

# Disengagement or delusion?

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Irish voters rejected the Lisbon Treaty 53 percent to 47 percent on June 12 last. This result, from a country which has probably benefited more from the EU than any other (€40 billion inward transfer of funds), stunned many. The vote has direct consequences for Ireland and the EU, and poses wider questions.

## EU referendums in Ireland

A referendum was politically vital to legitimise the new Irish constitution in 1937 and to minimise conflicts with London. A by-product of this requirement is that the constitution can only be amended by referendum. There have been 28 such referendums over the last 71 years, seven of them dealing with the EU.

Date	Issue	Turnout	Yes	No
1972	EEC membership	71%	83%	17%
1987	Single European Act	44%	70%	30%
1992	Maastricht Treaty	57%	69%	31%
1988	Amsterdam Treaty	56%	62%	38%
2001	Nice Treaty (I)	35%	46%	54%
2002	Nice Treaty (II)	50%	63%	37%
2008	Lisbon Treaty	53%	47%	53%

There has, up until now, been a consistent 30 percent opposition to European treaties. The only thing the five main groups, and I use the term loosely, who generate this vote share is their opposition to "Europe".

There are far-left splinter groups for whom the EU is a capitalist structure, far-right figures who see it as a creeping socialist plot, fundamentalist Roman Catholics who see it as a secular/humanist Trojan horse, hardcore nationalists for whom the nation state represents the summit of human political development, and ultra neutralists/pacifists who reject any structured security cooperation (just about accepting the UN).

Once a referendum is called, the media are required to offer balanced coverage. This provides exceptional national exposure for figures from these otherwise marginal groups.

## The Lisbon Treaty and campaign

The Lisbon Treaty was supported by all the five main political parties who collectively account for 156 of the 166 seats in the Dáil (the lower house of parliament), and 86 percent of the votes in last year's general election.

It was opposed by Sinn Féin (four seats), and the far-left Socialist Party who lost their only seat in 2007. A new element was a strange and extraordinarily well-financed campaign from the conservative Libertas think-tank headed by the self-proclaimed millionaire Declan Ganley.

Libertas must have spent something in the region of €2 million on their sophisticated campaign - which opposed Lisbon as not being radical enough in terms of democratic reform of the EU. Where these funds came from is, and will most likely remain, a mystery as private foundations and campaign groups are not subject to the same financial disclosure rules as political parties.

The "No" campaigners began their work early, in opposition to the defunct Constitutional Treaty, and carried on against Lisbon. They seized the initiative and trumpeted their key arguments: Lisbon threatened Irish neutrality and opened the door to conscription into a future European army; Lisbon would lead to abortion on demand, gay marriage and general moral depravity; Lisbon threatened Ireland's low corporation taxes (seen by the right as being more important than EU Structural Funds in producing the "Celtic Tiger"); Ireland would lose votes and her EU Commissioner.

Their most seductive argument was their simplest - that a "better deal" was possible.

The "Yes" campaigns were slow to mobilise, and with the exception of the Labour Party, did not seek to defend the treaty in the context of the overall European project. They found themselves fighting on issues selected by their opponents, often facing the impossible task of disproving false claims.

The treaty itself, being largely composed of amendments to existing treaties, did little to help as it does not make for easy reading. This was underlined when both the Taoiseach (prime minister) Brian Cowen and Ireland's EU Commissioner Charlie McCreevy admitted that they had not read it. Admissions that did little to help a "Yes" campaign by now essentially reduced to a "trust us, we know what we're doing" pitch.

These weaknesses left the "Yes" campaigns playing a difficult-to-win catch-up game.

A post-referendum poll found that even amongst "Yes" voters 57 percent thought the "No" campaign had been more convincing. Across all voters that figure rose to 68 percent. A perverse flip showed that the electorate would largely repeat their 2007 votes for the parties they had just disavowed.

## Broader challenges

Many political parties face a real challenge in offering a modern statement of what vision of society they offer, as distinct from what their political heritage is. This is even more acutely true in Ireland where the two main parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, who collectively won 69 percent of the votes in 2007, have become virtually indistinguishable centre-right entities.

They trace their heritages back to the 1922-23 Civil War largely fought over the nature of the new state's connections to the former colonial power. Their differences once reflected slightly distinct class bases which have long since vanished.

No Irish government can be formed without the participation of one of these parties. Their election campaigns have become largely managerial - who can best manage the country - rather than political - what kind of country they propose.

This managerial mentality prevented either party from offering a political message in support of European construction to motivate voters about a broader or more profound, picture. Older voters could draw motivation from the 1972 and 1987 referendums where such arguments were more present.

For younger voters the EU has become a part of the normal backdrop, just something that exists. In a significantly depoliticised society terms like Commission, Council of Ministers, European Parliament, directives and treaties have become part of the background noise. Rather like airline passengers during the safety demonstrations, people hear the words but don't really listen, much less comprehend.

If Ireland wishes to continue benefiting from the EU, her voters will have to be invited to vote again on Lisbon, plus a few protocols and perhaps a Commissioner for every Member State, next Spring.

In this referendum the country's political leaderships will be fighting for their lives. That might be just enough to motivate them to spell out what they offer, and then go out and actively campaign for it.

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