

Understanding the 2015 Marriage Referendum in Ireland: Context, Campaign, and Conservative Ireland

Johan A. Elkink, David M. Farrell, Theresa Reidy, Jane Suiter¹

On 22 May 2015 the marriage referendum proposal was passed by a large majority of Irish voters and the definition of marriage in the constitution was broadened to introduce marriage equality. This referendum is remarkable for a number of reasons: (1) it is uniquely based on an experiment in deliberative democracy; (2) the referendum campaign was unusually vigorous and active; and (3) the voting patterns at the referendum point to a significant value shift along the deep seated liberal conservative political cleavage of Irish politics. This article provides an overview of the background to the referendum initiative, the campaign prior to the referendum, and the key factors that drove voter turnout and preference. Based on a post-referendum survey, we find that while support for the government of the day, political knowledge, and social attitudes have the same effects as commonly found in other referendums, the variation among social classes was less prevalent than usual and door-to-door canvassing by the two sides of the campaign impacted through turnout rather than vote preference. The voting behaviour of the different age groups suggests strong generational effects.

Keywords: political campaigns; electoral behaviour, referendums; constitutional convention; marriage equality

Introduction

The Irish marriage referendum of 22 May 2015 originated in a long campaign by the LGBT community to put marriage rights onto the political agenda. The Labour Party included marriage equality in its election manifesto in 2011. Eamon Gilmore, leader of the Labour Party, declared that marriage equality was ‘the civil rights issue of this generation’.² Following the formation of the coalition government in 2011, and reflecting a more lukewarm position on the matter by Fine Gael, a decision was taken to refer the matter to the proposed Constitutional Convention, a major experiment in deliberative democracy in Ireland that was set an agenda of items to consider. In its report on 2 July 2013, the convention recommended that the Constitution be amended to introduce marriage equality. This is the first time in Irish history that a referendum was called as a result of a process of deliberation involving ordinary citizens; indeed it is also one of the first times in the world that a deliberative process has resulted in a referendum (Farrell, 2014a; Fournier et al., 2011), and certainly the first to have succeeded.

¹ We are grateful to the referees for helpful feedback and comments on an earlier draft of this paper. The usual disclaimer applies.

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eamon-gilmore/is-same-sex-marriage-the-civil-rights-issue-of-this-generation_b_7467986.html, 29 May 2015 (accessed 1 July 2015).

If the origins of the referendum were unusual, the conduct of the campaign was equally so. This was an intense referendum campaign that resulted in a remarkably high turnout. It combined a high impact media strategy with a door-to-door canvass of voters that was particularly strong even by the standards of Irish on-the-ground campaigns. The mobilisation efforts of the campaign groups translated into a turnout of 60.5 per cent, a twenty year record in the history of Irish referendums. An unusual feature of the marriage referendum was that it reversed a declining turnout trend. Average turnout in Ireland's 39 referendums is 52 per cent; the last referendum to break the 60 per cent turnout threshold was the divorce referendum in 1995. The last moral-social referendum on children's rights in 2012 recorded a turnout of just 33.5 per cent.

There are three broad categories of referendums in Ireland, changes to the legal, political and administrative system, international treaties (most frequently arising from Ireland's membership of the EU) and moral-social questions. The marriage referendum was of the latter category, representing a type of question that tends to draw from a deep rooted conservative-liberal cleavage in Irish politics, a cleavage that has delivered some of the most divisive, bitterly contested and closely fought referendums in recent decades. Divorce was passed by a margin of just 9,000 votes in 1995, having failed in 1986 (Girvin, 1987; Darcy & Laver, 1990), and the abortion referendums in 1983, 1992 and 2002 were noted for their unpleasant campaigns that exposed deep divisions in Irish society (Girvin, 1993, 1996; Kennedy, 2002).

The literature on referendum voting behaviour -- in significant part influenced by Irish political science -- has resulted in a number of theoretical perspectives on explanations of voter turnout and vote choice in referendums (for recent reviews see LeDuc, 2015; Suiter and Reidy 2013). These perspectives relate to the importance of demographics, of satisfaction with the government of the day, of the general ideological orientation of the voter, and of knowledge of the referendum issue or politics in general. For the most part, these have been investigated extensively in the context of European integration referendums (Marsh, 2015; Elkink & Sinnott, 2015). This article aims to evaluate the extent to which such perspectives are relevant in understanding voting behaviour in a moral-social referendum -- that on marriage equality in 2015.

Voting behaviour should not be studied in isolation but rather seen within the broader setting of its institutional, cultural and social context (Elkink & Farrell, 2015). The article proceeds accordingly with an overview of the context of the referendum vote, in particular its roots in the Constitutional Convention and the overall dynamics of the campaign fought by the Yes and No campaigns. It subsequently introduces the 2015 Voters, Parties and Elections Referendum Study and the survey data that were collected. This is followed by an analysis of the manner in which voting behaviour in the referendum was influenced by its pathway to the ballot through the Constitutional Convention and the intense campaign that followed. The core of our analysis is based on a regression analysis evaluating the key factors explaining both turnout and vote choice. The resulting picture is one of values and attitudes shifting sharply along the liberal-conservative divide over the last few decades.

The Role of the Constitutional Convention in Influencing the Agenda

This referendum occurred as a consequence of an unusual experiment in deliberative democracy. The Irish Constitutional Convention, which met from late 2012 through to early 2014, was established by the Oireachtas as a one-off body consisting of 66 randomly selected citizens and 33 politicians (29 from the Oireachtas and four from the Northern Ireland Assembly), chaired by an independent chair. This 100-member body was tasked with deliberating on eight specific issues, such as whether to reduce the voting age, a review of the electoral system, and the representation of women in politics and public life. Probably the most significant issue put to the Convention was marriage equality (see Farrell et al., 2016; Suiter et al., 2016).

The Convention discussed this issue in its third session held on the weekend of 13-14 April 2013. As per its standard practice, the Convention members' deliberations were informed by expert briefing documents and presentations, submissions from advocacy groups and individuals (an unprecedentedly large number of submissions were made for this topic -- amounting to over one thousand pieces of varying lengths), and presentations by a number of advocates (included in the mix a Catholic Bishop, the grown-up children of same-sex couples, and a gay man opposed to marriage equality).

Having had time to read and reflect on the various materials, and to hear from and question the experts and advocates, the Convention members then deliberated in groups. The question of whether or not to recommend the introduction of marriage equality was ultimately put to a vote of the Convention members, and this met with the support of 79 per cent (for more, see Suiter et al. 2016).³ In its report on 2 July 2013, the Convention thus recommended that the constitution be amended to introduce marriage equality.⁴

Two years later the referendum was called. The contribution of the Constitutional Convention to this referendum process was threefold. In the first instance, the fact that the Convention members voted so overwhelmingly in favour of the recommendation and the intense media interest that surrounded its debate and recommendations somewhat forced the hand of the Taoiseach. As someone who is instinctively socially conservative and who up till then had resisted requests to express a view on marriage equality Enda Kenny moved quite quickly to endorse the Convention's recommendation. It would have been easy enough for him to forestall demands for a referendum on this matter given that it was not included in the Programme for Government.

³ At this meeting the Convention in addition recommended that relevant legislation should be introduced to address the parentage, guardianship and upbringing of children in families headed by same-sex married parents. The government also acceded to this request and the Child and Family Relationships Act was signed in April 2015.

⁴ <https://www.constitution.ie/AttachmentDownload.ashx?mid=c90ab08b-ece2-e211-a5a0-005056a32ee4> (accessed 1 July 2015).

Second, the fact that the Convention membership included representatives from all the political parties ensured that there was a strong cross-party agreement on the issue. It would have been relatively easy for one or other of the opposition parties to have sought to make some political capital out of this issue and/or to have raised roadblocks in the debates in the Dail. The fact that none did is in large part thanks to the strong degree of consensus achieved by the Convention.

Third, the Convention allowed space and time for careful, measured and informed deliberation about a matter of some considerable controversy. This is what should be expected of any well-run deliberative process (Reuchamps & Suiter, 2016), but in this instance its particular significance was how it informed policy makers and advocates in Ireland of the nature of the debate, how it might unfold and, most significant of all, how citizens might react. Thus, one would expect voters that were aware of the Constitutional Convention and its deliberations to engage differently with the referendum than those that were not: knowledge of the Convention should affect the vote. We evaluate this in the statistical analysis below.

There was some legal debate about whether a referendum was actually needed to provide for marriage equality. The constitution does not make reference to marriage as being between a man and a woman, most likely because in 1937 there was only a traditional view of marriage as that between heterosexual couples. Legislation over the decades had included references to the traditional model. The decision to opt for a referendum over legislation probably arose from a cautious streak in the governing parties. Fearing the political repercussions if a marriage equality law was struck down by the Supreme Court and had to go to referendum anyway, the government opted for the referendum route.

The wording for the marriage referendum was published in January 2015, the Referendum Commission was established that same month and the date for the referendum was announced by the Taoiseach in a television interview on 19 February 2015. The referendum process had been in train for some time and the early announcement of the date gave campaigners three months to prepare for the final elements of the marriage referendum campaign (see also Murphy, 2016).

The Dynamics of the Referendum Campaign

The dynamics of campaigning at referendums can be very different from elections (Farrell and Schmitt-Beck 2003; LeDuc 2002) with such factors as the referendum question, the process of initiation and the campaign participants having important effects on the outcome of the referendum. The Yes campaign was managed by an umbrella group known as Yes Equality with extensive civil society involvement and with the support of all of the political parties represented in the Dail. This group was highly organised and opted to concentrate its message on the simple but powerful argument that the referendum was about equality for all couples. The primary messaging was targeted at the mainstream electorate and not the LGBT community; the explicit aim was to go after every vote, not just the support base. The initial phase of the Yes Equality campaign began with the idea of 'I'm Voting Yes: Ask Me Why?'. The group was very effective in maintaining its core message throughout the campaign in both its media campaign and in the extensive direct canvass which it organised. A Yes Equality bus visited all the main

urban centres; novelty events were organised such as Ben and Jerry's providing free ice cream to supporters; there was a clear, focused and multi stranded social media strategy; and a strong merchandising strategy also operated with bilingual Yes/Tá badges, bags and brochures appearing across the country. The Yes side also organised a mass canvass of voters, with a particular focus on youth mobilisation. A registration initiative was very successful in the early stage of the campaign and newspaper reports suggested that 60,000 new voters were added to the electoral register, amounting to a very significant swelling of the register.

There were a number of conservative Catholic groups involved in the No campaign and the Catholic Church itself was also a participant, but it played a more low key role than had been the case in previous referendums. In contrast to the Yes campaign, the No campaign focused almost exclusively on the airwaves, where strict referendum regulation ensured no political advertising about the issues and a 50:50 balance on all broadcast current affairs shows and items (Reidy & Suiter, 2015). The No campaign also paid for a large number of YouTube advertisements which fell outside the strict rules on political advertising. The No messaging focused on traditional family values with messages such as 'Children need a Mother and a Father'. Opinion polls during the campaign pointed to voter concerns in relation to how adoption rights and surrogacy arrangements might be affected by a Yes vote and these points were taken up by the No groups throughout the debate, although with some variance in the focus and interpretation among the different groups. These points were also the major areas of contestation during the various referendum debates on the broadcast media, with Yes campaigners pointing out that adoption and surrogacy were unrelated to the issue being decided and No campaigners arguing that questions of the family and children were intrinsic to the decision.

The media have long been the main arena for referendum campaigns (De Vreese, 2007). Referendum campaigns in Ireland are commonly focused on national television, local and national radio and opinion pieces in the local and national media. Campaign management and organisation have evolved in recent years and have been especially influenced by social media (Medvic, 2011), which have come to increasing prominence in all elections and referendums in Ireland since the mid 2000s. This was particularly evident in the marriage referendum, which witnessed the heavy use of social media. Twitter and Facebook were used to remind voters to cast their ballots on polling day, record their vote after polling and facilitate other voters getting to the polls through extensive systems of carpooling and other schemes.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Twitter released a global heat map of the activity on the #MarRef hashtag (see Figure 1), which shows that there was considerable international interest in the referendum. While Ireland does not have provision for emigrant voting, recent emigrants retain voting rights (for up to 18 months after they leave) but need to return home to make use of it. A widespread social media campaign documented young voters from across the world returning to Ireland to cast their

votes. The campaign was especially strong on Twitter where the hashtag #HomeToVote was used 72,000 times in just 24 hours on the day of the referendum.⁵

Direct canvassing of voters, sometimes known as the ‘ground campaign’, is relatively unusual in referendums. This fact has often been criticised in post-referendum research arising from voter complaints about a lack of knowledge about the referendum issue (Suiter & Reidy 2013). Distribution of campaign leaflets is a common feature of referendums and a blanket strategy of posterage is adopted with some vigour in all elections and referendums. Reports during this referendum campaign confirmed that the Yes side in particular were engaged in extensive door-to-door canvassing of voters. This is unusual in an Irish referendum and the second element of our empirical analysis below focuses on the scale of canvassing, its impact on voter mobilisation and its effect on voter decision making.

Campaigns are vital in educating voters about the referendum proposal. Research on referendums in Ireland has repeatedly demonstrated the importance of knowledge in understanding voting behaviour (e.g., Sinnott et al., 2009). Whether it is the catchphrase ‘if you don’t know, vote no’, a reluctance among voters who feel uninformed to participate, or an increased susceptibility among those with low levels of knowledge to be influenced by misleading campaign messages (Elkink & Sinnott, 2015), we expect voters with low levels of knowledge of the referendum to be less likely to vote, and more likely to vote against the proposal. We also expect that voters who voted against the proposal would be more likely to express opinions and attitudes drawing from the No campaign’s positions on children and surrogacy. These are some of the hypotheses which we examine in the empirical analysis below.

The Social Context: Conservative Ireland

The Irish marriage referendum attracted a great deal of international attention. Global media coverage of both the campaign and the result was extensive. Support for equal marriage rights has been growing internationally and more than a dozen countries already provided equal marriage by the time Ireland held its referendum. Although Ireland was the first country to use a national referendum to introduce equal marriage rights, it is also likely that a large part of the international interest stemmed from the perception of Ireland as a deeply conservative country with a Catholic majority population. While this perception was accurate until the 1970s, religiosity has been dropping for some decades and the limited available survey data points to a decline in clericalism especially since the 1990s (Coakley & Gallagher, 2010: 61).

Referendums on moral-social policy provide valuable insights into value change in Irish society and the 1980s appear to mark an important turning point in the balance between liberals and conservatives. Up to that point, Ireland experienced overwhelming conservative dominance and

⁵ “Emigrants take planes, trains and automobiles #HomeToVote”, *Irish Times*, <http://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/generation-emigration/emigrants-take-planes-trains-and-automobiles-hometovote-1.2222151>, 23 May 2015 (accessed 1 July 2015).

Catholic social teaching was reflected in Irish law most prominently perhaps in terms of the restrictions on contraception and divorce. Referendum trends in the 1980s point to a value split in Irish society of two thirds conservative and one third liberal (Sinnott 1995). An anti-abortion clause was included in the constitution in 1983, passed by a two thirds majority, while an attempt to introduce divorce in 1986 was defeated by close to a two thirds majority.

Abortion was back on the political agenda in 1992 when three proposals were put to the people to allow for the right to travel to avail of abortion services, the right to information on abortion services, and a third on what was called the 'substantive abortion issue' -- a proposal to further restrict access to abortion over and above what had been included in the constitution in 1983. Girvin (1993) refers to the belief among government members that a 'moderate conservative' position was most likely to be passed in relation to the substantive abortion issue. The Government were wrong in their logic as a split in the conservative vote resulted in an unexpected coalition of liberals and hardline conservatives defeating the proposal. The success of the travel and information referendum proposals pointed to some movement in attitudes to abortion.

The combination of the liberal and the hardline conservative vote was evident again in 2002 when a fifth referendum proposal aiming to further restrict abortion was defeated. The analysis of the 2002 referendum results points to a shrinking conservative vote: Kennedy (2002) reports that all Dublin constituencies and eight other largely urban constituencies voted against the 2002 abortion proposal. Data drawn from the European Values Study and the European Social Survey have all pointed to a changing balance in attitudes and a growth in the liberal group (Garry et al., 2006; Fahey et al., 2005).

Ireland does not have a referendum study (as we discuss in the next section) and thus has data of varying quality on referendums from both the distant and recent past. Insights into the conservative-liberal divide are usually drawn from comparative international surveys and constituency level results in moral-social referendums. There is considerable confluence in the available evidence with conservative voters usually profiled as rural, located along the western seaboard and from lower socio-economic groups (Girvin, 1993; Sinnott, 1995; Fahey et al., 2005). The highest conservative votes in referendums are usually drawn from a constituency list which includes Cork North West, Limerick West and both Donegal constituencies. The converse is also true and the liberal vote which had been clustered in affluent Dublin constituencies in the 1980s expanded across urban areas over the following decades. In the data analysis that follows below we examine the liberal-conservative divide and assess the extent to which the balance in this deep cleavage has altered.

The Voters, Parties and Elections Referendum Study

Referendums have become a regular feature of the political landscape in Ireland. Despite their growing use and great national and international interest in the practice of referendums in

Ireland, the Irish referendum experience is under-researched.⁶ This 2015 study was launched by the Voters, Parties and Elections specialist group of the Political Studies Association of Ireland with the purpose of combining forces and sharing resources across a number of the political science departments in Irish universities to study the underlying voter dynamics in this important referendum on marriage equality. The project follows in a long line of previous studies, most prominently by Richard Sinnott and Michael Marsh, both of whom pioneered research on referendums in Ireland. This Voters, Parties and Elections study seeks to build on their efforts and to take the study of Irish referendum dynamics forward.⁷

The study consisted of three waves, two of which occurred before the referendum and one in the week after the vote on May 25-27 -- this article is focused on the third wave. Irish market research company Red C implemented the survey (via telephone interviews) with questions commissioned by the *Sunday Business Post* and the authors. The questions are designed to be largely in line with those used in earlier referendum studies (e.g., Sinnott et al., 2009; Sinnott & Elkind, 2010; Marsh et al., 2012). With a sample size of 1,006 adults aged 18 and over, Wave 3 provides an opportunity to better understand voter behaviour in the referendum.

In the survey 87 per cent reported to have turned out to vote and of those 71 per cent claimed to have voted Yes. Compared to the real figures of 60.5 and 62 per cent, respectively, these are of course inflated figures. This will be partly due to sampling bias and partly due to misreporting actual voting behaviour by the individual respondents. Where the likelihood of misreporting correlates with variables that are included in the regression analyses, this can result in biased coefficient estimates. Indeed, Achen & Blais (2015) find that such misreporting does lead to inflated estimates of the effect of education, political interest, and being middle-aged. However, since the impact of applying sampling weights to regression models -- other than those derived from the sampling process itself -- is not straightforward (Gelman 2007), we make the assumption that while the mean estimates of variables may be biased, the control variables included in the regression should address the bias in the regression coefficients reasonably well.

The analysis is based on a series of probit regressions explaining the binary variables of turnout and Yes vote. The main model is evaluated by three different model specifications: the explanatory variables of Model 1 operate as control variables in Model 2; and those of Model 2 as controls in Model 3.⁸ The results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 1.⁹

⁶ There is no permanent national referendum study. Piecemeal efforts to explore the dynamics of voter decision-making arise periodically, but almost always when a government loses a referendum vote on an issue of political significance, such as a referendum related to European integration (Nice I or Lisbon I) or most recently on Oireachtas inquiries (Marsh, Suiter & Reidy 2012). On other occasions when governments win referendums or the referendum is of lesser political significance, they are not sufficiently exercised to commission basic research. To date, it has not been possible to secure funding for a permanent referendum study from the Irish Research Council.

⁷ For more on this study, see <https://referendumstudy.wordpress.com>.

⁸ This form of modelling avoids the 'kitchen sink' approach to regression analysis: adding all variables to the same model would result in inappropriate controls for variables early in the causal chain.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

There are three components to the analysis discussed here, analogous to the preceding discussion. In the first instance we look at the impact of the Constitutional Convention and how far voters were aware of its role in bringing about the marriage referendum. We then turn to campaign dynamics and consider the impact of voter knowledge and campaign activities on mobilisation and knowledge. The last element of the analysis is an evaluation of the demographics underpinning voter attitudes and decision-making; here we provide an update on the status of the liberal-conservative divide in Irish politics.

The Impact of the Constitutional Convention

As discussed above, this referendum was an unusual one in part because of its origins: the decision to put marriage equality to the vote was the outcome of an experiment in deliberative politics in the form of the Irish Constitutional Convention. As we discuss above, the Convention certainly had an impact relating to the calling of the referendum, but we might also expect an impact on the behaviour of voters during the referendum. If the Convention and the campaign are seen as different components of the deliberative process that leads to the opinion formation of the voter, then we would expect voters who are familiar with the Convention to vote differently from those that are not. Opinion changed among the Convention members over the course of their deliberations on this subject, with a shift towards a more liberal position on average (Farrell et al. 2015). Voters who were aware of the Convention are also likely to be aware of the fact that this was the main conclusion of deliberation among their peers, which should impact on their own consideration of the referendum issue. In other words, one might expect voters who are more aware of the Convention to be more supportive of marriage equality.

To see the impact of the Convention, we need to look at Model 3 in the regression table. The deliberations are of course towards the end of the ‘funnel of causality’ (Campbell et al., 1960: 24-37), which explains voting behaviour along a chain from socialization, through long term attitudinal effects, to last minute events. We therefore need to control for the earlier components of the causal chain -- demographics and attitudinal variables -- to see the impact of more recent effects such as the campaign and the Convention.

Awareness of the Convention is measured through a series of statements, in which the respondent is asked to indicate whether the statement is true or false:

- ‘The participants in the Constitutional Convention were ordinary citizens’ (56 per cent answered this correctly);
- ‘Some politicians were included in the Constitutional Convention’ (67 per cent correct);

⁹ The final model was also evaluated with a set of dummy variables that reflect party support as an additional control variable. This did not alter any of the findings reported and party support itself did not have a significant effect on either turnout or vote choice. Results available upon request.

- 'The Constitutional Convention recommended a referendum on marriage equality' (77 per cent correct); and
- 'The Constitutional Convention recommended the abolition of the Seanad' (34 per cent correct).

Taking 'don't know' as a lack of knowledge, this leads to a 5-point scale from zero to four indicating the level of awareness of the convention. In our sample, 54 per cent score up to two, a further 34 per cent have three items correct, and the remaining 12 per cent are fully aware of the Convention. One might argue that this question is simply a proxy for general awareness of politics and this referendum specifically. We can investigate this by relating it to the general knowledge question about the referendum that we discuss below. While there is indeed a significant, positive correlation between the two -- as one would expect -- the R^2 is only 0.0088. This suggests that the measure provides a good indication of awareness of the Convention, quite independent of political knowledge more generally.

Inclusion of this awareness scale in the multiple regression analysis provides evidence of a slightly more liberal disposition among those respondents who were more aware of this deliberative process. While there is no discernible impact on the likelihood of turning out to vote, there is a positive and statistically significant effect on the probability of voting yes. This suggests that the involvement of the Convention in the establishment of the referendum has had an impact on the deliberative nature of the referendum in the wider community.

The Impact of the Campaign

Political campaigns are intended to educate, influence and mobilise voters and these are the elements which are investigated in the analysis in this paper. We turn to the educational aspect first, by looking at the impact of knowledge of the referendum.

Similar to our measure of awareness of the Convention, knowledge (or awareness) of the referendum is measured using four statements about the consequences of the Yes vote, based on some of the main themes in the campaign. This is similar to the measure used in the Lisbon referendum survey by Elkink & Sinnott (2015). The four items, where respondents were simply asked to say whether it is true or false, are:

- 'As a result of the Yes vote, clergy will be obliged to perform same-sex marriage' (75 per cent answered this correctly);
- 'As a result of the Yes vote, same-sex marriage will be protected by the constitution' (93 per cent correct);
- 'As a result of the Yes vote, it will be easier for couples in same-sex marriage to adopt children' (48 per cent correct); and
- 'Regardless of the Yes vote, the surrogacy rights for both same-sex and heterosexual couples will not change' (64 per cent correct).

The second and fourth statements are true. Given the passing of the Child and Family Relationships Act of 2015, most of the rights and practical implications assumed to be related to

marriage were already available to same-sex couples prior to the referendum, so that the only change resulting from the referendum was the constitutional guarantee of the right to civil marriage. Therefore, the first and third statements are factually incorrect. Counting for each respondent the number of correct answers, and treating 'don't know' as an incorrect answer, we obtain a 5-point scale of (objective) knowledge of the referendum issue.

Given that the same control variables are required as above, Model 3 also provides the regression analysis concerning the impact of political knowledge. We find a very strong positive impact of knowledge, which has an amplifying effect. Those who are more informed are more likely to vote, and more likely to vote Yes, thus significantly contributing to the referendum outcome. A similar double impact is observed in European integration referendums across Europe, and can be explained through a theoretical model focusing on risk avoidance by voters (Elkink & Sattler 2013).

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Elkink & Sinnott (2015) argue that an important mechanism relating campaigns, knowledge, and vote is the fact that less informed voters are more likely to be persuaded by misleading campaign messages. In this instance it is remarkable that canvassing bears no correlation with objective knowledge. Table 2 shows that despite the statements of the knowledge question being aligned with the messages of the campaigns, the number of correct answers between those canvassed by the Yes and those canvassed by the No campaign is not statistically significantly different, although the former show slightly higher scores.

When asked whether they were approached by canvassers from either campaign, 26 per cent of the respondents indicated that they had been approached, 87 per cent of them by the Yes campaign and 36 per cent by the No campaign. As we might expect, this had a strong impact on turnout, but very limited impact on vote choice (Dalton et al., 2011; Farrell and Schmitt-Beck, 2003). Those approached by the No campaign were no more likely to vote No; those by the Yes campaign no more likely to vote Yes; but the former were less likely to turn out and the latter significantly more likely, relative to the reference category of those that were not canvassed at all. This demonstrates the effectiveness of the canvassing -- it certainly impacted on behaviour - - and suggests perhaps that the canvassers focused on mobilization more than education or persuasion. While it might be difficult to change a voter's perception of marriage equality, those on the No campaign will have assumed that a low (and therefore differential) turnout -- with older voters always more likely to vote -- would be beneficial for their objective, while the Yes campaign will have been focusing on mobilizing the vote.

Closely related to the issue of mobilization and awareness is the second-order theory of voting behaviour. This holds that in elections or referendums that are of secondary importance to voters their voting behaviour typically reflects the voter's evaluation of the primary arena rather than of the issue itself (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). In European integration referendums, where the issue at hand is complicated, the European Union at a relative distance from the voter, and the government usually the initiator of the referendum, voters will therefore often use the

referendum to express their evaluation of the government (Franklin, Marsh & McLaren, 1994; Franklin, Marsh & Wlezien, 1994; Franklin, 2002; though see Hobolt & Wittrock, 2011). In this Marriage Referendum it might be expected that the second-order theory would have less explanatory power for a number of reasons. While initiated by the government, the referendum proposal was based on the recommendation of the Constitutional Convention, and while the government was supportive, it is difficult to see the referendum as a proxy for government support in this context. Furthermore, all parties in Ireland were strongly in favour of a Yes vote -- at least in terms of their formally expressed positions.¹⁰ Finally, if one thing is clear from the high turnout, it is that this referendum drew a lot of attention just by the nature of the question, and it was certainly not seen as 'secondary' by the voters in that sense.

We include the second-order variable in the regression analysis as a standard control only, measured by asking respondents whether they are satisfied with the government of the day or not. Somewhat against our expectations the impact is relatively strong and statistically significant: those dissatisfied with the government were indeed more likely to vote No, despite all parliamentary parties agreeing on the issue. This suggests that some of the voters will have used the referendum to express their generally dissatisfaction with the government, regardless of their views on marriage equality.

The Impact of Demographics

Ireland has a reputation as a conservative, Catholic country. Certainly, previous referendums on moral-social issues would have supported this view. We might expect support for marriage equality to be closely related to liberal political values more generally. Indeed, in the literature on European referendums, the issue-voting model argues that voting behaviour in European referendums is primarily about attitudes: those more favourably inclined towards European integration are more likely to vote yes (Garry et al., 2005). To evaluate this basic explanation of the vote, we asked respondents a battery of four attitudinal questions. Specifically, they were asked to position themselves on 9-point scales indicating their agreement with: 'People coming to live here from other countries has made Ireland a much better place to live', 'There should be a total ban on abortion in Ireland', 'Government should increase taxes to increase spending on health and social services', and 'Children need to be raised by both a father and a mother'. All attitudinal scales were added to the analysis, with high scores representing more liberal positions. These are provided in Model 2, consistent with the view that such attitudes represent more fundamental values that are only to a limited extent affected by the campaigns and deliberations in the period just before the referendum -- a step earlier in the 'funnel of causality', but subsequent to demographical characteristics. Given that all attitudinal variables point to more liberal attitudes, we would expect positive impacts on the probability of a Yes vote. There is no immediate reason to expect an impact on turnout.¹¹

¹⁰ It is clear, however, that in the case of the Fianna Fail party there were quite serious internal differences (resulting in the high profile resignation of Senator Averil Power from the party in the days following the referendum).

¹¹ Except, perhaps, indirectly, with the strength of the support for either the Yes or the No side impacting on the probability of turnout in the referendum (Elkink & Sattler 2013).

The attitudinal variables in the regression analysis show that those more closely related to a conservative-liberal ideological dimension are strongly correlated with a Yes vote, while the one variable measuring a more economic left-right dimension shows no correlation with vote choice. This suggests that the ideological space of political competition in Ireland is at least two-dimensional. Attitudes have only a marginal impact on turnout, but the one most directly related to the referendum at least according to some campaign messages -- that of the requirement for children to be raised by both a father and a mother -- had a significant impact on turnout. In other words, those who feel more strongly that children should be raised by both a father and a mother were less likely to vote.

To better understand the changing nature of Irish social attitudes, however, we need to look beyond the measures of the attitudes themselves. We need to look at their relationship with typical demographic variables that can be expected to impact on the vote, and in particular the role of age. Model 1 examines the explanatory power of demographics in this referendum. Gender had a significant impact on the vote, with women more likely to support the referendum than men, although with similar levels of turnout.

Impressions in the social media and reports in the news media would suggest that age was a key factor in this referendum. Usually, younger voters are significantly less likely to vote than older voters (Blais 2004; Franklin 2004; Wattenberg 2011), but in this referendum there appeared to be a very high level of engagement among younger voters. Through the #HomeToVote tag on the Twitter, the impression was made of a large influx of young voters traveling home from all over the world to vote in the referendum. Indeed, contrary to previous referendums, we see only modest differences between the younger and older voters in terms of turnout, with those over 45 somewhat more likely to vote than those under 25.

There is certainly an important impact of age on vote preferences: support for marriage equality gradually declines as we approach the older age cohorts. The perennial question for all such age effects is whether this is primarily a life-cycle or a generational effect. Separating these effects is notoriously difficult (Neundorf & Niemi 2014), due to the fact that in a cross-sectional analysis, age (life-cycle) and year of birth (generation) are by definition perfectly linearly related. A generational effect therefore cannot be discerned from the regression output alone. We attempt to ascertain the generational effect by looking at the vote proportions in one of the preceding social-moral referendums, the abortion referendum in 1992. In that referendum three questions regarding abortion were put to the voter, including one asking whether there should be a right to distribute information about abortion services in foreign countries: this is the one we use here. To visualize the generational shift between those two referendums, we relabel the age categories for the 1992 data to match their respective age groups in 2015 -- i.e. those that are 18-24 years old in the survey data of 1992 are classified as being 41-47 years old now. We subsequently juxtapose the distribution of voting behaviour by age group in 1992, shifted by 23 years, onto the distribution in 2015, which results in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Figure 2 certainly suggests that what we see is a generational shift, i.e. that conservative Ireland is dying. Although we do not have proper panel data for these respondents, we do see that in the aggregate, voters who were then in the 18-24 years old category now vote similar to other voters in their forties, while generations that were added to the voting population since then are significantly more liberal.¹²

If we are to argue that conservative Ireland is in retreat it raises a question as to what extent this move towards more liberal values is also reflected in less conservative attitudes among rural and working class voters. The news media in the aftermath of the referendum emphasised how social class operated differently from the experience of previous referendums. In particular, working class neighbourhoods showed surprisingly strong support for marriage equality. Indeed, the effect of social class is not visible in our analysis: farmers were less likely to vote Yes than others, but among the latter there was no variation between lower, middle and upper class. This result suggests important changes in the composition of the conservative group as lower social class groups had been an important subset of the conservative group.

The erosion of the conservative vote is also visible when looking at the urban-rural divide. While those in the countryside are statistically significantly less likely to vote Yes, they do so only by a small margin. Studies in the past have consistently found significant differences between rural and urban voters in social-moral referendums (see, e.g., Sinnott 1995). This pattern is replicated in the 2015 referendum,¹³ but perhaps not as starkly as before. While this is only very limited and suggestive evidence of a decline of conservatism in Ireland, in combination with the findings when looking at age and the attitudinal variables, all correlations point in the same direction, that of a slowly dying conservative Ireland.

¹² The oldest age category is somewhat more difficult to compare, since '65+' would include both those close to 65 and those much older.

¹³ See, for example, the analysis by Michael Gallagher at <http://politicalreform.ie/2015/05/27/on-the-same-sex-marriage-and-presidential-age-referendums/>, 27 May 2015 (accessed 1 July 2015).

Conclusion

The 2015 referendum on marriage was a remarkable political event. The role of the Constitutional Convention in shepherding the proposal onto the ballot paper was a first in Irish politics. The active campaign on the ground and in the media was more akin to the referendum campaigns of the 1980s. The balance of opinion along the liberal conservative cleavage has been transformed since the 1980s with a liberal majority in evidence across all social classes, regions and genders.

The analysis presented in this paper points to an important impact of the Constitutional Convention. Voters who were knowledgeable about the convention and the role that it played in bringing about the referendum were more likely to vote yes.

The examination of campaign dynamics confirms some important expectations about referendum campaigns but challenges some of the received wisdom about the conduct of the marriage campaign. Canvassing of voters was unusually extensive but as expected, its impact was on mobilization rather than education. Interestingly, those who were canvassed by the No side were less likely to vote while the converse was true on the Yes side. Issues involved in the referendum question were debated extensively in the media throughout the campaign. The referendum frequently trumped the other current affairs business of the day and the active canvass of voters spoke to an unusual level of campaign intensity. Political parties played a low key role in the campaign and the path of the referendum onto the ballot paper was through the non partisan Constitutional Convention. Nevertheless, our analysis points to clear second order effects in the voting behaviour. Voters who were unhappy with the government were more likely to vote against the proposal.

Combining the analysis of the data from the marriage referendum survey with historical data from referendums in 1992 on abortion allows us to arrive at some important conclusions on value change among Irish voters. The long standing image of Ireland as a conservative, Catholic country has been shattered. The scale of the Yes vote produced newspaper headlines around the world. Analysis of the voting patterns using a demographic lens confirms that the change in values is generational. Irish citizens are becoming more liberal and the conservative base has shrunk to a one third minority. The pace of the change is noteworthy.

Our final point is a political one. This paper has pointed to the importance of the evolution of the referendum issue and its pathway to the ballot paper. It has confirmed that campaigns matter and finally, it has demonstrated a transformation in the core political cleavage in the Republic of Ireland. Ireland is the second most frequent user of referendums in Europe now. Yet, there is no national referendum study. A properly funded comprehensive referendum study is essential. It would inform policy, assist campaigners in devising their campaign tactics and most importantly it could contribute to an environment in which voters could be aided in their vote choice and facilitated in their act of voting.

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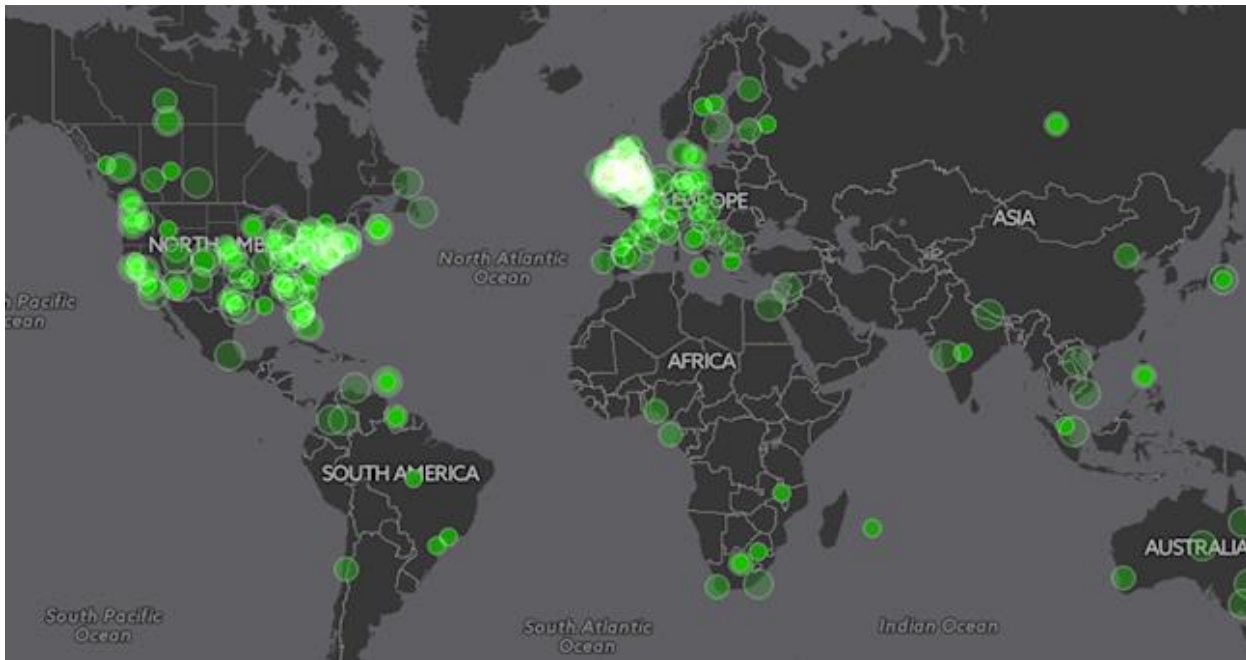


Figure 1: Geographical distribution of the use of the #MarRef tag on Twitter
Source: www.twitter.com (released 22 May 2015)

Table 1: Probit regressions explaining turnout and vote in the marriage referendum, respectively. Standard errors in parenthesis.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Turn out	Vote yes	Turn out	Vote yes	Turn out	Vote yes
Age (reference category is 18-24)						
25-34	-0.021 (0.190)	-0.013 (0.220)	0.018 (0.270)	0.130 (0.270)	-0.46 (0.210)	0.120 (0.270)
35-44	-0.030 (0.200)	-0.360* (0.220)	0.140 (0.210)	-0.140 (0.260)	0.068 (0.220)	-0.150 (0.270)
45-54	0.310 (0.220)	-0.510** (0.230)	0.410* (0.230)	-0.170 (0.270)	0.380 (0.240)	-0.150 (0.270)
55-64	0.130 (0.220)	-0.660*** (0.230)	0.270 (0.230)	-0.420 (0.280)	0.270 (0.240)	-0.370 (0.280)
65+	0.290 (0.210)	-1.200** (0.220)	0.440** (0.220)	-0.580** (0.270)	0.420* (0.230)	-0.550** (0.270)
Social class (reference category is "Upper")						
Farmer	-0.017 (0.280)	-0.630*** (0.220)	0.180 (0.310)	-0.190 (0.250)	0.300 (0.320)	-0.230 (0.250)
Lower	-0.130 (0.150)	-0.150 (0.130)	-0.110 (0.150)	0.070 (0.160)	0.002 (0.160)	0.120 (0.170)
Middle	-0.160 (0.130)	-0.170 (0.120)	-0.140 (0.130)	0.032 (0.140)	-0.100 (0.140)	0.031 (0.140)
Female	0.073 (0.110)	0.290*** (0.099)	0.009 (0.110)	0.240** (0.120)	0.002 (0.120)	0.250** (0.120)
Urban	-0.110 (0.110)	0.160 (0.099)	-0.160 (0.120)	-0.019 (0.120)	-0.220* (0.120)	-0.051 (0.120)
Single	-0.280** (0.120)	0.030 (0.110)	-0.300** (0.120)	-0.043 (0.130)	-0.300** (0.120)	-0.064 (0.130)
Attitude - abortion			0.026 (0.20)	0.069*** (0.019)	0.021 (0.020)	0.068*** (0.020)
Attitude - parents			0.052*** (0.019)	0.240*** (0.020)	0.040** (0.020)	0.240*** (0.021)

Attitude - immigration			-0.033 (0.024)	0.052** (0.024)	-0.045* (0.025)	0.040 (0.025)
Attitude - taxes			0.010 (0.020)	0.025 (0.020)	0.010 (0.020)	0.024 (0.020)
Government dissatisfaction			-0.060 (0.110)	-0.320*** (0.120)	0.029 (0.120)	-0.260** (0.120)
Canvassed no campaign					-0.320 (0.200)	0.075 (0.220)
Canvassed yes campaign					0.450** (0.160)	0.110 (0.150)
Knowledge of referendum					0.240*** (0.062)	0.150** (0.064)
Knowledge of Convention					0.039 (0.055)	0.120** (0.058)
<i>Intercept</i>	1.300*** (0.210)	1.000*** (0.220)	1.000*** (0.290)	-1.100*** (0.330)	0.360 (0.350)	-1.800*** (0.390)
<i>Observations</i>	974	855	953	838	953	838
<i>AIC</i>	727	949	701	687	682	683
<i>AUC</i>	0.63	0.72	0.66	0.88	0.71	0.88

*p < 0.10; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01

Table 2: The impact of canvassing on knowledge of the campaign. $\chi^2 = 12.05, p = 0.44$

Knowledge of referendum	0	1	2	3	4
Neither campaign canvassed (N = 746)	0%	9%	33%	31%	27%
No campaign only (N = 33)	0%	6%	30%	30%	33%
Yes campaign only (N = 166)	0%	8%	26%	27%	40%
Both campaigns canvassed (N = 60)	0%	7%	28%	32%	33%

Figure 2: Distribution of the liberal vote by age group in the 1992 abortion and 2015 marriage referendums. Age categories for the 1992 abortion referendum are relabeled to reflect their current age.

