in a country this may contribute to a greater stability in terms of attitudes to the EU and to that extent weaken the impact of second order factors, suggesting that the Danish case on which [Svensson \(2002\)](#) relies may be untypical. The Irish experience that is explored here, with nine votes to Denmark's five, may show whether this is the case. Certainly most studies on EU referendums do show a significant impact of these second order considerations, whether this is simply rejecting a proposal put by an unpopular government or following party cues.

The primary focus of this paper is to explore the stability of referendum voting behaviour in the Irish case, but to the

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