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Campaigns, Mobilisation, and Composition Effects in the 2018 Irish Abortion Referendum

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Abstract

Referendums on issues usually thought to split along cleavage lines are least likely to see significant campaign effects because it is difficult to get voters to switch sides on such issues. We argue that even though campaigns might not be very effective at shifting people's votes—persuasive effects—the campaign can influence the decision to vote or not—mobilising effects. Using the 2018 referendum to repeal the Irish ban on abortion, we test for mobilisation effects in which one campaign caused the withdrawal of support for its campaign and possibly motivated potential voters in the other side's campaign. By remaining "on message" the pro-choice side's arguably less interesting campaign allowed mainstream elites to come on board. We offer evidence that the campaigns mobilized some groups and suppressed turnout in others, leading to a larger victory for the repeal (the ban on abortion) side than most had expected.

Keywords

backfire effects; cleavages; electoral campaigns; minimal effects; referendums; turnout composition effects

1. Introduction

If electoral results are all about fundamentals (cleavages, the state of the economy, and partisanship), then campaigns should have limited and fleeting effects. This would seem to be even more likely in referendums on subjects that relate to issues on which there is a cleavage division in society. People's values are fixed or change slowly, so it is unlikely that an electoral campaign will matter. But campaigns may activate those fundamentals or a cleavage through framing. Because of underlying values, many people will only be likely to vote one way, but whether they vote or not can be influenced by the campaign. Rather than look at the campaign's ability

to *persuade* people to switch their vote choice, referendum campaigns might be more impactful by *mobilising* people to vote (or to depress their probability to vote). To do that campaigns may highlight some issues that make it easier or harder for people who hold underlying beliefs to go to the polls in support of what might be their natural "side."

We take the case of the 2018 abortion referendum in Ireland, which is a hard test of the "campaigns matter" thesis because for many it is a salient issue on which positions are fixed, so campaigns and campaign events are less likely to have an impact (Arceneaux & Kolodny, 2009; Leduc, 2002). It was a clear choice for voters, whether the proposal was to remove a ban on abortion or not. The referendum to replace the 8th amendment of the Irish constitution—an earlier 1983 amendment that gave Ireland one of the most restrictive abortion regimes in the world—was carried comfortably on 26th May 2018. On a turnout of 64 percent, just over 66 percent voted in favour of repeal (the ban on abortion). Most observers were surprised by the large margin of victory, as there was a tendency for support for liberalising referendums to be overestimated in polling or to tighten during the campaign.

Using polling evidence and an analysis of the campaigns for either side we demonstrate that the Yes side (to repeal the ban on abortion) concentrated its campaign on the issue of fatal foetal abnormalities and primarily campaigned through young women and their families who had been negatively affected by the extant abortion regime. The campaign was careful not to alienate moderates unhappy with the status quo but fearful of a very liberal abortion regime. It framed the referendum not in terms of women's rights, but as a means to avoid harm to women. The No side, on the other hand, ended up alienating many soft-Nos. Through the campaign, the Yes side gathered elite support, while the No side shed support from elites who no longer wanted to be associated with that side. The effect was to create an unusual composition of voters, where those most likely to vote Yes—women and young people—were more likely to vote than normal turnout patterns would have predicted.

First, we expand the discussion on campaign effects generally, then on framing in campaigns, and how framing can impact mobilisation. We then defend the case selection, outline available data sources, setting up hypotheses related to the possible impact of the campaigns on turnout. We look at the background of the abortion referendum, and the subsequent "short" campaign. The subsequent section amasses evidence from various sources, including an exit poll taken on the day of the referendum, but also historical referendum data and constituency-level data from 2018. The data indicate unusual turnout patterns at this referendum that support our argument that the campaign mobilised groups differently.

2. Campaign Framing and Mobilisation

Conventional wisdom tends to assume campaigns matter. So when we look at those aspects of a winning or losing campaign that stand out, we judge that these must be the crucial elements that the campaigns got right or wrong. Political science is less certain, and it points to minimal effects of many types of campaign activity (Gelman & King, 1993). These minimal effects might be consequential in a tight race but are unlikely to have caused big victories for which fundamentals (values, ideology, policy performance, or partisan attachment) could be more likely explanations. A meta-analysis estimated campaigns' *direct* persuasive effects on candidate choice in the US at zero (Kalla & Broockman, 2018).

Even if campaign events register with potential voters, their impact might be largely cancelled out by the campaign activities of opponents. If they have an impact it could be that the impact is vanishingly small in some elections or referendums. Erikson and Wlezien (2012) found that there is an equilibrium position, perhaps in referendums based on the voters' ideological positions, which campaigns may disturb momentarily. Thus, campaign events will only have an impact if they happen so close to polling that there is no time for the effect to decay.

Campaigns, however, may activate those fundamentals, by defining what a proposal actually means. Voters' ideological positions will be important, especially in referendums, but often the referendum is not so clearly defined, so that "opposing camps campaign on behalf of competing ways of understanding what is at issue" (Sniderman & Theriault, 2004, p. 158). Voters can be activated or primed to consider what the referendum is about. So we can see that the Brexit referendum was framed in terms of immigration and domestic control of policy, which might have had an impact on the result. This suggests that campaigns might change voters' behaviour without shifting the values underlying opinions. In a referendum on EU enlargement, a focus on immigration might cause a voter who had seen the enlargement project positively in terms of expanding markets, to switch sides without actually changing their outlook on the EU.

Hillygus and Shields (2008, p. 185) found that "campaigns help voters translate their predispositions into their candidate selection by increasing the salience of one consideration over another." In particular, presidential candidates target "persuadables," those voters who are either not aligned to a party, or for whom they are in conflict with their party on a certain issue. With the right messages, that issue can be used to "wedge" the voter from their party. Vavreck (2009) found that while the economy mattered, it was up to the campaigns to clarify this in voters' minds. If the fundamentals do not work in your campaign's favour, you need to try to focus on some "insurgent" issue. Sides et al. (2018) found evidence that the Donald Trump campaign's activation of race, ethnicity, and gender helped him win the 2016 US presidential election. Thus, while the election was not about race, voters were activated to view the candidates in terms of their own attitudes to these issues.

As well as activating some predispositions, the campaign can also have an impact on whether or not people become voters at all. In most countries without compulsory voting, about 25 to 50 percent of those who could vote choose not to. Sometimes this is for circumstantial reasons—a voter is away on polling day—sometimes it is for structural reasons—a voter finds voter registration difficult. We know that certain groups are more likely to vote than others, which would seem to give some campaigns an advantage. It is by now well established that older people, the middle class, and the more educated, are more likely to vote than the young, working class, and the less educated. Fraga (2018) looks at the "turnout gap" between groups in the US and finds that turnout can be suppressed when there is a perception that groups are electorally irrelevant. So Fraga argues, that when an electorate is expressly engaged by a campaign, it can close or create a turnout gap that will have an effect on electoral results. Indeed much of modern campaigning focuses on mobilisation rather than persuasion—see, for instance, Bowler and Donovan (1994). Differential turnout could cause different outcomes due to stratification bias, as some groups are systematically more or less likely to vote. Existing studies showing this tend to be on the US, and studies on referendums tend to focus exclusively on Switzerland or the US (though, see Velimsky et al., 2024).

Often the decision not to vote is because potential voters have not been mobilised: the campaign may not have been intense, the issue may not be one they have an interest in, or could be that they cannot choose an

obviously better option among those available to them. It has been shown that in referendums in Switzerland, campaign intensity had a greater impact on the turnout for selective voters rather than habitual voters or non-voters (Goldberg et al., 2019). Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2018) found issue of saliency was linked to turnout in a Dutch referendum. Campaigns try to mobilise their own support, but could, by exposing conflicts on the opponent's side, create demobilising factors for that side. This was observed in the 2005 Dutch EU Constitution referendum (Schuck & de Vreese, 2009). Campaigns on moral issues are often run based on the moral frame of the proponents, not necessarily the voters they are targeting (Feinberg & Willer, 2019). The messages then might be unpersuasive and even off-putting, leading to some groups not participating and other groups being more likely to vote.

The effect of these phenomena—campaign framing and mobilisation—might interact. Certain framings might mobilise certain groups and suppress turnout among others. For instance, on two occasions Ireland re-ran referendums asking an almost identical question within a short period of time. The Nice and Lisbon Treaties were initially rejected on low turnouts where the No side set the agenda, but the rerun saw increased turnouts, and the Yes side won on a substantively different framing. In the absence of panel data, we cannot say whether many minds were changed, but the raw number of No votes in the referendum on the Nice Treaty was almost identical in the first and second referendums. However, the raw number of Yes votes in the second referendum went up, and the referendum was passed. Garry et al. (2005) found that the change in salience of the issue brought about by a more intense campaign led to an increased turnout and a changed result.

Mobilisation often takes place through elite activity. Referendums are unusual in that there is not control of the campaign in the same way that in elections a party will have control of how it campaigns. Anyone can campaign for a Yes or No vote in a referendum, which may hinder the ability of elites to control the campaign. Elites will sometimes back a campaign that they see as a winning one, but if it seems to be losing or campaigning unconventionally, elites might withdraw support, which in turn could have the effect of suppressing turnout. In Ireland, an earlier attempt at socially liberalising amendments that showed high early polling support had failed because of a successful campaign which effectively reframed the issue on which people saw themselves voting.

Darcy and Laver (1990) found that, in the 1986 Irish divorce referendum, the No campaign changed the subject of the referendum from the issue of assisting those suffering in broken marriages to the likely plight of remarried men abandoning their duties to their previous families; "The Amendment will impoverish women" was one of the messages the No side produced. An opinion reversal occurred because opponents of divorce managed to create doubts in people's minds. This in turn led to a populist takeover and elite withdrawal from the campaign. It was in Darcy and Laver's (1990) view a general trend, one they observed in distinct questions and settings. We do not know the mechanism through which this took place—if there was any impact on turnout, for instance.

O'Mahony (2009) argued that elite withdrawal or non-involvement was at work in the initial Irish Nice and Lisbon referendums. And, in a low-information referendum on parliamentary inquiries, the entry of elites in opposition to a proposal was important (Suiter & Reidy, 2015). Elite activity seems to matter, but the causal order might be reversed as elites withdraw from losing campaigns. So we might see that campaigns in cleavage referendums matter because they activate certain frames, thereby mobilising certain groups of voters.

3. Case and Hypotheses

The abortion referendum of 2018 in Ireland allows us to test these propositions. Abortion is clearly a cleavage issue on which many people have opinions linked to strong underlying values—women's rights and the right to life, for instance. Sometimes, in referendums, political parties take positions that determine whether people vote and how, but, in this case, all the main party leaders supported the repeal side, though some were more open to party members campaigning for a No vote. There should be limited partisan effects. On Leduc's (2002, p. 714) continuum, this case lies at the end of the scale where campaigns should matter least.

Indeed, it could be argued that nothing much happened in this case. If we look at underlying opinions on abortion, they appear to be stable between the 2016 Irish general election and the 2018 referendum (see Table 2 in Section 5). This referendum would appear to be a clear case of campaigns do not matter. We argue against the prima facia evidence that in fact the campaign did matter, and while the campaign did not switch the result, a different campaign could have tightened the margin, which in turn would have affected the debate in the post-referendum legislative environment.

This is primarily a case study, with an extreme case as measured on the variable stability/volatility in referendum voting. We treat the case study like an attempt to solve a puzzle, piecing together bits of evidence to point to a likely cause (Gerring, 2017, p. 20). It uses a description of the campaign based on contemporary reports, interviews with people in the campaigns, and polling data. The test will use these data to establish the motivation of those who voted and to calculate the turnout proportions of different groups. We also use aggregate data on turnout in Irish referendums. Rather than have a smoking-gun test, we gather pieces of evidence that will point to the probability that the campaign mattered in the sense that it mobilised some groups more than others, though, in 2018, it certainly did not change the outcome.

We expect:

> H1: The composition of voters in different referendums will vary from those voting in other referendums and elections (differential turnout).
>
> H2: Those most affected by the issue will be mobilised to vote in greater numbers than would otherwise be the case.

In sum, we argue that we will observe campaign effects, but that these effects relate to the withdrawal of some from a campaign, and demobilisation among those who initially opposed the referendum. In the next sections, we go through the case, first giving a background to the referendum.

4. Background to the Referendum

Abortion had long been a divisive issue in Ireland. Abortion was outlawed by the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act, which stipulated life imprisonment for illegally procuring an abortion. The section of that Act related to abortion became irrelevant in the UK in 1967 by its Abortion Act. Ireland, however, with Church control of state-funded hospitals, schools, and other welfare-providing institutions, was unlikely to see a liberalising law proposed.

However, there were genuine fears that abortion might be introduced by the courts. In the US, the 1974 Supreme Court decision in Roe v. Wade had the effect of making it much more difficult for states to restrict access to abortion. The Irish Supreme Court was unlikely to immediately follow suit, but since the 1960s it had been active in inventing rights that had the effect of liberalising Irish laws in ways the Oireachtas (parliament) would never have. The McGee judgement in 1973 effectively told the Oireachtas that because of the newly discovered right to marital privacy, it could not outlaw contraceptives. Privacy had been an issue in Roe v. Wade, so it was not farfetched to think an Irish Court might later go down this route.

In this context, the Pro-Life Amendment Campaign was formed, and it was remarkably successful. The leaders of the two main parties, like most Irish politicians, came out in favour of an amendment to put a constitutional ban on abortion. Over time the Courts chose a path that the people had probably not foreseen. The X case in 1992, involving the rape of a 14-year-old girl, tested the question of "equal right to life of the mother," which was interpreted to mean that if a woman's life was at risk, including from suicide, an abortion should be permitted. This was something Irish governments thought intolerable and twice proposed amendments to close off suicide as a ground for abortion. The people rejected both attempts to do that in referendums.

Opinion changed slowly, with people becoming more ambivalent after 2007, and then more liberal after 2011. Table 1 shows the changes in opinion. The cause of the ambivalence to the issue after 2007 is uncertain, but after 2011 the issue became politicised again.

The death in 2012 of a pregnant woman, Savita Halappanavar, in circumstances that suggested that the 8th amendment influenced whether doctors could make life-saving medical interventions if that meant the termination of a foetus, created anger among many. Unusually, that level of anger did not dissipate but instead spurred increased activity in the existing groups that had been campaigning for the repeal of the 8th amendment. Halappanavar's death added to the pressure on the government to react to a European Court of Human Rights ruling, and legislation was finally put in place to give effect to the Supreme Court decision in the X case in 2013. Though it was an exceptionally restrictive regime for the provision of abortion in Ireland, it still caused a split in the main governing party.

While abortion was not a major issue in the 2016 election, it was significant enough that the two governing parties made commitments in their manifestos to address the issue. Labour said it would put a repeal referendum to the people within five years, and the Christian Democratic Fine Gael party committed to sending the issue to a Citizens' Assembly (CA). The Fine Gael minority government formed after that

Table 1. Attitudes to abortion among Irish people (in percent).

	2002	2007	2011	2016	2018
Total ban (0–2)	33.5	27.0	15	15	18
Ambivalent (3–7)	38.2	40.8	50	44	41
Freely available (8–10)	23.4	26.7	27	35	40
Do not know	5.1	4.5	9	4	1

Notes: People who fully agree that there should be a total ban on abortion in Ireland would give a score of 0; people who fully agree that abortion should be freely available in Ireland to any woman who wants to have one would give a score of 10; and other people would place themselves in between these two views; question: Where would you place yourself on this scale?; the question in 2018 to voters in the referendum was worded slightly differently. Sources: Marsh et al. (2008, 2017, 2018) and McShane (2018).

election immediately did this, and the CA met over the course of a year, eventually recommending repeal, and suggesting that abortion should be allowed in any circumstance reason up to the 12th week of pregnancy. The report was then sent to an Oireachtas (parliamentary) committee, which broadly agreed with the recommendations of the CA, garnering support even from some avowedly pro-life parliamentarians. There was a sense that the CA showed politicians that advocating to loosen the restrictive regime would not be political suicide.

The post-2016 election environment had also changed somewhat. It saw the election of several pro-choice Teachtaí Dála (TDs or MPs) in the traditionally more conservative Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil parties. Fine Gael got a new leader (and Taoiseach) in 2017 with the election of Leo Varadkar, who was younger and more liberal than his predecessor. Varadkar immediately committed to a referendum on the issue.

The government announced that once one legal hurdle was crossed it would put the choice to repeal the 8th amendment to the people in a referendum, with a new clause to explicitly give the Oireachtas the right to legislate. When that hurdle was cleared on 7 March 2018, the Bill to allow for the referendum was introduced. Both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael allowed a free vote on the Bill, though the leadership of both parties indicated they would support repeal. It passed 110 votes in favour and 32 opposed. Apart from one Sinn Féin TD and eight independent TDs, all other opponents were from Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil—the main centre-right parties. The date for the referendum was then set for 25 May 2018, which meant a nearly two-month campaign.

5. The Campaigns and Campaign Strategies

Campaigns work by trying to pick issues on which to run and to state a position on those issues in a clear, logical, and emotionally appealing way. The clear result in favour of Yes, suggests that its campaign was the better one, but establishing that the campaign mattered is not that simple. As we see in Table 2, polling on the issue almost two years before, suggests that the campaign did not matter much, except perhaps to move much younger and much older voters, but these are small shifts. In an analysis of survey data, Elkink et al. (2017, 2020) show that the fundamentals were associated with the vote in conventional ways. Thus older, rural, church-going voters were more likely to vote No.

Polling consistently showed a strong lead for change from the status quo, and a desire to repeal the 8th amendment (see Figure 1), but conventional wisdom for which there is some evidence (opinion

Table 2. Position on abortion after the 2016 election and referendum campaign.

Mean score	Total	male	female	18–24 years old	25–34 years old	35–49 years old	50–64 years old	65+ years old	ABC1	C2DE	F
2016	6.07	5.97	6.18	6.80	6.97	6.44	5.82	4.72	6.50	5.79	4.02
2018	6.10	5.81	6.33	7.63	7.12	6.28	5.69	4.11	6.52	5.80	4.59
change	+0.03	−0.16	+0.15	+0.83	+0.15	−0.16	−0.13	−0.61	+0.02	+0.01	+0.57

Notes: The question was: "On a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means you strongly believe that there should be a total ban on abortion in Ireland, and 10 means that you strongly believe that abortion should be freely available in Ireland to any woman who wants to have one, where would you place your view?"; ABC1 refers to professional and managerial class; C2DE refers to manual workers and unemployed; F is farmer. Source: McShane and Fanning (2016) and McShane (2018).

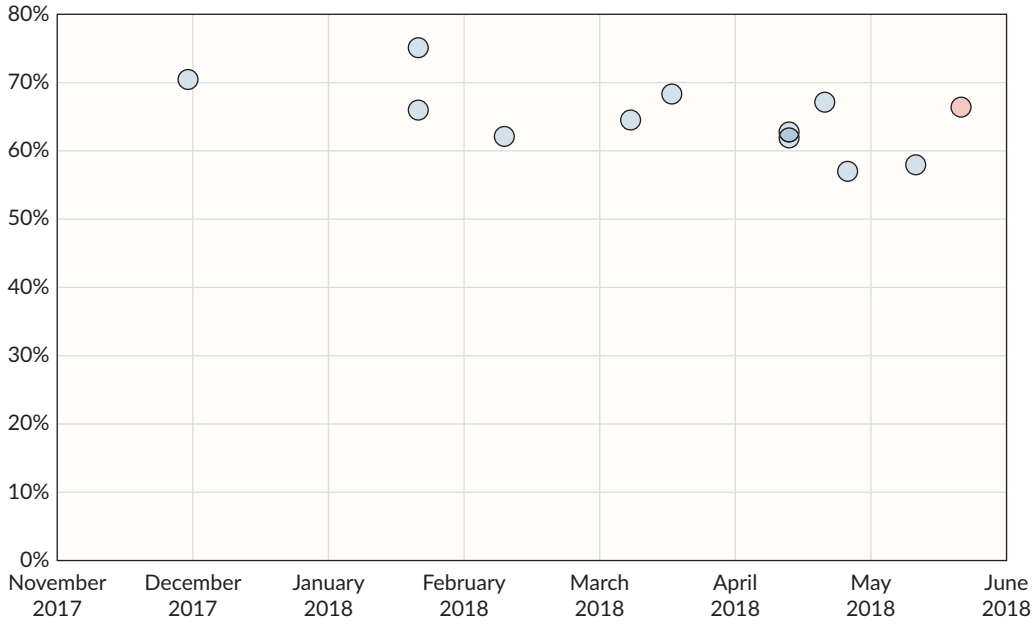

Figure 1. Percentage supporting the repeal of the 8th amendment in opinion polls during the long campaign.

poll-predicted Yes votes are on average nine points higher than the actual Yes vote in Irish referendums), assumed that this would tighten in the course of the campaign. Those on the Yes side assumed that the No side would have superior financial resources, which it could use to target voters in the unregulated online space. Initially, the No side appeared to be better organised, and they started the campaign earlier. In March the two No organisations, Love Both and Save the 8th, launched a provocative poster campaign with images of foetuses, asserting that one in five babies in the UK are aborted. The Together for Yes (TFY) campaign—a coalition of three feminist and women's rights groups—was slower to get started. Initially, it has less money and fewer volunteers. In a private interview with one of the leaders of the TFY campaign, they said they knew from polling that people did not want the status quo, but that the No side would try to paint repeal in such an extreme way so that people might take fright. The pro-choice campaign was conscious that its preferred moral frame was not one that would appeal to persuadable voters (Atikcan & Hand, 2024).

It knew also that people were concerned about women's health, fatal foetal anomalies, and rape cases. It knew—again because its private polling said so—that messaging about choices and human rights would not appeal to the "concerned centre" undecideds or soft Yes voters who would eventually turn out in large numbers for the Yes side. Though some found it difficult to not campaign on a human rights frame, the campaign was successful in maintaining message discipline (TFY, 2019, pp. 36, 75).

The result was a campaign that from the start sought not to alienate. The framing was on "Care, Compassion and Change," which was safe, perhaps to the point of banality. Apart from a small independent postering campaign by Rosa, a small radical-left feminist group, there was almost no framing of the referendum in terms of women's rights. While TFY was very professionally organised and put together big canvass teams remarkably quickly, the posters took a bit of deciphering. It dealt with legal and medical questions adeptly, but there was little emotion. Still, the attempt to raise €50,000 was beaten in hours, and, eventually, it raised over €500,000, much of it from small donations.

A scandal broke mid-campaign into the treatment of cervical cancer test results, which can only have reinforced the message about women's health, but the fear remained of what was to come from the No side. Yet for all the threats of US money pouring into the campaign, the No side did not work. It started quickly and appeared well organised, but on the airwaves, where much of the real work is still done, the No side got sucked into campaigning on hard cases. It debated whether to concede on these hard cases and one of the leaders said publicly that it had no problem with the abortions that took place under 2015 legislation, causing pushback from within the campaign. It was admitted that compromise to some central position was impossible for the No campaign to hold itself together (private interview).

In the first RTÉ television debate, the Yes side came off second best. Two doctors led the debate, with the expectation that they would be respected authoritative voices focussing on the harm the amendment did to women's health, but they sounded clinical. The Yes side then moved to politicians who were better at handling public debate. On the Yes side, the parties took a bigger role in the last week of the campaign. Fine Gael handled rebuttals for the Yes campaign. There was a recognition that Mary-Lou McDonald of Sinn Féin was the best performer for Yes in the first debate, and then we saw other leading politicians come in, who also performed well.

For the No side, one of their campaign directors felt they had better posters, a better ground operation, and were better organised, but he observed that "our campaign fired up their base" (private interview). The Life Institute (one of the organisations that made up Save the 8th) saw its failure to win the framing battle. That campaign director claimed—perhaps fairly—that the media accepted the Yes side's framing of the harm the 8th amendment did to women.

The emotion came from women and their families affected by the 8th amendment. According to one of the TFY campaign team (private interview), the focus was on securing the middle ground through women's stories:

> The focus on legislation wasn't at all our preference, but we worked hard to shift the emphasis towards hard cases and especially to the stories. Most of the stories are out of the TFY Story Lab, which works with groups and individuals to train and prepare them to tell their stories in effective ways, and to place them in the media. We also had "warmer" posters and leaflets.

In later TV debates, those women in the audience telling their "hard case" stories probably did more to connect with people than the campaign leaders on the stage. The hard cases, it turned out, were remarkably common. No campaigners found themselves having to defend a cruel position. The No message of protecting human life was a very difficult sell when the messengers sounded so inhumane.

And one weapon—one that was probably overestimated—was removed from the No side when many social media companies refused to accept paid ads for the referendum. The Irish market was small, so financially it was not a sacrifice for the goodwill the move engendered. The No-side spent its energy on conspiracy theories of a corrupt media elite under the control of the government. While the media probably was biased in favour of change, suggestions that Taoiseach Leo Varadkar controlled Google seemed silly. The No campaign used its last week on the idea that the government's proposed legislation was too extreme. But at this stage, it was the No side that appeared extreme.

From the last weekend of the campaign, there was a sense of a swing to Yes, and certainly that the expected swing away had failed to materialise. Yet on the doorsteps, there were larger numbers canvassing than at any other recent campaign. The reactions were reported as overwhelmingly positive for the Yes side. The campaign also saw 118,389 new voters register—almost double the 66,000 new voters registered for the 2015 marriage equality referendum. While we do not know the composition of the new voters, it is reasonable to assume that these were overwhelmingly young voters, expected to vote to support repeal.

There was a cascading effect on the Yes side, with evidence that its success has brought more people on board. When Michael Creed, the conservative minister for agriculture, came out with Farmers for Yes, it felt significant. He would not have dreamed of taking this position two years earlier, maybe not two months earlier. As the No side was perceived as increasingly extreme in its positions, a photo opportunity with "TDs for No" on the Wednesday before the referendum was much less well attended than the same one a week earlier. The most senior TDs who had earlier come out for No, Dara Calleary and Michael McGrath (both later cabinet ministers), did not appear. One TD who identified as pro-Life issued a statement in advance of polling day saying that:

> [I] no longer think it is credible to pretend that everything is fine as it is. We cannot ignore all the stories we hear of pain and hardship experienced by so many at the most difficult of times….I still hold the same beliefs I always did, I just don't believe I have the right to enforce them onto others. (Ó Cionnaith, 2018)

While he was convinced to switch his vote, it might have been that other natural No supporters found themselves less likely to vote at all.

6. Tests, Data, and Results

A key argument here is that the campaigns mattered, perhaps less in shifting opinions on abortion, but in shifting the turnout; that turnout was substantively different in 2018 than in other polls. In this section, we look at a variety of evidence that points to substantively different turnout patterns in the 2018 referendum. It is obvious that there is significant variance across referendums in terms of turnout. Among the 43 referendums held, turnout has varied by between 29 and 71 percent (see Figure 2).

It could be that turnout just reflects the salience and mobilisation efforts by campaigns, but has no impact on the composition of the voting public or the result. Our focus is on how campaigns affect turnout and how turnout can affect referendum results. To evaluate this, we look to public opinion polls. Public opinion polls cannot account for differential turnout. Instead, they look at the population at large. Therefore, it is hypothesised that differences in turnout across referendums will impact the "accuracy" of the opinion polls for those referendums. To compare polls prior to referendums with referendum results we use a regression model. Our first model looks at how turnout and the number of days between the poll and the referendum influence a poll's accuracy (the absolute difference between the poll result and the referendum result). The analysis suggests that referendums with higher turnout are significantly more likely to be more accurate, that is to have a lower difference between poll and referendum results. By contrast, referendums with a lower turnout are more likely to have bigger differences between the polls and the actual results. The model in Table 3 uses 136 polls across 30 referendums in Ireland for which polling is available. We expect polls to be 8.5 percentage points closer to the result where turnout is 70 percent compared with referendums in which

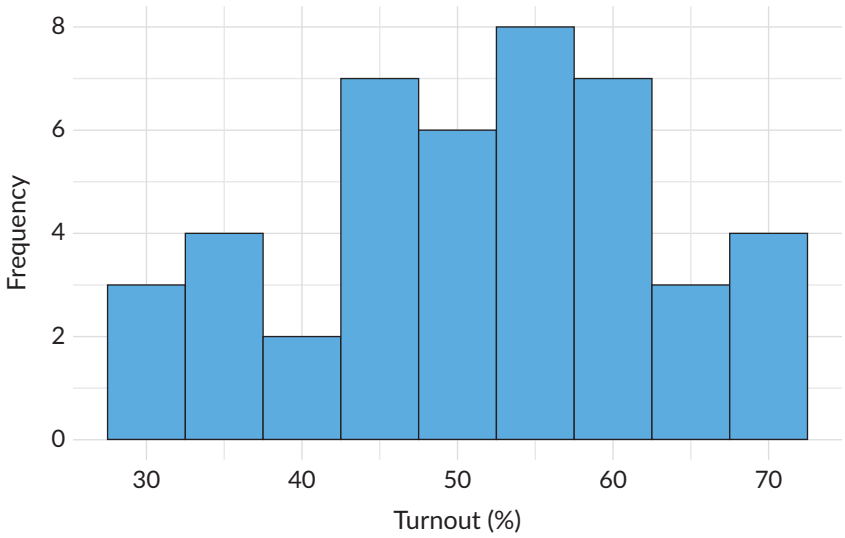

Figure 2. Distribution of turnout in Irish referendums.

Table 3. Regression estimating the effect of turnout on polling error.

	Model 1: Poll error		
	Estimate	Std. Error	P-Value
Intercept	22.892	(4.055)	< 0.0001
Days until referendum	0.005	(0.005)	0.2947
Turnout	–0.213	(0.071)	0.0031

turnout is 30 percent. This shows a clear link between turnout, the composition of the voting electorate, and hence the outcome.

The next regression models (Table 4) also reveal this to be true. An increase in turnout typically benefits the Yes side. The models evaluate the relationship between the percentage that voted in favour of a referendum with the turnout of that referendum, the number of people who stated that they would vote Yes, and the number of people who stated that they were undecided in polls prior to the referendum. The first model uses 122 polls across 29 referendums, excluding the referendum on abortion. The second model uses 136 polls across 30 referendums, including the referendum on abortion. In both cases turnout is significant. The higher the turnout, the higher the vote in favour of passing the initiative proposed by the government. The results suggest that we should expect support for Yes to be almost 10 points higher in referendums where turnout is 70 percent, compared with referendums where turnout is 30 percent.

In another model, we interact turnout with the percentage of "Don't Knows" on the Yes vote. The idea here is that if the interaction is positive, i.e., where opinion polls say many potential voters are undecided, but the eventual turnout is high, then we can say that the "Don't Knows" tend to break to Yes, which is contrary to the narrative in Ireland that undecided tend to become No voters. The interaction term is not significant, but the effects plot (Figure 3), shows that there is a positive relationship between the number of undecideds and support for a Yes vote at high levels of turnout, but that there is no effect when turnout is lower.

Table 4. Regression models predicting the final Yes vote.

	Model 2a: Excluding referendum on abortion			Model 2b: Including referendum on abortion		
	Estimate	Std. Error	P-Value	Estimate	Std. Error	P-Value
Intercept	−9.760	(8.147)	0.2330	−8.772	(8.066)	0.2790
Opinion poll yes	0.733	(0.086)	< 0.0001	0.680	(0.084)	< 0.0001
Opinion poll undecided	0.695	(0.104)	< 0.0001	0.662	(0.102)	< 0.0001
Actual turnout	0.244	(0.079)	0.0030	0.306	(0.077)	0.0011

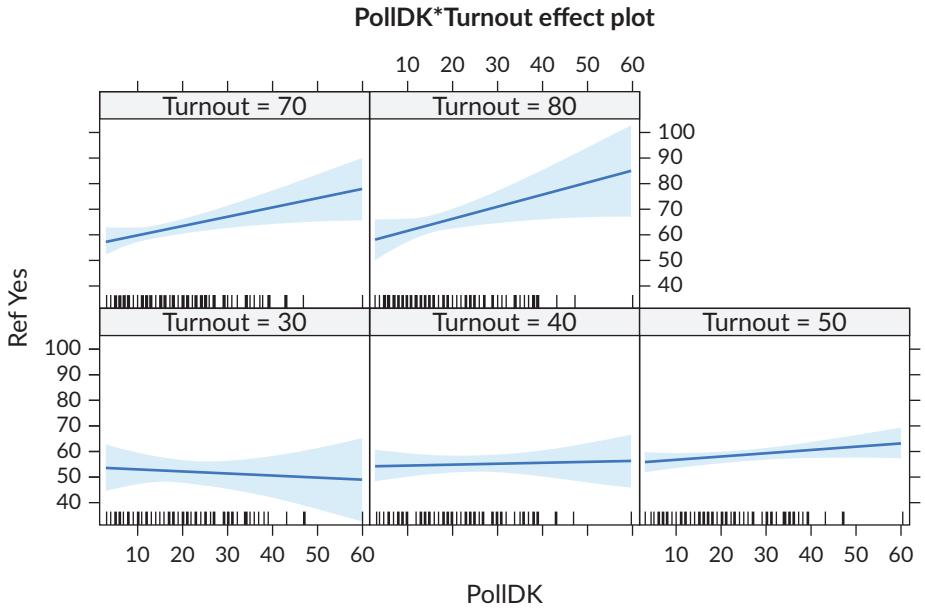

Figure 3. Effects plot of "Don't Knows" and turnout on the Yes vote. Note: DK = "Don't Knows."

The influence of the campaign in driving turnout is also observable in the self-reported "probability to vote." Two polls were conducted by *Ireland Thinks*, one at the start of the campaign period finishing on April 18th over one month from polling day, with a second completed on the Wednesday of polling week, two days before the vote. Figure 4 gives the self-reported likelihood to vote among those intending to vote Yes and those intending to vote No at both points in time. Those intending to vote No appear to be no less likely than those intending to vote Yes at the start of the campaign. However, from the second poll, it would appear that a sizeable number of those who would favour the No position had decided not to vote. Yes supporters became somewhat more likely to vote. This further supports the hypothesis that turnout was influenced by the campaign.

Turning specifically to the composition of the voters in 2018 we can see that estimates of turnout among different groups are much different to those in the 2016 election. Turnout patterns are highly gendered. Based on exit poll results we calculated the turnout for specific groups by comparing it to the voting age population in each category from census data. Overall, we estimate female turnout at almost 80 percent, up from 66 percent in 2016. Our estimate of male turnout fell from 78 percent to about 65 percent. We can see that in the (admittedly small) 18–24-year-old group, turnout increased from 41 percent to 66 percent.

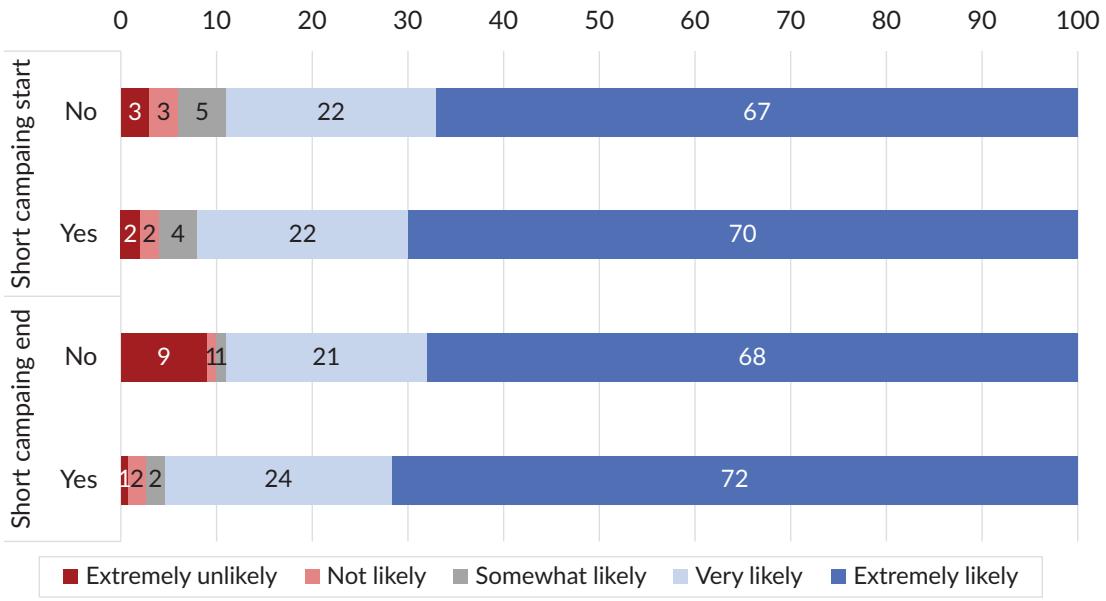

Figure 4. Probability to vote at the start and end of the campaign, by vote choice.

If we compare constituency-level turnout in the 2018 referendum to that of the general election in 2016 there are some things we would expect to see if turnout composition were uniform. Turnout at the constituency level in the two polls is positively correlated, though the 0.66 correlation coefficient is somewhat smaller than we would expect. The correlation coefficient between the 1992 and 1997 general elections was 0.84. Where in the general election turnout correlations run with expectations, with a significant positive correlation with the proportion of over 65s in a constituency (corr. = 0.54, $p = 0.0004$). We also see that the proportion of households that are owned (0.78, $p < 0.0001$) and the proportion of the population that is Catholic (0.64, $p < 0.0001$) are positively correlated with turnout in that election. However, in the 2018 abortion referendum patterns changed significantly, which possibly means that the campaigns mobilised different people in the two polls and that turnout was an important factor in voting trends in 2018—though obviously we have to be cautious of an ecological fallacy. Unusually we observe no link between the proportion of older people in a constituency and the turnout in the referendum (0.08, $p = 0.62$). Contrary to the "normal" patterns, the link between Catholicism and turnout fell away (0.14, $p = 0.38$). Instead, there is a moderate, positive link between the proportion of the population that is female (0.5, $p = 0.0009$). In terms of explaining the Yes vote at the constituency level, we see the proportion of the population that is over 65 is negatively correlated with the Yes vote (–0.48, $p = 0.002$), as is the proportion of the population that is Catholic (–0.78, $p < 0.0001$). These pieces of evidence support the argument that the composition of actual votes was different in this referendum, and those who become more likely to vote are those for whom the issue is most salient.

What the campaign was about is also clearly important. The Yes campaign was criticised by some on its own side for being too safe, focussing on "care, compassion and change" and not rights. It spent much of the time talking about "hard cases" and there is some evidence that these frames are adopted by voters. The RTÉ (McShane, 2018) exit poll shows that people were much more in favour of the availability of abortion in conditions "between 12 weeks and 24 weeks if there is a serious risk to the woman's life or health" (67 percent somewhat agree or strongly agree); "in cases of fatal foetal abnormality" (71 percent); and "if the pregnancy is the result of rape or incest" (73 percent). By contrast, a bare majority agree with its availability "on request up to 12 weeks" (52 percent). This was the issue the No side continually tried to raise, and frame as "unrestricted"

and "too extreme," and which the Yes side reluctantly engaged with. Women were marginally more likely than men to agree to abortion provision in this circumstance (55 to 48 percent). Age was also important (76 percent of 18–24 year-olds versus 31 percent of over-65s).

When asked which of a list of "factors were important to you in making your decision how to vote in the Referendum?" respondents were most likely to say "women's right to choose." This is contrary to our expectations, as the frame of women's choice was rarely used in the campaign. Other frames, such as "risk to life and health" and "the question of fatal foetal abnormalities" receive slightly less support (55 percent and 40 percent respectively). It is possible that the messaging did not matter for significant parts of the pro-choice electorate, but this messaging may still have been important for moderates at whom it was targeted.

7. Discussion

Referendums on issues that tend to split on cleavage lines should not be subject to normal campaign effects. But campaign frames might activate certain ways to view an issue. Abortions seem an unlikely case for this. Yet, through the use of frames campaigns, might mobilise some voters and demobilise others. While we argue that the campaign for the repeal of the 8th referendum was not as important as is commonly reported in media, there is evidence that the unusual turnout patterns were a result of mobilisation efforts by the Yes side and a backfiring campaign on the No side. Thus, we find more support for the idea that mobilisation by campaigns is influential if not in this case on the result, at least on the size of the result. The size of the results matters because, in the aftermath of the repeal of the 8th referendum, few people on the losing side complained about the legitimacy of the result, in the way the Brexit result was contested and challenged. It also had an impact on the subsequent debate, as the large gap and the clear sense that people knew what they were voting for meant it was easier to pass a liberal abortion regime through the Oireachtas.

While the data available makes it difficult to test whether campaigns have strong persuasive effects in an extreme case cleavage referendum, the available evidence suggests that they do have mobilising effects and that the mobilisation was not uniform. Good campaigns can mobilise their own side's natural supporters, and, in fact, there is a suggestion that a campaign can energise their opponents if it is too polarising. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the long campaign of raising an issue and lobbying for action is not productive. If anything it was the determined pressure by feminist activists, who were able to make the Savita death a focussing event for change, that saw a shift in Irish public opinion and enabled mainstream politicians to confront an issue that most wanted to steer clear of.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

All data are publicly available or can be requested from the authors.

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