

What the UK could learn from Ireland's EU referendum campaigns

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*Ireland has held several referendums on EU issues, with both the Treaty of Nice and the Treaty of Lisbon being rejected by the electorate, before subsequently being approved in second referendums. **Gavin Barrett** outlines five lessons the British government could learn from the Irish experience, including the feasibility of the UK holding its own second referendum should the country vote to leave the EU on 23 June.*



With the UK's referendum on exiting the EU drawing inexorably closer, and opinion polls on a knife-edge, 'Brexit' is now everywhere in the British press. The referendum brings the UK into political territory familiar in its nearest neighbour, Ireland, which has held 39 referendums, 9 of them on EU issues (compared to merely 12 UK referendums, only one of them EU-related). What lessons can David Cameron draw from Ireland's referendum experience? At least five come to mind.

Winning referendums is difficult and managing referendum debates is problematic

The first lesson from the Irish experience is that winning referendums is no easy task. Over a quarter of all Irish referendums – 11 out of 39 – have been lost by the government, including 2 out of 9 EU-related referendums. Further, as shown by the then freshly-elected Irish premier Enda Kenny's 2011 defeats in two referendums designed to abolish the upper house of the Irish parliament (the Senate) and to confer extra powers on the parliament to conduct enquiries, Cameron's relatively recent election victory provides no guarantee at all of subsequent referendum victory.

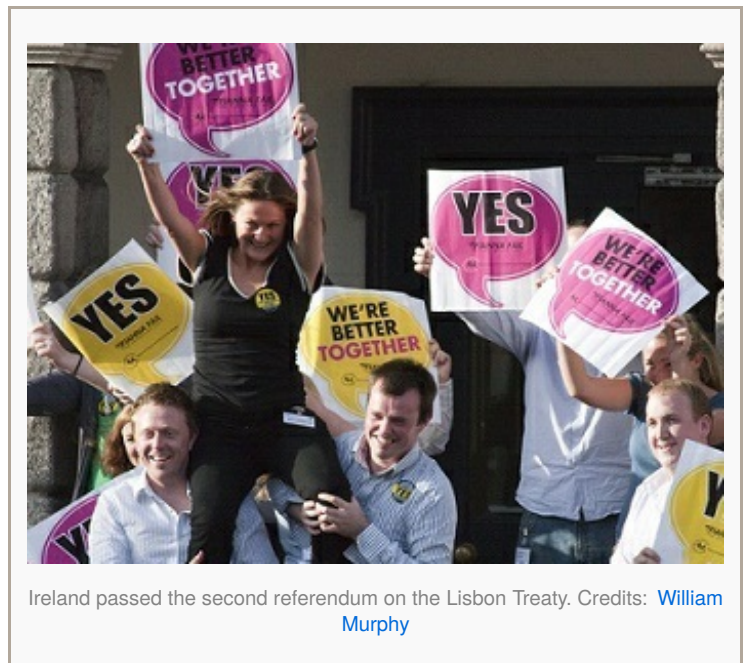
Statistically, winning European referendums in particular has become increasingly difficult. Two of the last 5 Irish EU-related votes have failed – and this in a country where the economic case for 'yes' votes in European referendums is stronger than in the UK.

The referendum on 6 April in the Netherlands, which saw a startling defeat over the Ukraine–EU Association Agreement, demonstrates that this challenge is not only confined to Ireland.

Red herrings can proliferate. Post-referendum analysis of the first Irish Lisbon Treaty referendum described the debate as 'heavily influenced... by specific misperceptions [concerning] abortion, corporate taxation and conscription.' It seems equally unavoidable that many UK voters will inevitably ignore David Cameron's preferred campaign issues (e.g. the economic implications) and vote on other grounds.

Turnouts vary – and can be crucial

The second lesson from Ireland is that referendum turnouts vary, but are normally lower than in general elections. If a referendum involves a question that excites public interest, reasonably large numbers vote. Thus the 1972



referendum on Irish accession to the European Communities attracted 68% of voters to the polls.

But that was exceptional. Many referendums have attracted shockingly poor participation rates. Only about a third of the electorate bothered to vote in the 2001 referendum on ratification of the Nice Treaty. Of 39 Irish referendums, over a third have failed to draw half of the electorate to the polls: most (over 70%) have failed to secure a 60% participation rate. In contrast, no parliamentary election in Ireland between 1948 and 1987 had a participation rate lower than 70%. The worst voter turnout in an Irish parliamentary election since 1948 was the 2002 turnout of 62.57%. Fully 82% of the referendums held in Ireland since 1937 have failed to match that.

The UK referendum turnout is hard to predict. The Scottish referendum turnout of 84.6% was the highest recorded for a UK election *or* referendum. But Braveheart has always inspired more passion than Brussels. Only 65% of UK voters turned up for the last European referendum in 1975. David Cameron should pray for a sizeable referendum turnout. If voters fail to show, he may lose: polling evidence indicates older voters, who are more likely to vote, are by far the most Eurosceptic.

The UK broadcast and written media won't help much

Third, in the UK, as in Ireland, the media ground has shifted against the government in EU referendums, albeit for different reasons. In Ireland, the effect of the 2000 *Coughlan* Supreme Court ruling has been to force the broadcast media to split airtime evenly between 'yes' and 'no' campaigns in referendums, regardless of the levels of support. The effect has been less obvious than otherwise might have been the case because the overall level of broadcast coverage has been limited in the case of certain referendums, and because the print media are neutral or pro-EU.

In the UK, the BBC has increasingly now taken a *Coughlan*-type approach in European referendums because a barrage of complaints by Eurosceptics otherwise ensues. A report, however objective and truthful, which produces evidence favouring the case for remaining in the EU will thus now tend to be followed by a report taking the opposite view. Much of the print media, unlike in Ireland, is virulently hostile to the European Union, with the Daily Express, the Daily Telegraph and the Daily Mail particularly vocal in their opposition. David Cameron can thus draw little support from the broadcast media – and even less from the written.

Money isn't everything – but it counts

Considerable sums of money have been spent in or prior to at least three of the referendums held in Ireland – the 2008 first Lisbon Treaty referendum (with multimillionaire Declan Ganley's Libertas being the key sponsor), the 2012 Children's Rights referendum, and the 2015 Marriage Equality referendum (with, in both of the latter, Atlantic Philanthropies, an entity financed by Irish-American billionaire Chuck Feeney, funding advocacy groups long before the votes).

The overall effect has been debatable. The Marriage Equality referendum in particular, which provided constitutional recognition for same-sex marriage, would likely have succeeded anyway. Moreover, the Senate referendum provides an example of a referendum being defeated by the financially less well-resourced side. Still, resources undoubtedly play some role – and this in a context where the 1995 *McKenna (No. 2)* Supreme Court ruling effectively removes the government as a direct financial player in referendums in favour of private parties, to some extent privatising referendums.

UK government expenditure is also subject to limits (although, fortunately for the remain side, far less drastic ones), notably under so-called *purdah* rules leading up to the vote. David Cameron confronts a well-organised 'no' campaign awash with donations from millionaires and hedge funds. The 'yes' side also has its support in City of London financial institutions. But Brexit-advocates are unlikely to lose because they were outspent.

A second vote

Finally, what prospect is there of an Irish-style second vote if the UK votes for Brexit? Ireland's initial 'no' votes to

Nice and Lisbon concerned treaties requiring unanimous adoption. Thus a 'no' vote threatened to blockade the whole Union's progress. This bargaining power bought (very limited) concessions, then a second referendum.

A Brexit vote, however, will only directly impact upon British integration. Not only are concessions by other states correspondingly less likely, domestically no UK government could simply ignore such a referendum result. Nevertheless, the final 'Brexit' deal could be so economically and politically disadvantageous for the UK, that one wonders if Britons themselves would demand a confirmatory referendum before condemning themselves to self-imposed political and economic exclusion.

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*Note: For more information on this topic, see the author's forthcoming article in the [Journal of Legislative Studies](#). A shorter version of this article also appears in the *Sunday Business Post*. The article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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