

It's the Campaign Learning Stupid: An Examination of a Volatile Irish Referendum¹

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The growth in the use of referendums to make major political decisions internationally has brought renewed interest in the factors which underpin voting behaviour at these types of elections. Referendums vary from traditional political contests, in that they are usually focused on a single issue, the dynamics of political party interaction can diverge from national and local elections, non-political actors may often have a prominent role in the campaign and voters may or may not have strong, clear views on the issue being decided. The LeDuc (2002, *European Journal of Political Research*, 41, 711–732) framework classifies referendums along a spectrum from stable to volatile. This case study is focused on the volatile end of the spectrum and will consider the Parliamentary (Oireachtas) Inquiries (OI) referendum in the Republic of Ireland. The OI referendum was defeated by a narrow margin and the campaign period witnessed a sharp fall in support for the proposal. This work employs two models of voting behaviour to understand the OI campaign, campaign learning and rational voting. Consistent with expectations for volatile referendums, the analysis shows that voters relied significantly on heuristics or shortcuts emanating from the campaign and to a lesser extent on either media campaigns or rational knowledge.

1. Introduction

The global financial crisis has precipitated serious debate about the nature of politics in a number of countries, resulting in a marked increase in enthusiasm for the political reform agenda. This trend is especially evident in European countries where institutional design and electoral systems have been singled out as priorities (Ireland, UK, France). Referendums on political reform are on the horizon in many

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states. The UK has already voted on changing the electoral system (AV Referendum, 5 May 2011), Scottish independence will be put before the people in the next year and reform of the House of Lords moves on and off the list of potential referendums. February 2011 marked the election of a new government in Ireland whose programme for government includes commitments which may require up to 10 referendums over the course of its term in office. Four referendums have already taken place (two in October 2011, May 2012 and November 2012). Of the four which have taken place, one has been on institutional reform with the possibility of a further eight in the pipeline.

LeDuc (2002) envisages referendums on a continuum from stable to volatile where stable referendums speak to highly salient issues and volatile ones to issues where voters are less likely to have a thought-out position and which do not draw from core values. Hence, we argue that the political reform and institutional referendums currently in vogue can be envisaged as volatile on this spectrum. This is important because we argue that campaigns matter more in volatile referendums and that voters are more likely to rely on relatively more superficial cues and short-cuts than on deep seated or long-held views. This paper presents the most recent Irish political reform referendum on parliamentary inquiries as a case study in order to delve more deeply into which model of campaign voting behaviour is predominant in these elections. In general, we can envisage that the campaign can impact on voters' decision in two broad ways. On the one hand is the rational model or cost–benefit analysis where voters vote in line with their interests and knowledge, on the other side is the campaign effects model which draws from the work of Zaller (1992) who described the process of opinion formation as a complex interaction between information and predisposition. LeDuc extends upon these elements and suggests that when a referendum is likely to be volatile, the learning process of the campaign including events, media and heuristics are central factors in voter decision-making. Thus volatile referendums arise when voters are presented with a question which relates to an untried or emerging political issue. In these contexts, voters acquire much of their information about the issue over the course of the campaign and in the absence of an ideological predisposition on the question, voters will seek information from alternative sources during the campaign, most prominently through the media and campaign learning. As opinions may only form during the campaign when voters acquire information, opinions may change leading to volatility, ensuring such referendums can be unpredictable as significant groups of voters arrive at a decision over a short period of time. Essentially, campaign events, knowledge acquisition and heuristics are central to decision-making in volatile referendums as this type of plebiscite may make it difficult for voters to engage sufficiently in order to determine the rational implications of the decision to be made. This article explores this proposition using data from the 2011 Irish parliamentary inquiries (OI) referendum.

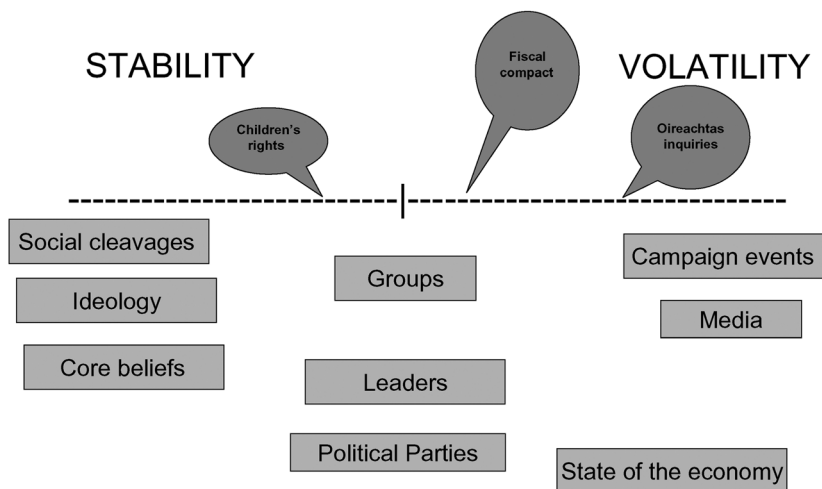
Developing on [Whiteley *et al.* \(2011\)](#) we consider three elements of campaign learning. First, we look to mobilisation, secondly we examine cues and shortcuts or heuristics including partisanship and trust and thirdly we explore the extent to which cognitive engagement or understanding and knowledge of the issues impact on voter decision-making. The cost–benefit model provides for an alternative explanation and examines the extent to which the vote is predicted by voters' position on the question to be decided.

We argue the OI referendum is worthy of deeper investigation as it was a political reform proposal, designed to empower parliamentary committees to undertake public inquiries and put before the people as the first in a series of measures designed to improve the functioning of parliament. With many governments planning democratic innovations and reforms of political institutions, further referendums which share many of the features of the OI referendum are likely around Europe and in Ireland where a Constitutional Convention is currently considering whether to put a number of institutional reforms including the reform of the electoral system to the people.

2. Referendums

In general, referendum elections are classified as low information elections and evidence demonstrates that it can be difficult to engage voters on the specific information and arguments in a low information campaign ([Lupia, 1994](#); [McDermott 1997](#)). That being said, there is great variation in the information environment at referendums and [LeDuc's \(2002\)](#) framework seeks to capture some of the underlying elements. The essential feature of this model is that referendums ask different types of questions of voters and that the type of question posed conditions the behaviour of voters. Referendums that ask questions related to the core fundamental values and attitudes held by voters should be stable, i.e. voters' opinions draw on cleavages, ideology and central beliefs and are unlikely to change in the course of a campaign. Consequently, opinion polls should show very little movement over the course of the campaign. At the other end of the spectrum, volatile referendums are those which ask questions on which voters do not have pre-conceived fixed views or opinions. The referendum may ask questions on new areas of policy or previously un-discussed items or items of generally low salience such as political architecture or institutions. In this case, the campaign learning is vital and the campaign may change voters' initial disposition (Figure 1).

Thus, campaigns matter most at volatile elections. When voter political knowledge emanates from a low base, the campaign contributes greatly to increasing political knowledge. This point is particularly clear from [Farrell and Schmitt-Beck \(2002\)](#) where they demonstrated that voter ignorance is widespread and levels of political knowledge among voters are often overestimated. In addition, [McAllister,](#)



Source: LeDuc (2002: p.714)

Figure 1 Elements leading towards stability or volatility in referendum voting. Reproduced with permission from John Wiley and Sons.

2002 (in Schmitt-Beck and Farrell) argues that partisan de-alignment has created a more volatile electoral environment as the number of voters who make their decisions during campaigns has risen. In particular, there has been a sharp rise in the number of voters who decide quite late in a campaign. In volatile, low salience referendums these forces will be magnified. *Garry et al. (2005)* point out that the vigorous campaign undertaken by the Yes side at the second referendum on the Treaty of Nice in Ireland led to a diminution in the role of second order effects and greater emphasis on the issues contained in the Treaty. Thus, for voters facing a referendum with a focus on a new or undeveloped issue, the campaign is essential. *Neijens and van Praag (2006)* confirm this dynamic in their work on Dutch referendums. Their analysis led them to conclude that new political issues, low profile campaigns and lack of support from community organisations all contributed to volatility in referendum voting. Similarly, *Whiteley et al. (2011)* set out four complementary theories of how campaigns impact on referendum votes. These were cognitive engagement, heuristics and shortcuts, mobilisation and a cost–benefit or rational approach to voting. They found that a wide range of factors was important in the UK AV referendum but that the cost benefit model had the largest traction. Following *LeDuc (2002)* we combine three of these into the major features of one campaign learning dynamic which includes media, cues and shortcuts and cognitive engagement, on the one hand, and a second rational model on the other.

In theory, voters acquire knowledge and information in the course of a political campaign. This process has been variously described by Norris, 2002a,b (in LeDuc, Niemi and Norris) as 'campaigns are designed to inform, persuade and mobilise voters' while Farrell and Schmitt-Beck (2002) describe the main functions of campaigns as creating information flows and drawing the attention of voters to the available information. Ultimately groups participating in a campaign will use a variety of techniques to communicate with voters.

Beginning with campaign learning, the traditional campaign includes a mobilisation dynamic which is, of course, focussed on the media including TV and radio coverage, on campaign advertisements and the internet. In general, voters find all of these useful to various extents (Bowler and Donovan 2000 and 2002). Voters will acquire campaign information from a wide variety of sources and these sources of information and manner of presentation can also be influential in the course of a campaign. But crucially, campaigns alert voters to an upcoming election and Kuklinski and Quirk, (2000) have shown that the campaign can motivate citizens into engaging with the issue at hand and making a final decision. Thus, campaigns have a direct mobilisation effect, increasing the number of people who turnout on election day (Gerber and Green, 2000; Lassen, 2005).

Heuristics or cues and shortcuts have been considered central to campaigns for decades and in particular cues and prompts from elite sources may prove effective as voters use shortcuts to arrive at a decision (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998 provides an extensive discussion and experimental evidence). These short-cuts take a variety of forms, but include taking the advice of a trusted source, whether it is a political party, a friend, part of the media or a social organisation, such as a church or trade union. Zaller (1992) in assessing the role which 'experts' may play in a campaign indicated that voters may place greater weight on information provided from outside the political environment, although voters may decide which information is most important to them. Sniderman (2000) and Bullock (2011) have also explored the role of experts and the manner in which voters may use expert contributions as a cognitive shortcut in their political decision-making. Gallagher (2011) discusses the dominance by *ad hoc* groups in referendum campaigns in Ireland. The groups participate on both sides of the debates and are often seen as marginalising political parties during referendum campaigns. The effect is clear in different types of referendums including those on EU treaties, moral issues and institutional design questions.

In a re-specification of the Nadeau *et al.* (1999) model, Clarke *et al.* (2004) demonstrated that heuristics and other voting cues are especially important in low information elections. A low-intensity campaign will also be open to direct interventions by groups who may change the dynamic and trajectory of a referendum issue in particular if the intervention emanates from a trusted group which provides a useful heuristic for at least part of the electorate. Party identification,

impressions of party leaders and evaluations of the incumbent government are all also central cues utilised by referendum voters. Denver (2002) showed that in the Scottish and Welsh devolution referendums the position of the political parties was clearly understood by a majority of voters. The evidence also demonstrates that in the Scottish case, voter behaviour was consistent with party identification and that this was less so in the Welsh case where voters were less persuaded by the arguments for Welsh devolution.

Cognitive engagement is also crucial (Norris, 2000; Clarke *et al.*, 2004; Dalton, 2008; Whiteley *et al.*, 2011) which essentially means that ability and motivation matter. Thus, levels of knowledge and understanding of the issues matter, as does interest. If people are unengaged with the matter in general they are unlikely to vote, but they will also have a bias to the *status quo* if voting against the referendum results in the maintenance of the *status quo* (Nadeau *et al.*, 1999; LeDuc, 2003; Clarke *et al.*, 2004). Availability of information during the campaign and the framing of such information are central elements underpinning voters' cognitive engagement with the issues. De Vreese and Semetko (2002) and in Ireland Sinnott and Elkink (2010) have argued that the information environment is a major consideration when examining referendums.

The rational, or cost–benefit literature, draws on the work of behavioural economics and has been applied in a referendum context in Clarke *et al.* (2004), Hobolt (2005) and Whiteley *et al.* (2011). The argument here is that voters, in order to make a competent and reasoned decision, should vote in line with whatever proposition is closest to their preferred position or ideal point. However, as Hobolt has argued voters also need to assess whether a rejection of the proposal will lead to a continuation of the *status quo* or to an entirely new situation. This requires that information is available to voters and that voters access that information. In the absence of information about the impact of a 'yes' vote, voters might be well advised to opt instead for the *status quo* by voting 'no'. 'If you don't know, vote "no"' is a slogan commonly used by a 'no' side in referendums and, contrary to arguments often made by the 'yes' side, this is not an irrational view. If the *status quo* is not too bad, even if it is less than ideal, why risk a change to an uncertain future? In some referendums, however, this decision is complicated by the possibility (and this is common in referendums on EU matters) that a 'no' vote could also move the *status quo* to a new point. Thus if people are engaged, do not understand but nonetheless decide to vote, it makes sense for them to support the *status quo* (Hobolt, 2005; a more extensive treatment is Hobolt, 2009).

3. Referendum elections in Ireland

Ireland is one of a small but growing number of countries which makes frequent use of referendums and much has been written on the conduct of referendums in

Ireland (Gallagher, 1996, 2003; Sinnott, 2001; Sinnott and Elkind, 2010). Sinnott (2002) provides an overview of voting behaviour at Irish referendums and considers cleavage structures and the party system while discussion of some of the individual referendums can be found in Darcy and Laver (1990), O'Mahony (2001), Garry *et al.* (2005). Thirty-five referendums have taken place since 1937. This referendum, officially known as the Referendum on Houses of Oireachtas Inquiries (OI), was the 30th amendment proposed to change the constitution of Ireland, known as Bunreacht na hÉireann. The amendment arose from a Supreme Court decision, known as the *Abbeylara* judgement, which parliamentarians argued limited the type and scope of inquiries which parliament could conduct. While parliamentarians had grumbled about the consequences of the *Abbeylara* judgement for many years, the issue came into sharp focus in the aftermath of the financial crisis when public demand for investigations into the causes of the banking and public finance crisis in Ireland became acute. Uncertainty surrounding the legal position of parliamentary inquiries was used as an argument to limit the role of parliamentarians in investigating and evaluating the causes of the financial crisis in Ireland. High-profile parliamentary type investigations in other jurisdictions (UK and USA) reinforced the weakness at the centre of parliamentary functions in Ireland. Consequently, in 2011 the newly elected coalition government decided to hold a referendum to change the Constitution as it related to the powers of the parliament. The core of the referendum proposal was empowering members of the parliament to carry out investigations into matters of public import and significance.

Studies of parliament in Ireland have tended to highlight its weakness. Executive dominance is seen as a particular problem and the parliament has been variously described by Dinan (1986) as 'a woefully inadequate institution' and by Chubb (1992) as a 'puny parliament'. These negative assessments have also been confirmed more recently by Gallagher, 2012 (in Coakley and Gallagher) and Martin (2013). While the financial crisis may have been the immediate precipitator of the OI referendum, it was also seen as a measure which would go some way to addressing the longstanding imbalance in parliament.

The OI referendum was held on the same day as a second referendum relating to the pay of judges as well as a presidential election. All three of the elections fall under the broad heading of second-order contests but the referendums must also be classified as low-information elections. Both were massively overshadowed by a tightly contested, melodramatic and personality focused presidential election (Murphy and Reidy, 2012; O'Malley, 2012). Low-intensity campaigns have been a regular feature of referendums in Ireland. The first referendums on both the Treaty of Nice and the Lisbon Treaty were characterised by weak campaign efforts and subsequent voter studies demonstrated that voters felt under-informed and consequently, voted against the proposals (Sinnott, 2001; Sinnott and Elkind, 2010).

The second referendums on both Nice and Lisbon saw a sharp increase in campaign activity by those on the Yes side and the treaties were passed with comfortable majorities. Although these experiences would suggest that governments should be cognisant of the need to engage in vigorous campaigns to inform voters, the experience of recent referendums, including OI would suggest otherwise.

The OI and Judges Pay referendum campaigns were barely visible until the final week before voting. The political parties were focused on the presidential election and directed very few resources towards the referendum. Low information alone cannot be used to explain the outcome as the referendum on reducing judge's remuneration was passed with a substantial 'yes' vote, while the OI referendum was narrowly defeated. Of the two referendum issues, the OI question received more media interest and importantly in the last week of the campaign there were a number of high profile interventions. Some representatives from the legal community participated on the 'no' side in the referendum campaign. The most prominent group was the Irish Council for Civil Liberties and they were active in a poster campaign, newspaper editorials and media debates. Eight former attorney generals came out in opposition to the proposal just days before polling in a series of newspaper contributions. Their views were subsequently described as 'nonsense' by the Minister for Justice and the last few days of the campaigns were passed in disagreement and recrimination, although it must be reinforced, all overshadowed by the dramatic collapse in support for the frontrunner in the presidential election.

It is also worth noting that Ireland has a highly regulated campaign environment with an [IDEA \(2008\)](#) report concluding that Ireland one of the most heavily regulated referendum campaign frameworks internationally. The Referendum Act (1998) established a Referendum Commission which oversees the campaign. The Referendum Act (2001) amended the role of the commission and its central role now is to inform the public about the upcoming referendum, promote participation and explain the details of the referendum proposals. No public funding is provided to political parties or campaign groups participating in referendums. The Government may campaign in favour of the proposed referendum but they are precluded from using public monies in the course of their campaign arising from a Supreme Court decision, known as the McKenna judgement. Only the Referendum Commission receives public funding. As a result, the Referendum Commission is the dominant actor in advertising the referendum and issues to the public and is responsible for providing information on the subject matter of the referendum, promoting awareness of the upcoming referendum and encouraging voters to turnout on referendum day. In carrying out these functions, the Commission runs a media campaign on TV, radio and online and drops leaflets into all homes. However, it cannot give advice or arguments on either side of the discussion

and is limited to increasing turnout following changes narrowing its remit in the Referendum Act of 2001. For the OI referendum, as examined in this paper, the Referendum Commission dominated the information campaign.

4. Data and methods

This study utilises data collected as part of a study commissioned by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, the lead Government department sponsoring the referendum, three weeks after the vote. Polling firm Red C carried out 1005 interviews with adults aged 18+ conducted between the 28 and 30 November 2011, utilising random digit dialling. Half of the sample was interviewed using an RDD landline sample, with the other half conducted using an RDD mobile phone sample. The interviews followed a fixed format, laid down in a detailed questionnaire. Questions were either closed or pre-coded and we must include the usual caveat that some voters when presented with a plausible reason to explain their voting may readily, but not necessarily accurately select an option proffered by the interviewer. Only those who voted at the referendums are included in the study.

The research employs two voting models and assesses which is most accurate in explaining voter decision-making at the OI referendum. The campaign learning model incorporates three elements of the referendum campaign: mobilisation, cognitive engagement and heuristics and shortcuts. The variables employed in each of

Table 1 Variables included in the study

Model	Variables	Scale
Campaign learning	Mobilisation	Usefulness of various sources of information 1 not useful, 5 useful
	Heuristics/cues/shortcuts	Levels of trust in campaign participants Influence of campaign participants Partisanship 1 Do not trust at all, 5 trust completely 1 No influence at all, 5 strong influence
Cognitive engagement	Knowledge of proposal	0 Opposition, 1 government 1 Not at all knowledgeable, 10 extremely knowledgeable
	Recall arguments about proposal	0 No, 1 Yes
Rational voter: costs and benefits	Recall who making the case	0 No, 1 Yes
	Felt appropriate to vote yes/no	0 No, 1 Yes
	Objective knowledge questions	0 No, 1 Yes

the statistical models and specifically the sub-components of the campaign learning model are summarised in Table 1.

5. Discussion

We know that campaigns matter and referendum campaigns often see huge changes in public opinion. Nonetheless, the scale of the drop in support for OI was surprising. In opinion polls carried out by various companies from September 2011 up to the week before the vote, support was extensive, with a Behaviour and Attitudes Sunday Times poll putting it at 81% and an IPSOS MRBI Irish Times poll putting it at 74%. ‘Don’t Knows’ were 6 and 19%, respectively (see Figure 2). In just nine days, support for the proposal dropped from over 80% of those polled

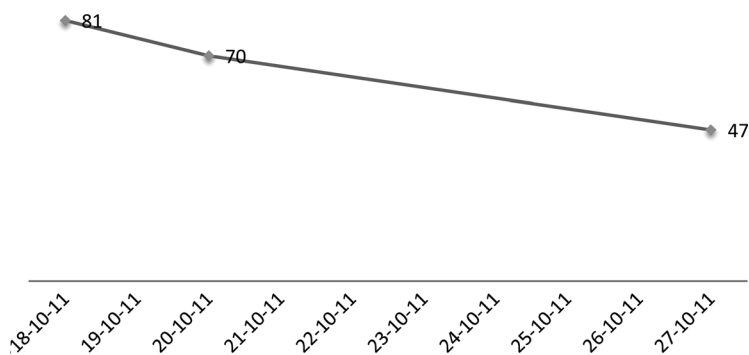


Figure 2 The campaign matters (OI referendum).

Table 2 Cognitive engagement

Low cognitive engagement levels	Don't know
Why I voted 'yes'	18 ^a
Why I voted 'no'	44 ^b
Recall arguments for a 'yes' vote ('yes' voters)	42
Recall arguments for a 'yes' vote ('no' voters)	47
Recall arguments for a 'no' vote ('yes' voters)	50
Recall arguments for a 'no' vote ('no' voters)	42
Recall who argued for a 'yes'?	50
Recall who argued for a 'no'?	57

This table is based on 719 respondents who voted in the referendum.

^aIncludes 'no particular reason' and 'did not know what it was about' as well as 'don't know'.

^bIncludes 'did not know what it was about', 'not enough information', 'only found out on election day', and 'no particular reason' as well as 'don't know'.

to less than 50%. Notably much of the drop in support occurred during the last week as can be seen from Table 2. The referendum was defeated by a margin of 116,167 votes or 52% opposed to the proposal.

5.1 Mobilisation

Our campaign learning model has three components, mobilisation, cognitive engagement and heuristics and shortcuts. Addressing each of these in turn, we outline the summary findings from the survey. Beginning with mobilisation, we argue that mobilisation includes both usefulness and influence of various media and in order to capture the influence of media we asked how useful voters found various media sources. The Referendum Commission has a central role in this area in Ireland and specifically, the Referendum Commission adverts were focused on alerting citizens to the upcoming referendum. Nevertheless, the results outlined in Table 2 show that only a small number of voters found the adverts and/or the information booklet useful (Figure 3).

Unsurprisingly, voters found the broadcast media and panel discussion programmes most useful followed by the print media. However, over half of all voters found one or less sources to be useful, with one-third finding no source useful and a further 20% just one source. Campaign communications from the Referendum Commission was very rarely seen as useful particularly in isolation from other sources. Furthermore, the survey results indicates a mobilisation effect in that there is also a clear relationship between perceived usefulness of sources and voting behaviour: 64% of those finding no source useful voted ‘no’, whilst only 50% of those finding one or two useful did so and only 43% of those finding more than two sources useful.

5.2 Heuristics

We have a number of measures of heuristics including influence, trust and partisanship. Turning first to influence we asked to what extent voters believe each had on

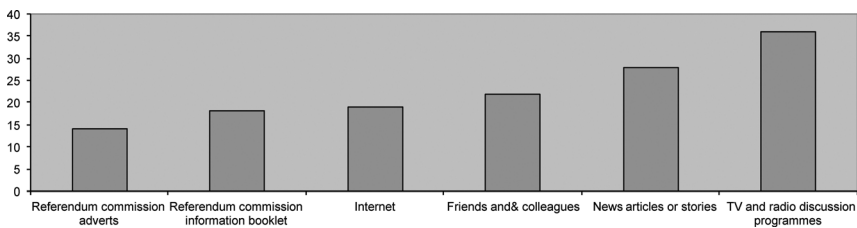


Figure 3 Mobilisation: can you tell me how useful you found the following sources of information about the OI referendum? Chart is based on 719 respondents who voted in the referendum. Responses were on a five-point scale where 1 was not very useful and 5 very useful. This table reports results for 4 and 5.

their decision to vote in the referendum. Figure 4 outlines the influence of the various sources of information. Media coverage in general (30%) or specific radio or TV broadcasts (29%) provided the answer for almost 60% of all voters, it was most influential for a majority of voters. Family, friends and colleagues (27%), political debates and politicians' views and the former attorney generals (23%) followed in a tight group with the Referendum Commission (12%) trailing. Again, 30% rated none of these as highly influential.

Turning to further heuristics we can look at trust in various institutions and individuals as well as partisanship. We know that voting cues are particularly powerful when emanating from trusted sources. In addition, if these sources intervene in a debate they have the potential to change the trajectory. Just days before the referendum a group of former attorney generals wrote a letter to *The Irish Times* highlighting problems with the wording of the referendum, framing their concerns in terms of giving politicians too much power akin to those of a court. It is useful to interpret this action against the political backdrop in 2011, trust in political parties, public institutions and politicians plummeted in the lead up to the EU/IMF bailout of Ireland and there has been no substantial recovery in reputation for any of the areas of the political system. The allocation of extra powers to politicians and parliament was likely to be negatively conceived by at least some of the voters.

Using a five-point scale, voters were asked to rate their levels of trust in the main campaign participants. Figure 5 reports the results for voters who had high levels of trust (points 4 or 5 on the scale). We asked whether voters trusted politicians (9%), information from the internet (11%), media coverage (25%), some former attorney general (27%), Referendum Commission (35%) and legal experts (37%). Again almost one-third of voters had trust in none of these groups. Of these groups the only ones with a clear uni-directional cue are the legal experts and former attorney generals, all of whom advocated a no vote. Interestingly, there was no link between trust and voting 'yes' to the proposal but there was a clear link operating in the

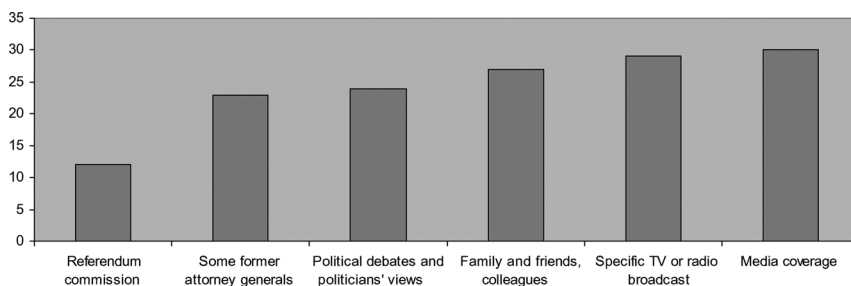


Figure 4 Heuristics: to what extent do you believe that each of the following had an influence on how you decided to vote on the OI referendum? The figure is based on 719 respondents who voted in the referendum. Responses were on a five-point scale where 1 was not at all influential and 5 very influential. This figure reports results for 4 and 5.

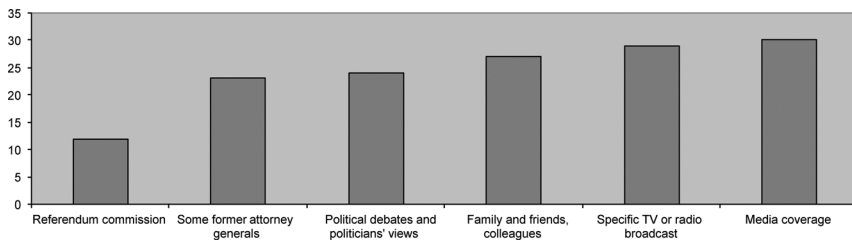


Figure 5 Trust: to what extent do you trust the information provided to you in relation to the OI referendum? The figure is based on 719 respondents who voted in the referendum. Responses were on a five-point scale where 1 was not at all trusted and 5 was very trusted. The figure reports results for 4 and 5.

opposite direction with a significant association between trust in legal experts and some former Attorneys General and voting 'no'. Forty-seven per cent of those with low trust (score 1/3) in the former Attorneys General voted 'no' compared with 70% of those with high levels of trust (score 4/5), and a similar, although weaker, pattern can be seen in the case of legal experts: 50 and 59% voting 'no' at low and high levels of trust, respectively. Thus, it would seem that the negative cue provided by the legal personnel had a significant impact on a group of voters persuading them to vote in favour of the *status quo*. Of course, endogeneity is a problem with these relationships. It is not possible to isolate the causal factors and it is possible that those with a pre-existing inclination to vote 'no' are more likely to trust groups or individuals advocating arguments on the 'no' side.

Partisanship is often an important factor in voter decision-making at referendums but it played a peripheral role in the OI referendum. All of the parties represented in the parliament supported the proposal and this led to minimal parliamentary debate on the issues. The parties focused their resources and personnel energies on the presidential election and their campaign contributions were confined to occasional press releases, a small poster campaign by Fine Gael in Dublin and publicity from a last minute change of mind by one member of the main opposition party, Fianna Fáil. In terms of partisanship the 'no' vote was strongest (65%) among those who said they would vote for the leading opposition party, Fianna Fáil if there were to be an election tomorrow and weakest among Government supporters with Fine Gael voters (37%) and Labour (55%). Sinn Féin supporters were in the middle (57%). Supporters of other parties and non-party candidates also voted 'no' by a ratio of two to one. While Fianna Fáil supported the amendment, there was very little recognition of this among voters, thus the partisan opposition cue here is likely. Even when they agreed with the notion of Oireachtas reform Fianna Fáil voters were still marginally less likely to vote 'yes' than 'no' (47–53%) while Fine Gael voters who agreed voted 'yes' by 70–30% and Labour by 55–45% and Sinn Féin 51–49%. Interestingly, support for the proposal was weak

among Labour party supporters despite their party being in government and a Labour minister, Brendan Howlin, being the lead minister behind the proposal.

5.3 *Cognitive engagement*

Turning next to cognitive engagement we know that there is some evidence to indicate that when campaigns are more intense, and arguably based on values, voters are better informed and will be more likely to rely on more sophisticated criteria—such as attitudes and knowledge—and less likely to rely on simple cues (Hobolt, 2005). This is less likely to be in the case in a low information, low salience referendum such as this. Nonetheless it is worth examining the role of engagement in this referendum. We asked voters how knowledgeable they themselves felt they were about the objectives of the referendum, and asked to respond using a ten-point scale with 10 extremely knowledgeable and 1 as not at all knowledgeable. The mean score was 5.0 among voters (4.6 in the sample as a whole), but there are statistically significant differences between ‘yes’ and ‘no’ voters: the former averaged 5.3 and the latter 4.8. ‘No’ voters felt less knowledgeable than ‘yes’ voters did. This reflects differences at the lower extreme, as 33% of ‘no’ voters scored themselves in the range 1–3, compared with just 24% of ‘yes’ voters.

Respondents were also asked if they could recall arguments made by both sides of the campaign. Interviewers coded these into preset categories. The most common positive arguments in the campaign for a ‘yes’ were recalled by voters as being that the amendment would allow public inquiries into matters like the financial crisis (14%), and that it would save money on tribunals (13%). The major case against was that the amendment would give politicians too much power (27%) with small numbers recalling more specific claims that legal rights would be infringed (9%), that anyone could be investigated (4%) and that the amendment would take away from the powers of judges (4%). There is not a big difference here between the arguments attributed to the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ side, between those who voted ‘yes’ and those who voted ‘no’ although, ‘too much power’ was mentioned as an argument made by the ‘no’ side by 30% of ‘no’ voters but only 23% of ‘yes’ voters.

Asked why they themselves voted ‘yes’ or ‘no’, respondents unsurprisingly chose the same arguments. (Again, interviewers coded these into the preset categories.) On the ‘yes’ side the predominant explanation was that it would allow public inquiries into matters of public importance (25%) followed by that it would save money on tribunals (9%) and that family and friends were voting ‘yes’ (9%). The largest group simply said that it was ‘appropriate’ (36%). ‘No’ voters explained that politicians should not be given the right to investigate people (14%) (another 5% said too much power to the government) or interfere with the judicial system (12%), but people also said that they did not trust politicians (11%). The most common

response, however, was that they did not actually know what the referendum was about (32%), and a further 7% indicated similar uncertainty in different words. Some respondents gave more than one response, but even if we allowed for this in the percentages the broad pattern would not change with the most common 'yes' and 'no' responses still being as above. Approximately 50% could not say who argued for a 'yes', or a 'no' or what the arguments were on each side; nor could they provide an explanation in terms of the issue itself for their choice (to vote 'no'), while the most common reason for a 'yes' vote—it was appropriate—provides us with little confidence that respondents could have elaborated on why it was or was not appropriate. These findings are summarised in Table 2 and give a very strong indication that voters' levels of information about the specific issue were low with many being unable to recall arguments for their voting decision or identify the main participants on either side in the campaign.

5.4 Cost benefit

In a bid to get at the cost–benefit calculation we also asked voters to explain the reasons why they voted 'yes' or 'no'. While these may well be *post hoc* rationalisations, which are suggestive but which may or may not reflect the real reasons, they should reflect the underlying causes for a particular vote. A clear majority, 58%, of those who voted 'no' expressed support for the idea behind the amendment. There was overwhelming support for this statement both within the electorate and among those who voted (see Table 3). Some 74% of those who voted in the referendum favoured OI in principle and only 21% disagreed; among those who voted 'yes' 43%/47% 'yes' voters agreed with the principle, as did 31%/53% 'no' voters. Clearly, there were a large number of no voters whose decision is difficult to reconcile with their stated preference for parliamentary inquiries, one possible reason being that the proposition went further than their own preferred position.

Table 3 Rational

The Oireachtas should be able to hold inquiries into matters of general public importance			
	Voted yes	Voted no	Total
Against inquiries in principle	3	18	21
Neither for nor against	1	6	5
Favour inquiries in principle	43	31	74
Total	47	53	100

This table is based on 719 respondents who voted in the referendum. Cells are percentages of the total. Responses were on a fully labelled seven-point scale where 1 was disagree strongly and 7 was agree strongly and 4 was neither for nor against.

The inconsistency of voting behaviour with voters' personal positions on the Oireachtas Inquiries proposal is neatly summed up in Table 3. Many voters favoured the proposal in principle but voted against it. Indeed, there are also a small number of voters who opposed the principle yet voted in favour of the proposal. While some may argue that it was rational for voters who favoured parliamentary inquiries in principle but opposed the specific detail of the OI proposal to vote against the referendum, the low levels of information and inability to recall any arguments on either side of the campaign suggests that this could only hold for a small number of voters.

5.5 *Multivariate analysis*

Table 4 reports the results of a logistical multivariate analysis of the voting models where the dependent variable is vote coded as 0 for voted 'no' and 1 for voted 'yes'. The table reports the full model and for ease of presentation it sets out only those variables that are statistically significant. In addition we ran the model with the various grouped independent variables run separately but the outcome was broadly similar. It is clear that the results affirm the impressions from the summary data presented already and specifically, we can see that shortcuts emerge as the predominant factor driving voter decision-making. The influence of the Referendum Commission is significant and consistent with expectations, those who were influenced by the Referendum Commission were more likely to vote in favour of the proposal. Trust in its various guises appears to be the most important shortcut for voters and those with high levels of trust in legal experts

Table 4 Logistical regression: multivariate campaign model on vote (yes and no)

Mobilisation	
Shortcuts	
RC influence	-0.509*** (0.139)
Pols trust	-0.415** (0.134)
Former AGs trust	0.536*** (0.114)
Legal experts trust	0.305** (0.116)
Rational	
Knowledge scale	0.241* (0.111)
Constant	-0.661 (0.531)
Observations	283
Log likelihood	-165.81984

Figures in parenthesis are standard errors. *** $P = 0.01$, ** $P = 0.05$, * $P = 0.1$.

and former attorneys general were more likely to vote against the proposal while those with high trust in politicians were likely to vote in favour.

The cognitive engagement element of the campaign learning model is also significant, although the size of the coefficient is smaller than with shortcuts while the mobilisation elements of the campaign learning model are not significant. Rationality does not appear as significant in this full mode. Note Table 4 reports the results for the estimation of the four separate elements run simultaneously. Separate models were also estimated and similar patterns were recorded.

Of course, the scenarios discussed in the multivariate model are complementary to one another and the variables are not independent of one another. In order to understand the dynamic better we simulated the 'no' vote under various conditions independent of one another. We included a number of items on the vote and then reduced the set by dropping items whose effects were so small in the sample that it might not be present in the wider population. The resulting set of items is concise, but it provides the basis for an accurate prediction of the voting behaviour of three quarters of all cases, a reasonable result with this sort of data. We started with the mobilisation items, followed by cues including trust items, then cognitive capacity including self-reported knowledge and attitude towards Oireachtas reform with respect to inquiries. We also added a few items of real knowledge: that some former Attorneys General wrote a letter criticising the proposal, that the Seanad (upper House of Parliament) could not inquire into anything it wanted to and that all parties supported the referendum wording in the Oireachtas. Finally, we included the ability to provide a cost–benefit analysis or a description of the 'yes' and 'no' arguments Table 5.

Table 5 Multiple regression showing simulated no vote under certain conditions

Mobilisation	
All referendum commission ads useful	– 17%
Shortcuts	
None trust former AGs	– 21%
None trust legal experts	– 8%
All trust politicians	– 22%
All would vote Fine Gael	– 17%
Cognitive engagement	
None know former AGs criticised change	– 2%
None know limits to Seanad inquiries	– 7%
All don't know 'no' arguments	– 10%
All feel adequately informed	– 11%
Costs and benefits	
All favour OI	– 23%

This table is based just on the 719 people who voted in the referendum. The table shows change in 'no' outcome if variable at its maximum/minimum value and all others at their mean value. Predictive model correctly classifies 76% of cases: McFadden's adjusted $R^2 = 0.26$.

We know that there was a significant downward movement in support for the referendum over the course of the campaign. The multivariate analysis confirms this and the evidence indicates that campaign events, and in this case the unexpected intervention of legal experts had a decisive impact in the closing days of the campaign. However, it would require a very different study, and a much more extensive one, carried out during the campaign, to isolate the importance of different factors in a way that would establish absolutely whether A led to B or B to A in this particular campaign.

6. Conclusion

The OI referendum did not draw on any deeply held values of the Irish public. As an issue it was unrelated to the major cleavages of Irish politics. While a small political reform debate had developed in response to the economic collapse, even at the height of the general election campaign in 2011, political reform was considered a significant political issue by only 6% of those surveyed in an Irish Independent, Lansdowne Poll. Political reform and more specifically, Oireachtas reform were new to the political agenda and had been subject to only very limited debate.

The Referendum Commission was the primary source of campaign advertisements and information on the referendum proposals. The results of the survey demonstrate that the information provided by the Referendum Commission left many voters underwhelmed and uninformed on the main issues. We see that many did not know why they voted either way, with between 40 and 50% of all voters unable to recall the arguments for either a 'yes' or a 'no' vote. One result was that while there was underlying support for reform with 74% of all voters in support of Oireachtas Inquiries in principle, it failed to pass. There was a very high level of ignorance of the issues where some 44% of voters could not give cogent reasons for why they voted 'no', underlining the common practice of 'if you don't know, vote no'.

However, there is clear evidence of voters relying a good deal on heuristics or shortcuts for voting both 'yes' and 'no'. There is a clear association between trust in legal experts and some former attorneys general and voting 'no', as there was between knowing these made a case for a No vote and voting 'no'. At the same time there was also a clear association between those who trusted politicians and voting 'yes'. Partisanship mattered with the particular support for 'yes' among government Fine Gael voters and No among opposition Sinn Fein voters. Finally, for the minority who understood the issues, the implication is clear, they were more likely to vote 'yes'.

Thus, the analysis presented confirms the [LeDuc \(2002\)](#) framework. For a low salience, low information referendum, the campaign had a significant impact on the decision-making process of voters. Voters predominantly rely on relatively

shallow cues or shortcuts in terms of identifying which way to vote. Mobilisation techniques and media campaigns may well have an impact on whether or not to turn out but appear to have less impact on the direction of the vote, while levels of cognitive engagement with this type of volatile referendum are low. The findings in relation to the OI referendum are entirely consistent with much of the work that has looked at a low salience, low-intensity referendum campaigns in Ireland (Sinnott, 2001; Sinnott and Elkins, 2010). Campaigns matter a great deal at these types of referendums whether the issue is one of institutional design or an EU treaty. Voters make their decision during the course of the campaign and often, voters who feel uninformed about the decision at hand are likely to vote no.

Further work will be needed to extend this to other countries and also to a series of referendums across the LeDuc spectrum.

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