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IMPROVING HUMAN RESEARCH POTENTIAL
AND THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC KNOWLEDGE BASE

**Democratic Participation and Political Communication in
Systems of Multi-level Governance**

Ireland: Turnout decides

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Following each of the two referendums in Ireland on the Treaty of Nice, the European Commission Representation in Ireland arranged for a special public opinion survey to be carried out with a view to determining why people voted for or against ratification, or abstained, and what their perceptions, preferences, sources of information and long-term views on European integration were. Both surveys were conducted by Millward Brown IMS/EOS Gallup under the auspices of the Eurobarometer Unit of DG Press in the European Commission.

The second Irish referendum on the Nice Treaty saw a marked improvement in communication and a substantial increase in people's sense that they could understand the issues at stake. The improvements in communication were concentrated in the mass media (television, radio and newspapers) and in interpersonal discussion of the issues. The Government's White Paper or summary of the White Paper and the activities of the Referendum Commission also played a role in this improved communication process.

All this was accompanied by a 25 percentage point increase in the proportion of people who felt they understood at least some of the issues involved in the Nice Treaty.

On the other hand, the evidence also showed that the communication process had its limits in that specific measures taken by the Government with a view to the second referendum (the insertion of a European defence reservation into the Irish Constitution, the Seville Declaration on neutrality and the new parliamentary procedures for examining EU proposals) generated, at best, only moderate levels of awareness among the public.

By comparison with the period immediately after the first referendum, there was a substantial increase in support for EU enlargement. The indicator of general orientation to European integration (unite/integrate fully versus protect independence) also shifted substantially by comparison with the immediate post Nice1 period but the evidence indicates that this change occurred as early as January 2002 and was not, therefore, a product of the Nice2 campaign. Movement in other attitudes to integration tended to be of very modest proportions. With one exception - attitudes to neutrality - the modest changes that did occur were in a pro-integration direction.

The evidence confirms that these developments had discernible effects on behaviour. The main determinants of increased participation in the referendum were (a) improved communication (via interpersonal discussions, newspaper articles, television news and current affairs, the leaflets of the Yes campaign and, more indirectly, the activities of the Referendum Commission) and (b) higher levels of knowledge of the European Union as measured by both subjective and objective indicators.

Turnout was also boosted by enthusiasm for European integration and by having an allegiance to one or other of the political parties (there was no evidence of one party having greater success in "getting out the vote" than the others). All other things being equal, gender also affected the level of participation - in this case, women being more likely to vote than men. Abstention by young people showed itself to be a persistent problem and one that is independent of the various communication and attitudinal effects considered here.

Although the traditional forms of campaigning -- the distribution of leaflets and door-to-door canvassing -- had more limited appeal than the media coverage of the campaign and the issues, they were important factors in securing votes for each side from those to whom they did appeal. Similarly, even though they appealed to only one person in six, the free newspapers advocating a No vote that were distributed in church porches made a significant contribution to augmenting the No vote. The Government's White Paper and the Seville Declaration on Ireland's neutrality tended to reinforce the Yes vote, while awareness of the constitutional clause relating to a common European defence was associated with voting No. Newspaper articles were the only mass media factor that affected the direction of voting - to the benefit of the Yes side.

In terms of attitudes to European integration, the most important pro-treaty effect came from being in favour of enlargement of the European Union. A general feeling of enthusiasm for European integration also boosted the Yes vote. Attitudes that inclined people to vote No included the view that too many issues are decided on by the European Union, the sense of being dissatisfied with the way EU policies are made and the feeling that Ireland should do all it can to strengthen its neutrality.

Domestic political factors also had some impact on the outcome. For example, all other things being equal, a tendency to trust trade unions was associated with an increased propensity to vote No, while a tendency to trust employers' organisations was associated with a Yes vote. Trust in government had no effect on the direction of voting. However, dissatisfaction with the way the government was running the country had a fairly minor though statistically significant effect (leading to voting No). On the other hand, the view that there are too many foreigners living in Ireland (an issue that had been pushed by a minority on the No side) had no significant effect on vote choice and the direction of voting was also unaffected by people's assessment of their own economic situation.

Variations in party allegiance had significant effects on vote choice. This was evident in particular in the tendency of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael supporters to favour ratification while Labour Party supporters, all other things being equal, tended to oppose ratification. Being a Green Party supporter had no effect one way or the other.

Finally, the analysis of the determinants of vote choice suggest that a significant source of the increased Yes vote was the elimination of the negative generational and gender effects that had been evident in the first Nice referendum.

The implications of all this for communication and debate about European integration can be summarised as follows:

- Communication works or can be made to work.
- The main mechanisms by which it works are the mass media and interpersonal discussion.
- When it works, it has demonstrable effects on behaviour in terms of both participation and the direction of vote choice.
- Knowledge and people's sense of assurance about their knowledge also have a significant influence on behaviour.

- Attitudes also influence behaviour and, while it is more difficult to bring about aggregate change in attitude than to bring about change in knowledge and awareness, attitudes do change in response to unfolding events.
- Party allegiance plays a significant role in mobilising participation and in influencing the direction of vote choice, though the direction taken by the choice may not be in accordance with the views of party leaderships.
- Although communication in the area of European affairs can be effective, it is not easy. The difficulties in this case are illustrated by the limited awareness of specific Europe-related policy initiatives taken by the Irish government (the Seville declaration, the constitutional reservation about joining a European defence, the arrangements for the Dáil and Senate to examine EU proposals)
- Although knowledge improved substantially in Nice2 by comparison with Nice1, two-in-five citizens were left uninformed (or feeling uninformed) about the issues and there was very little evidence of a spillover from improved knowledge about Nice to improved knowledge about European affairs generally.
- Turnout in the second Nice referendum in Ireland only looked good by comparison with the disastrous turnout in the first referendum; turnout of just below 50 per cent is not good, from any point of view.

Thus, there is much to be done by campaigners on both sides and by policy makers at national and European level to create a genuine and on-going debate about European integration. The Irish case is in many ways an illustration of a wider problem and, via the two Nice referendums, can be thought of as a test bed for potential remedies. The challenge for Irish and EU political leaders and policymakers is to continue the effort to engage and mobilise the citizens of Ireland, the citizens of other referendum-holding countries, and, with a view to consolidating the legitimacy of the Union, also the citizens of those member states that follow the representative rather than the popular route to the ratification of EU treaty changes.