
Why Did the Irish Reject Lisbon? An Analysis of Referendum Results

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Theme: This ARI looks at the referendum results and examines the different factors that help explain why the Irish electorate voted against the Lisbon Treaty on 12 June 2008.

Summary: The first part of this ARI considers the dynamics during the referendum campaign, which can be best described as a viciously 'negative' one by the 'No' side and a lacklustre, almost complacent one, by the 'Yes' side. It will demonstrate that polls throughout the campaign also indicated from the beginning that the 'No' side had gained momentum, even though a very large percentage of voters remained 'Undecided'. Thereafter, it examines the results of the vote, highlighting that except for some affluent urban constituencies around Dublin, the rest of the country decisively voted 'No'. An analysis of some of the different voting patterns found amongst the electorate is then made, based on a post-referendum Flash Eurobarometer survey conducted by Gallup, from 13 to 15 June. The conclusions of that survey and the examination of results by constituency underline that rural Ireland, manual workers, the youth and women voted against the Treaty.

Analysis:

Dynamics During the Campaign

On 12 June 2008 Ireland voted on the Lisbon Treaty. It is the only country in the EU which took (and is scheduled to take) the question to the popular vote. It was forced to do so as a consequence of a 1987 Irish Supreme Court ruling that stated that major changes to European Community treaties require amendments to the Irish constitution.¹ These amendments must be approved by a popular vote in which Irish citizens –not all residents of Ireland even if they are from the EU– can vote.

Well before the votes had been cast, there was evidence of gloom. Even though the major parties in the coalition government –Fianna Fáil, the Progressive Democrats and the Green Party– and those that formed the main opposition –Fine Gael and Labour Party– all favoured the Lisbon Treaty, many organisations had held a very aggressive 'No' campaign. This included Sinn Féin as well as the organisation Libertas.

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¹ For a discussion on why referendums are held in Ireland when constitutional changes take place, see http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1125246.

The 'No' campaigners effectively scared the public. Even though there was no basis for their slogans, they stated in well-orchestrated and displayed posters throughout the country that: abortion would be legalised by Lisbon; Ireland would not be able to maintain its military neutrality; there would be conscription into an EU military force; corporate taxes would increase; and Lisbon would result in the privatisation of education and health. Smacking of some pretentiousness, the 'No' side also tried to explain to the Irish that its electorate's rejection of Lisbon would kill the Treaty and force the renegotiation of key points for Ireland. If politics does sometimes breed strange bedfellows, this referendum was a prime example of a coalition of left, centre and rightist organisations coming together and telling (at best) half-truths in order to prop up the 'No' vote.

On the other side, the 'Yes' campaigners did themselves no favour: they committed their own errors that resulted in the 'No' campaign gaining momentum throughout.

The first error was starting their campaign relatively late in the game, literally only a few weeks before the vote. Part of the reason for this was based on the resignation of the then Prime Minister (Taoiseach) Bertie Ahern. Although he led his Fianna Fáil party to election victory in 2007, he somewhat surprisingly announced in April 2008 his resignation, effective from 6 May 2008. Why? Certainly, by all accounts both domestically and internationally, Mr Ahern played a pivotal role during his tenure by helping to solve the troubles in Northern Ireland as well as leading the EU as its President when the Draft Constitution was agreed in 2004. Yet throughout the last year there were doubts about his personal and professional financial affairs. To be fair, Mr Ahern has never been proved guilty in a court of law of receiving illegal payments. However, he did make a television appearance before the 2007 general elections stating that while going through a divorce in the 1990s he received 'dig-outs' (or financial help) from friends, some of whom were also business leaders, opening doubts of whether or not there were conflicts of interest when he was a politician. Since then, the public scrutiny regarding his financial activities, demands for resignation from the opposition Fine Gael, as well as hounding by the media proved too much pressure for even the most seasoned of politicians to continue in power. It was only after 6 May that the new Prime Minister, Brian Cowen, would really start the 'Yes' campaign, long after the 'No' side, which had started making noise against the Treaty months before.

The second error of the 'Yes' side is that their campaign could be best described as 'complacent', incorrectly assuming that the 'No' side would not win. For example, instead of really explaining the issues of Lisbon, many of their posters simply consisted of faces of either TDs (lower house representatives) or opposition members, accompanied by an unintelligible 'vote yes' in the corner. Moreover, the 'Yes' campaign did not fully confront the half-truths of the 'No' side that were scaring the public.

Third was the apparent infighting at times, particularly when the Prime Minister, Brian Cowen, was portrayed as a bully telling opposition forces to 'come in line' and simply back the campaign which would be led by the government coalition.

Evolution of Opinion Polls Before 12 June

Given the above, the number of those who would have voted 'Yes' never really reached the maximum of 50%+1 needed for victory throughout the months and days before the vote. As seen in polls published by the *Sunday Business Post*, at no one time since January would more than 45% have actually voted 'Yes'. In April, the 'Yes' side reached a

low of 35%, but would slightly recover to 40% by May. At the end of May around a third of voters were still undecided.²

Days before the vote, the *Sunday Business Post* data showed that 42% claimed they would vote 'Yes', 39% claimed they would vote 'No' and a whopping 19% still remained undecided.³ In fact, as captured by the European Commission's Eurobarometer post-referendum survey in Ireland, 15% of the electorate actually made up their minds on the last day of the referendum.⁴ The key, therefore, lay in switching the votes of the undecided voters, who remained a sizable share of the electorate.

Examining the Vote Results

The results of the vote show that 53.4% (752, 451 voters in total) voted against Lisbon, while 46.6% (862, 415) voted in favour. The raw vote difference between the two was slightly less than 110,000 voters.

When analysing the regional dynamics of the vote in more detail, 33 constituencies voted against Lisbon while only 10 of the 43 voted in favour.⁵ Yet, many of these constituencies that voted in favour of Lisbon attained marginal victories, as seen in Carlow-Kilkenny, Clare, Dublin North and Dublin North Central. The only decisive areas of the 'Yes' side were in the affluent areas of Dublin South, Dublin South-East and Dun Laoghaire (situated in the southern part of Co. Dublin). In a nutshell, voters from rural constituencies and working class areas voted against the Treaty.

A significant observation is also seen in the turnout: before the vote it was largely expected that the higher the turnout, then the more likely it would be for the 'Yes' side to stand a better chance of winning. This is because in the first Nice Referendum in 2001 (henceforth, Nice I, when the Treaty was not approved) voter turnout was less than 35%. When the Second Nice Treaty (henceforth Nice II) referendum was held in 2002 and the Treaty was approved, the turnout was 49.47%. Taking the experience of Nice I and Nice II together, then, many logically concluded that if turnout was around Nice II levels, Lisbon would be approved. But this did not happen: somewhat surprisingly, despite the fact that turnout for Lisbon was actually higher than the levels of Nice II, at 53.1%, the 'Yes' side still lost. It is still significant to note, however, that almost one in two Irish voters abstained. As captured by Eurobarometer, the three main reasons for not voting in the referendum were: voters did not understand the issues raised by the referendum, they were too busy to vote and they felt they were not informed about the issues at stake.⁶

Why the Irish Voted as They Did

Given the above data, one may well ask why did the Irish from most areas of the country vote so decisively against the Treaty? In the EU Summit on 19 June, Brian Cowen told the

² For a graphical analysis of the evolution of the vote between January 2008 and May 2008 see www.falternativas.org/en/content/download/12016/367871/version/3/file/87_Irish_referendum.pdf.

³ <http://www.sbpost.ie/post/pages/p/story.aspx-qqqt=NEWS+FEATURES-qqqs=news-qqqid=33568-qqqx=1.asp>.

⁴ European Commission, *Post Referendum Survey in Ireland*, 18/VI/2008, p. 4. This is a Flash Eurobarometer survey, conducted by Gallup from 13 to 15 June, at the request of the EU Representation in Ireland. Altogether, a randomly selected 2,000 respondents, aged 18 and older, were interviewed by telephone. The survey can be found at http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_245_en.pdf.

⁵ For a breakdown of data according to the different constituencies see <http://electionsireland.org/results/referendum/refresult.cfm?ref=2008R>.

⁶ European Commission, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

Council that he was still not sure why the people voted 'No' and this must be analysed over the next months, hopefully before the next Summit in October.

One place to start looking might be the 'Yes' campaign itself. As discussed above, campaign dynamics show that the 'Yes' was late to start its campaign, gave a lacklustre performance, failed to fully confront the sometimes dogmatic positions of the 'No' side and did not present themselves as a united front throughout. Another reason for the debacle of the 'Yes' side is that only days before the vote, major political figures such as the EU Commissioner Charlie McCreevy and Brian Cowen himself admitted to not having read the Lisbon Treaty. This decreased the legitimacy of their campaign. Nor did other member states from the Union attempt to come to Dublin, give momentum to the 'Yes' campaign and show the Irish why they should vote 'Yes'. This might explain why the 'Yes' side was unable to switch voter preference or credibly bring in the vote. All of these points are reflected in the Commission's Eurobarometer survey, which highlighted that 68% of all voters thought the 'No' campaign was more convincing than the 'Yes' campaign, compared with the 15% who believed the 'Yes' campaign was better than the 'No'.

It is also useful to ask what type of voters eventually supported the 'No' side. Eurobarometer data suggest that the following all voted *against* Lisbon:⁷

- 65% of all 18-24 year olds
- 56% of all women
- 58% of all unemployed
- 74% of all manual workers.

In contrast, 60% of all self-employed, 58% of all professionals and 66% of all senior managers voted 'Yes'.

Of all voters who voted 'No', 76% thought that the Treaty could be renegotiated; 62% of all 'Yes' voters believed that a second Treaty could not be renegotiated.

Amongst the electorate there were many fundamental misunderstandings about what Lisbon was about: 22% of those who voted against Lisbon felt that they did not know enough about the Treaty and did not want to vote for something which they were unfamiliar with.⁸

Nevertheless, one may argue that at least four main issues emerged. Many young voters, a majority of whom voted against Lisbon, were concerned that Ireland would lose its foreign policy neutrality under Lisbon. Many rural voters, conservative by nature, were also concerned that Lisbon would change the restrictive abortion laws (and, as some in the 'No' campaign suggested, even legalise same-sex marriages). And many citizens in general, at a time when economic growth was slowing down and unemployment on the rise, were afraid that Lisbon would alter the nature of the Irish corporate tax structure (with fears that investment would decrease). Many were further concerned that Ireland would lose its Commissioner and power within the EU's institutional structure. All of these points reinforce the idea that most voters did not completely read the document or fully understand what Lisbon was about.

⁷ European Commission, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁸ European Commission, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

Conclusions: This ARI has analysed developments surrounding the Irish referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. The campaign itself could be best understood as an aggressive one by the 'No' campaign and a lacklustre, if not complacent one, by the 'Yes' side. In terms of the overall results, it is significant to note that except for some affluent areas in Dublin, all other (mostly rural) constituencies voted decisively against Lisbon. Examining the socio-demographic profiles of voters, it can be seen that a majority of youth, women, unemployed and manual workers voted 'No,' while a majority of self-employed, professionals and senior managers voted 'Yes'. Policy issues of major concern for those that voted 'No' included the maintenance of Irish foreign policy neutrality, the continuation of Ireland's corporate tax structure and the preservation of the EU's institutional structures which guarantee a strong voice for Ireland.

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