



Press release

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Opposition to water charging regime was not representative of the majority of public says UCD report

Data suggests that the protesters only represented around 30% of all Irish households, at most, with the other 70% paying for water services as Irish Water customers, through group water schemes, or by privately funding their own wells and wastewater treatment.

Exit poll data for the 2016 general election showed that fewer than one in ten voters (8%) cited water charges as the most important issue influencing their choice of first preference candidates; even amongst those voting for parties and candidates active in the anti-water charges campaign.

Five factors were influential in generating the opposition to such charges: whether water services are perceived as public, private or social goods; levels of public trust in government; personal values; 'framing' of water charges policy; and the timing of the introduction of the charges.

The factors driving opposition to the introduction of domestic water charges in Ireland appear to have been multiple and complex in nature, combining political and personal circumstances around the time of introduction as well as in preceding decades.

Any future attempts to resolve opposition are also likely to be complex and time-consuming. The 2017 parliamentary committee report has recommended that the Irish Government must provide funding certainty for water services from general taxation but it remains to be seen if, and how, this will be implemented.

Any repeat of previous failures to invest adequately in water services will have long-term implications for Ireland's competitiveness, economic growth and quality of life.

UCD academics today launched a comprehensive inquiry into why the water charging regime in Ireland failed. Access to safe and reliable drinking water and wastewater services is essential for public health and well-being, but attitudes differ regarding how such services should be funded. In Ireland, the 2014 introduction of a domestic-sector consumption-based charging regime was met with public protests, leading eventually to the suspension of charges in 2016 and a subsequent recommendation by a parliamentary committee that they be abolished. Given that some form of domestic water charges exists in all EU countries and given that charges may still be required to comply with EU legislation, it is important to understand why the domestic-charging policy failed. This report argues that public opposition to domestic water charges was not generated by one single issue and presents five factors that it can be argued were influential

1. Water as a human right

- A key claim made by the anti-water charges campaign was that water is a human right and that funding water services through general taxation is the only way to protect access to these services for all. The campaign appeared to interpret and communicate this to mean unlimited treated water delivered to homes for free.
 - However, while water as a substance may be considered as free, its treatment and transportation are not. Wastewater services incur real and significant costs, which a general taxation model may not be able to deliver over the longer term. This has certainly been the case in Ireland, where investment in water services has long had to take a back-seat to more politically-urgent areas such as health and education.

2. Levels of public trust

- It is clear that public trust in government and public institutions, both internationally and in Ireland, was damaged by the fallout from the economic crisis. Lack of trust and perceptions of fairness have implications for how accepting people are of government policies, and it is likely that this partly drove opposition to the introduction of domestic water charges.
- Among EU member states, public trust in national political institutions fell by 18% between 2007 and 2013, particularly in countries that were confronted with austerity measures imposed by external actors.
- This was especially evident in Ireland: between 2006 and 2014, levels of mistrust in the Irish parliament increased from 39% to 54%, peaking in Autumn 2010, when, of all EU-15 citizens, the Irish had the highest levels of mistrust in both their parliament and government.
- Efforts have been made to enhance trust through the establishment of the Public Water Forum (under the Water Services Act 2014) as an independent consumer consultative forum which addresses affordability issues, costs, communications /education and engagement.

3. Personal values of water consumers

- The personal values of those opposed to the water charges appear to have played a role in shaping their resistance. Strongly held views about the value of continued public ownership of Irish Water, for example, were taken seriously enough by the Expert Commission and the parliamentary committee for the issue to be the first one addressed in both of their reports.
- The actual value people put on water services can be influenced by the level of service they are accustomed to receiving. In the Dublin area, for example, where the opposition campaign appeared to be strongest, it has been 40 years since households have had to pay directly for water services. As a result, they may have taken it for granted that water is not something to be paid for directly and, so, any attempt to introduce direct charges would naturally be met with strong opposition.

4. How the charges were framed by government and protesters

- In environmental disputes, frames are generally centred around what the key issue is and how it should be settled.
- The government's predominantly economic and financial-based framing was driven, no doubt, by the very real demands of bringing the public finances back into line and to comply with the EU's Water Framework Directive. However, its neglect of social concerns, such as poverty proofing the measure more clearly, may have inadvertently fed public resistance to the charges.
- The emphasis on social concerns amongst the protesters may, however, also point to an 'activist-type' mindset driving some of the anti-water charge campaigners, along with their framing of the use of civil disobedience tactics as necessary and acceptable.
- Whether the public viewed the charges as a potential loss or gain, especially for those households who had not been paying directly for water services for decades, is also relevant whereby research shows that people value a loss more than an equivalent gain. Such frames of losses or gains are not necessarily immune to change, as illustrated by the changing attitudes experienced by group-water scheme members over the years, thus showing the potential for a similar shift being achievable in relation to public water service customers.
- There is also some evidence that the framing and interpretation of water charges by the Irish public has been inconsistent, in that polls suggest people agree both with a right to water concept and also agree that everyone should pay something as it is a precious resource.

5. Timing of the charges

- The timing of the introduction of charges may have helped to fuel opposition in two ways. Firstly, there was the cumulative impact of contractionary national budgets from 2008 onwards, including service cuts, increased charges and taxes, falling income and high private debt. In this context, the water charges, coming, as they did, at the end of these measures may have been the last straw for certain people.
- The signs of recovery appearing from early 2014 onwards, and announced by government, may also have led to a perception that the charges were no longer necessary and so could be ‘safely’ resisted i.e. the economy was no longer in danger.

At the launch of the report, one of the authors of the report, Peter Clinch, UCD Professor of Public Policy said “*Five factors were influential in generating the opposition to water charges and allowing a campaign that does not appear to represent majority public opinion to defeat the charging regime. The campaign appears to have won the pr battle to present water services as a social good rather than an economic one and took advantage of falling trust in government around the time of the economic crisis. Successive governments ‘framed’ water charges policy as an economic necessity driven by the very real demands of bringing the public finances back into line and to comply with the EU’s Water Framework Directive but the momentum was lost due to the delay in their introduction as one of the last measures to address Ireland’s economic crisis. In addition, the neglect of social concerns at the outset of the policy formation, such as poverty proofing the measure more clearly, may have inadvertently fed public resistance to the charges.*”

The report also examines how representative was the opposition campaign and shows that:

- Despite the anti-water charges campaign resulting in a dramatic policy reversal by the government, analysis of data suggests that the protesters only represented around 30% of all Irish households, at most, with the other 70% paying for water services as Irish Water customers, through group water schemes, or by privately funding their own wells and wastewater treatment.
- Exit poll data for the 2016 general election showed that fewer than one in ten voters (8%) cited water charges as the most important issue influencing their choice of first preference candidates; even amongst those voting for parties and candidates active in the anti-water charges campaign.
- This raises interesting questions regarding why the government was reluctant to persist with the charging regime and whether it would eventually have become accepted policy, as occurred with the previous introduction of domestic waste charges.

UCD researcher, and coauthor of the report, Anne Pender said “This raises interesting questions regarding why the government was reluctant to persist with the charging regime and whether it would eventually have become accepted policy, as occurred with the previous introduction of domestic waste charges.”

Professor Clinch said “The factors driving opposition to the introduction of domestic water charges in Ireland appear to have been multiple and complex in nature, combining political and personal circumstances around the time of introduction as well as in preceding decades. Consequently, any future attempts to resolve them are also likely to be complex and time-consuming. The 2017 parliamentary committee report has recommended that the Irish Government must provide funding certainty for water services from general taxation but it remains to be seen if, and how, this will be implemented. Any repeat of previous failures to invest adequately in water services will have long-term implications for Ireland’s competitiveness, economic growth and quality of life.”

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