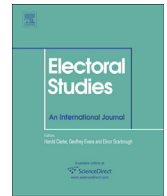




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Political knowledge and campaign effects in the 2008 Irish referendum on the Lisbon Treaty



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ABSTRACT

This article makes a distinction between the *attitude* component of campaigns and the *knowledge* component and argues that a campaign that influences knowledge of a proposal can be quite successful in influencing the vote. On June 12th 2008 Irish voters voted against ratification of the Lisbon Treaty. Perceptions, and especially misperceptions, of the Treaty played an important role in the referendum. The campaign focused in particular on influencing voters' perceptions of, rather than attitudes towards the Treaty. This article examines the interaction between knowledge, campaigns, and perceptions of the Treaty, in the referendum.

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1. Introduction

The nature of European Union referendums, as distinct from general elections and from clearly single issue referendums, provides valuable material with which to further our understanding of how voters make their decisions on whether and how to vote. EU referendums are also typically quite consequential, making it important not only to understand them from a scientific, but also from a policy-making point of view.

Voting behaviour in EU referendums is generally understood either in terms of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the government of the day – the so-called second-order perspective (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Franklin et al., 1994; Franklin, 2002); or in terms of the attitudes of voters towards European integration (Garry et al., 2005) and towards European policies (Hix, 2006; Laffan, 2008; Gamble, 2006); or in terms of the utilitarian benefits one expects to obtain from European integration (Gabel, 1998; Ehin, 2001; Van Apeldoorn, 2009); or, finally, in terms of the effect of knowledge of the issue at hand or of the

European Union in general (Binzer Hobolt, 2005). Previous studies of the Irish referendums suggest that political knowledge was crucial in determining the outcome of the referendums on the Nice and Lisbon treaties (Sinnott, 2001, 2003; Sinnott et al., 2009).

This article provides an in-depth examination of the role of political knowledge in the 2008 Irish referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon. It argues that a central feature of the campaign was the emphasis on perceptions of the contents of the Treaty, rather than evaluations of these contents. Although these two components of a referendum campaign are inseparably linked, they are nevertheless conceptually distinct.

Referendum campaigns can be distinguished by the extent to which they emphasise either the knowledge or the attitude component. On the basis of a statistical analysis of the results from an opinion survey conducted shortly after the referendum it is apparent that knowledge played a crucial role (Sinnott et al., 2009). This research shows that perceptions of the contents of the Treaty can be separated into two groups, one corresponding to issues emphasised by the NO campaign and one to issues emphasised by the YES campaign. The alignment of what voters perceive to be the contents of the Treaty with either the NO or the YES campaign is shown to be an important factor in accounting

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for the referendum result, as opposed to the overall level of knowledge of the Treaty contents or the negative or positive evaluation of these Treaty contents.

The next section of this article briefly describes the 2008 referendum campaign, thus providing the context in which the empirical analysis is pursued. Section 3 sets out the causal mechanisms that we believe connect political knowledge to voting behaviour. Section 4 introduces the survey data and the measurement of the key variables. Section 5 tests the causal claims in a series of regression analyses. Section 6 summarises the findings and draws some tentative conclusions. The appendices contain definitions of the variables and further details on the empirical analysis.

2. The Irish context

The two sides of the campaign in the 2008 referendum were of very different composition. Whereas the YES campaign was forced to defend the Treaty in its entirety and had to have an answer to every possible criticism of the Treaty, each different actor in the NO campaign could simply focus on a specific aspect of the Treaty. Quinlan (2009: 109) succinctly describes the NO campaign:

“As in previous European referendums, the no side was a diverse coalition[, including] ... Sinn Féin [as] the only party in the Oireachtas to call for a no vote ..., the Peace and Neutrality Alliance (PANA) ... the People's Campaign was a broad coalition which included [several MEPs] ... Meanwhile, sustained opposition to the Treaty on the right was provided by Cóir ... But the most vocal opposition to the Treaty came from the think-tank Libertas. Founded by Galway businessman Declan Ganley, Libertas opposed Lisbon because in its view it did not provide a transparent democratic Europe, weakened Irish power within the EU and opened the way for Irish corporate tax rates to be interfered with by Brussels.”

The YES campaign on the other hand consisted of almost all major political parties (with the Green Party formally staying neutral), the Irish Alliance for Europe and a number of business interest groups (Quinlan, 2009: 108–109). In addition to the protagonists on either side, there was the role of the Referendum Commission, which was established by statute to “explain the subject matter to the public, ... promote awareness of the referendum and ... encourage people to vote” (Quinlan, 2009: 109).

While this is at first sight a neutral assignment, in a referendum in which lack of knowledge of the Treaty contents is an explicit issue, the task of increasing “awareness” easily becomes indistinguishable from the political campaigns.

While the YES campaign was emphasising the increased efficiency and improved decision-making in the European Union to be brought about by the Lisbon Treaty, the NO campaign actively attempted to influence specific perceptions of the Treaty, often by emphasising items that were not actually present in the Treaty text, but that are important to Irish voters. For example, one section of the NO campaign emphasised the risk that the Lisbon Treaty would lead to the establishment of a European army with conscription for Irish citizens (Quinlan, 2009: 111).

3. Knowledge and referendum voting behaviour

Knowledge played a crucial role in determining the outcome of the Lisbon Treaty referendum. This is clear from the subjective evaluations of a nationally representative sample of voters. When NO voters in a post-referendum poll were asked why they voted NO, 46% of them mentioned something related to lack of information, knowledge, or understanding (Sinnott et al., 2009: 13). Subsequent statistical analyses of the survey data using appropriate control variables confirms that political knowledge was a crucial factor in determining the referendum outcome (Sinnott et al., 2009), which would not surprise even a casual observer of the campaign.

The idea that knowledge affects voting behaviour is hardly new (Carpini and Keeter, 1996; see also Bowler, this issue). In the 2008 Irish referendum, however, the role of knowledge was a complicated one, involving campaign effects, perceptions and misperceptions of the contents of the Treaty, and subjective evaluations of the level of knowledge of the Treaty. Fig. 1 provides a graphical depiction of our key causal argument. The difference between subjective knowledge — the extent to which a voter feels informed about the issue at hand in the referendum — and objective knowledge — the actual level of knowledge of the issue at hand, or of the European Union more generally — will be a crucial distinction in what follows.

The primary mechanism through which subjective knowledge can be expected to have an impact on vote choice (Arrow 4) is through risk aversion. The more uncertain a respondent feels about the impact of voting for a referendum proposal, the more likely the voter is to support the status quo and to vote against the proposal (Suiter and Reidy, 2013). Binzer Hobolt (2009: 40–57) provides a formal model elaborating on this idea. In this argument, the level of objective knowledge is of less importance; although it can of course be assumed that objectively less knowledgeable voters are also likely to feel less knowledgeable (Arrow 3). A feeling of a lack of knowledge was widespread in the 2008 referendum. Indeed some politicians exacerbated this feeling by making statements such as the admission by Taoiseach (prime minister) Brian Cowen on television that he had not read the Treaty “cover to cover” or the remark by Irish EU Commissioner Charlie

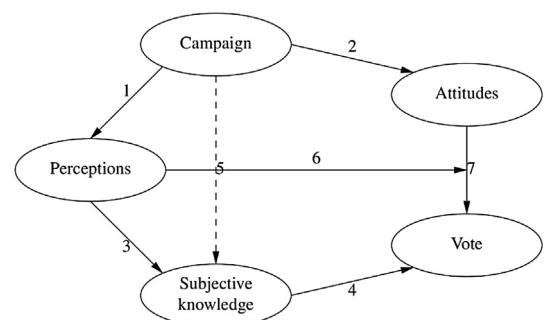


Fig. 1. Causal model examining the effect of knowledge on the vote (YES or NO). Objective knowledge is here conceptualised as perceptions that are correct, hence is part of the perceptions variable in this diagram.

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