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Headline: Soft Supporters of EU need to be inspired to vote Yes to Lisbon Treaty

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Irish voting in past referendums on EU treaties and recent opinion polls confirm that voter turnout will be crucial, write Richard Sinnott and Stephen Quinlan.

With the referendum on the Lisbon Treaty in the offing, now is a good time to take stock of Irish attitudes to European integration and of Irish behaviour in referendums on EU treaties.

The behavioural aspect is best approached by looking at the Yes vote, at the No vote and at non-voters in Irish Euro-referendums as percentages of the electorate.

Thus Figure 1 shows the huge fluctuations in abstention and how, when abstention expands, it eats into the Yes vote.

Sixty-six per cent of the electorate abstained in the first Nice referendum in June 2001. This pushed the Yes vote down to 16 per cent of the electorate. The No vote came in at 19 per cent. Although this was down two points on the No vote in the Amsterdam referendum in June 1998, it was enough to give victory to the No side by 53.87 per cent to 46.13 per cent.

In the second Nice referendum in October 2002 abstention contracted (while still amounting to 51 per cent). Partly as a result of the lower abstention rate, the Yes vote went from 16 per cent of the electorate to 31 per cent while the No vote remained stuck on 18 per cent. The result was victory for the Yes side by 62.9 per cent to 37.1 per cent.

A Eurobarometer National Report on Ireland (Eurobarometer 68)* helps in understanding the course taken by Irish Euro-referendums. The report confirms that there is widespread support in Irish public opinion for Ireland's membership of the EU.

As of October 2007, 74 per cent of Irish people believe that Ireland's membership of the Union is a good thing, 87 per cent believe that Ireland has benefited from EU membership and 69 per cent

have a positive image of the Union (the EU average on the latter measure is only 48 per cent, see Figure 2).

The problem is that these favourable attitudes vary in intensity. Positive images of the EU in Ireland consist of just 21 per cent of respondents who have a "very positive" image and 48 per cent whose image is only "fairly positive". The latter constitute a bloc of soft support for integration who could be persuaded to vote Yes but who, in the absence of effective persuasion, could abstain in large numbers, as happened with the first Nice Treaty in 2001, or be persuaded to vote No.

Eurobarometer 68 also identifies the characteristics of those with positive/negative images of the EU. Older people and women are slightly less positive and, though the differences are small, they may be worth attending to as they imply quite specific campaign targets.

Attitudes vary more markedly by social status - positive image of the EU is 88 per cent among managers, 80 per cent among the self-employed, 76 per cent among non-managerial white collar workers, while dropping to 64 per cent among manual workers and 42 per cent among the unemployed.

Educational differences confirm this stratification. A positive image of the EU goes from just under 60 per cent among those leaving school at 16 or less, to 73 per cent of those leaving at 17 or 18 and to over 80 per cent of those still in education at age 19 or more.

A positive image of the EU is also associated with a strong sense of national identity, implying that a nationalist outlook is quite compatible with and even conducive to support for integration.

A positive image of the EU is, not surprisingly, even more closely associated with a strong sense of European attachment or identity - 94 per cent of those with a strong European identity have a favourable image of the EU compared to 36 per cent of those with no European attachment. A positive image is also related to positive perceptions of the Irish economy, opening up the possibility that, if economic pessimism were to take hold, there might be some erosion of support for integration.

Finally, Eurobarometer 68 confirms previous findings that support is related to knowledge. Eighty per cent of those who answered three out of three EU knowledge questions correctly have a positive image of the EU compared to 50 per cent of those who did not know the answer to any of the three questions. While the level of difficulty of the questions asked varied, it is dismaying that, despite all the publicity about enlargement, 53 per cent of Irish people cannot give the correct answer to a true/false question on the proposition that "the EU currently consists of 15 member states".

And so to the two polls published last weekend and their very different estimates of "don't know" in response to the question on voting in the forthcoming referendum. The "don't knows" were 64 per cent in the Irish Times/TNS mrbi poll and 31 per cent in the Sunday Business Post/Red C poll. Correspondingly, there was a substantially higher level of support for the treaty in the Red

C poll with 45 per cent in favour and 25 per cent against compared to 26 per cent in favour and 10 per cent against in the Irish Times/TNS mrbi poll.

These discrepancies are due to the combination of different question wording and the tentative character of much of Irish public opinion on EU issues. The Red C question makes two references to the "Reform Treaty". As this way of putting the issue has positive connotations (who could be against EU reform?), these references may have moved some people from Don't Know to Yes.

Secondly, the Red C question concentrates the mind of the respondent by asking "If there were a referendum tomorrow, would you vote for Ireland to sign up the Reform Treaty or not?" The reference to a hypothetical referendum being held tomorrow will almost certainly have led some voters to put their Don't Know doubts aside and to plump one way or the other.

The Irish Times/TNS mrbi question is longer and refers successively to the political leaders of the member states, to the reform treaty, to the EU constitution and to the Lisbon Treaty and, rather than focusing on a hypothetical referendum to take place now, simply refers to the fact that "a referendum on the treaty will be held later this year". Only then is the actual voting intention asked.

In fact both questions highlight different aspects of the same reality. Faced with complex references to the role of the leaders of the EU member states, to a treaty with two different names and to the EU constitution, Irish public opinion retreats to the safety of its "don't know" hideaway.

Faced with a simple positive-sounding reference to a reform treaty and with the specified time-frame of "tomorrow", a substantial number of the erstwhile don't knows come down disproportionately on the pro-treaty side.

The combined evidence of Eurobarometer 68, the Irish Times/TNS mrbi poll and the Red C poll suggests that the challenge to the Yes camp in the forthcoming referendum will be to mobilise the widespread underlying positive but tentative attitudes to integration that are characteristic of Irish public opinion. Mobilisation here means giving people a reason to want to vote in the referendum.

We know that this was not done or not done enough in the first Nice referendum and that failure to mobilise the large swathe of "soft" support for European integration had a dramatic effect on the outcome.

Facilitating voter participation will also be important and, with the needs of young people in mind, a Saturday poll (as in the second Nice referendum) would probably be a good idea.

In terms of timing, serious consideration should be given to an October poll on the one hand to facilitate younger voters and, on the other, to give the citizens enough time to become familiar with the main features of the Lisbon Treaty and to develop confidence in their ability to make an informed choice.

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* The full text of the Eurobarometer report can be found on the website of the European Commission Representation in Ireland at www.euireland.ie.

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