

Report on Reasons Behind Voter Behaviour in the Oireachtas Inquiry Referendum 2011

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Report on Reasons Behind Voter Behaviour in the Oireachtas Inquiry Referendum 2011

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Executive Summary

This report draws on both quantitative and qualitative research carried out by RED C into voting on the referendum on Oireachtas Inquiries held in October 2011. It addresses three main questions:

- Why did people vote as they did in the Oireachtas Inquiry referendum?
- What does the public think about the political reform agenda to which the government is committed?
- What lessons can be learned for future votes on reform?

Why Did People Vote As They Did In The Oireachtas Inquiry Referendum?

There appears to have been overwhelming support for the objective that *the Oireachtas should be able to hold inquiries into matters of general public importance*, with a clear majority, 58%, of those who voted 'no' expressing support for the idea behind the amendment.

The major factors contributing to a 'no' vote, despite this apparent support are:

- attitudes to the issue itself. The major case against the referendum was that the amendment would give politicians too much power. Some 27% of 'no' voters identified this as the primary reason for their decision. Thus for some voters the change was either not wanted at all or excessive.
- lack of knowledge. Large numbers of 'yes' voters could not recall the arguments for a 'yes' vote (42%) or 'no' voters for a 'no' vote (42%). Also large numbers of voters were apparently uncertain about who was making any arguments for (50%) or against (57%) change. In addition, those with less knowledge were less likely to vote in accordance with their expressed views on Oireachtas inquiries. Many voters (30%) did not rate any of the sources of information we asked about as very useful.
- trust in particular sources. There were very noticeable associations between trust in particular sources and the direction of voting; those more trusting of legal experts (37%) and of some former Attorneys General (27%) were more

inclined to vote 'no', while those more trusting of politicians and those who trusted the Referendum Commission were more likely to vote 'yes'.

- partisanship, with Fine Gael voters much more likely than supporters of other parties to vote 'yes' regardless of other factors (37%).

Overall the numbers of people unable to explain why they voted 'no' beyond saying they did not know what the referendum was about is remarkable, and would seem to reflect poorly on the effectiveness of the campaign itself. Around 50% of people could not recall who argued for a 'yes' or a 'no' vote, nor could they recall what the arguments were on the 'no' side, or provide an explanation in terms of the issue itself for their choice.

A stronger campaign by those on both sides of the argument would have helped people to become better informed, irrespective of whether they then voted 'yes' or 'no'. However, those who favoured the principle, but voted 'no', were much less able to identify useful sources of information. Overall, most people tended to find the print and broadcast media the most useful sources of information, with one third of all voters saying they were particularly useful.

In general we conclude that the 'yes' side was unable to mobilise the support of those who appeared to have been in favour of a change, in part because the change proposed was perceived to be too great, and distrust of politicians helped contribute to this perception, and in part because of widespread confusion and lack of knowledge surrounding the reasons for the change.

What Does The Public Think About The Political Reform Agenda?

Questions were asked about nine reforms, some requiring a referendum and some not. The results are summarised below. There was general support for:

- reducing the number of TDs;
- allowing the Oireachtas to hold inquiries;
- allowing same sex marriages;
- giving more financial autonomy to local government; and
- abolishing the Seanad.

There was firm opposition to

- reform of the PR–STV (Single Transferable Vote) electoral system

Support for the following proposals was more evenly divided: i.e.

- reducing the presidential term;

- removing the offence of blasphemy from the constitution; and
- removing constitutional references to women’s life within the home.

There was no widespread body of pro- or anti-reform opinion and little association between support on one item and support on another. In addition, telephone poll responses on items that have not yet been subjected to intensive public debate may prove a poor guide to what would happen in a future referendum.

With respect to proposals for a Constitutional Convention, where it does come down on one side or another the public seems to favour a convention which is comprised predominantly of ordinary members of the public.

What Lessons Can be Learned for Future Votes on Reform (and Other) Issues?

A number of general recommendations emerged from the focus group discussions as well as from our quantitative analysis. These are summarised below and provide the starting point for more detailed discussion of the individual items:--

- More information through a diversity of media should be provided;
- More information from a wider variety of trusted sources should be provided; and
- The campaign should be developed over a longer period of time.

In general – reflecting evidence from comparable countries – the research found that people consider broadcast media to be one of the most useful sources of information. In addition to programme content, voters requested a more extensive advertising campaign by groups involved in the referendum campaign. Many voters also found newspaper stories very useful. In the focus groups, it was noticeable that younger age cohorts favoured campaign changes including, for example, greater use of social media.

The research shows that voters have a fair level of trust in the Referendum Commission, but that this is not matched by the perceived usefulness of its communications. A general problem is that those who are in most need of information from the Referendum Commission appear to derive the least benefit from it. In order to increase levels of knowledge among voters, the Commission needs to ensure that it engages in information provision that targets the least informed. This is a challenging task within the existing legislative framework, in view of the restrictions of the McKenna Supreme Court judgements.

Many voters were seemingly unaware of whether their political party was in favour of the reform proposal or not. Thus if opposition parties, in particular, are in favour of or indeed are against a proposal, it would be necessary for them to engage in some direct campaigning. The voters indicated that they see direct contact from political representatives as an essential element of an effective referendum campaign.

Methodology

RED C carried out quantitative and qualitative studies of voting in the referendum. These separate approaches are best thought of as complementing one another rather than providing rival interpretations. The quantitative study carried out by RED C consisted of 1005 interviews with adults aged 18+ conducted between the 28th and 30th November 2011. A random digit dial (RDD) method was used to ensure the process of selection of households to be included was random – this also ensured that ex-directory households were covered. A respondent from each household was then invited to take part in the survey, with demographic quotas used to ensure a representative sample. Half of the sample was interviewed using an RDD landline sample, with the other half conducted using an RDD mobile phone sample. Interviews were conducted across the country and the results weighted to make sure those surveyed matched the profile of all adults.

The interviews followed a fixed format, laid down in a detailed questionnaire. The great strength of this method is that its results can be generalised (with a margin of error of + or – 3%) to the population at large, and so to all those who voted in the referendum. This type of study also provides information about individuals that can be used to establish patterns. Thus it can be used to compare the behaviour of those who support government parties with other voters, or to compare those with more, as opposed to less, knowledge and these patterns can also be generalised to the population. A weakness of the method is that respondents are asked to answer fixed questions and there is little opportunity to explore whether everyone understands the questions in the same way, or perhaps gives equal thought to their answers. This is particularly so when the interview is a short one. The qualitative approach is designed to address such problems by inviting people to talk in a more open way and at greater length about their issues of concern.

To this end, four focus groups were conducted in Kilkenny and Dublin on 1st and 5th December 2011, by Carol Fanagan of RED C Research. All participants had voted in the Referendum on the Oireachtas Powers of Inquiry on 27th October 2011. Each group comprised a mix of ‘yes’ and ‘no’ voters but each was relatively homogeneous in terms of occupational class, some being more middle class, others working class in composition. Each group comprised 10 individuals. Questions followed a broadly similar format as the telephone poll, but were addressed to the group rather than to individuals and the convener moderated the discussion. Such a discussion can provide more depth, and capture nuances that may be missed in the quantitative studies, and may also provide good illustrations of some of the general findings from

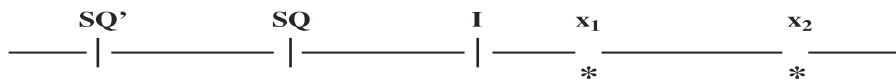
the surveys, but it should not be taken as expressing accurately the views of the population at large.

International Academic Research: Voting Behaviour in Referendums

Before we look at the evidence collected by RED C, it is useful to review some results from the very large number of studies of referendums around the world. While the circumstances in which referendums are fought vary widely, the processes by which people acquire information and make their decision on how to vote are sufficiently similar to allow us to learn from a very extensive literature. The research team felt that it would be appropriate to summarise these results so that the Irish experience can be placed in an international context and so that we can learn from experiences elsewhere.

A useful insight into voting behaviour in referendums is provided by Sara Hobolt in a recent paper on votes on the EU in many European countries (Hobolt 2005; a more extensive treatment is Hobolt 2009). The graphic in Figure 1 is taken from Hobolt 2005.

Figure 1. The Voter's Calculus



SQ: status quo

SQ': new status quo

I: voter's ideal point

x1, x2: ballot wordings

Figure 1 shows the problem any voter faces in making a decision on a referendum proposition, even when this is a simple question that can be thought of as one which provides for a change along a single dimension: more or less power for the Oireachtas for instance. In order to make a competent and reasoned decision, voters must decide where the ballot measure (e.g. x1) and status quo (SQ) are located and determine whether the proposition is closer to or farther away from their ideal point (I). They also need to assess whether a rejection of the proposal will lead to a continuation of the status quo (SQ) or to an entirely new situation (SQ'). This requires that information is available to voters and that voters access that

information. Voters may not even have explicit preferences in terms of an ideal point, particularly not before the campaign gets under way. In the absence of information about the impact of a 'yes' vote, voters might be well advised to opt instead for the status quo by voting 'no'. "If you don't know, vote 'no'" is a slogan commonly used by a 'no' side in referendums and, contrary to arguments often made by the 'yes' side, this is not an irrational view. If the status quo is not too bad, even if it is less than ideal, why risk a change to an uncertain future? In some referendums, however, this decision is complicated by the possibility (and this is common in referendums on EU matters here) that a 'no' vote could also move the status quo to a new point.

Hobolt's graphic illustrates the difficulty that any voter has in voting on the issue itself. Introducing a number of referendum studies, Larry LeDuc underlines the consequences when he points out that:-

"Theories of direct democracy tend to presume that referendum voters are 'issue' voters. However, the empirical evidence suggests that attitudes towards issues are only one of the variables affecting voting choice, and that they are not always the most important one in determining the outcome of a referendum (LeDuc 2002a)."

Much of the research into voting behaviour in referendums deals with the quality of voters' knowledge. It has been clear since the earliest studies of elections that in terms of their knowledge and interest in political matters voters fall well short of the democratic ideal. This will be more apparent when the issue is a relatively new one in public debate, or at least one that has not been widely debated. The campaign in such cases is likely to be of particular importance. However, voters can and do compensate for a lack of direct knowledge by making use of cues or 'short-cuts' that provide them with information sufficient to reach a decision (Lupia and McCubbins 1998 provides an extensive discussion and experimental evidence). These short-cuts take a variety of forms, but one of them involves taking the advice of a trusted source, whether it is a political party, a friend, part of the media or a social organisation, such as a church or trade union. Of course this advice needs to be available, and voters need to be aware of it and interested enough to access it. They also need a reason to pick one source of advice over another, and a key criterion here is trust. For Lupia and McCubbins (1998) this is built on perceived common interest and perceived competence in a field. Political parties are a significant source of cues in many referendums in Europe, but political parties do not always involve themselves in campaigns, nor do they necessarily present unambiguous messages in such campaigns. Most referendums are government initiatives and this may also

provide a positive or negative cue to voters, depending on their partisanship confidence in the government (Franklin, Marsh and McLaren 1995). Groups of various kinds can play a significant role.

Zaller (1992) analysed the manner in which information provided to voters during a campaign is converted into an opinion. He paid particular attention to the role that 'experts' may play in a campaign and indicated that voters may place greater weight on information provided from outside the political environment. Warren and Pearse (2008) and Fournier et al (2011) argue that citizen deliberation processes can be powerful forums as the members themselves are likely to act as ambassadors; this provides a source of non-partisan, but arguably expert advocacy. The referendums in Ireland on Lisbon and Nice saw very significant input from non-party groups on both sides. In each case the 'yes' side succeeded in establishing such groups only on the second vote.

People compare new bits of information to pre-existing mindsets or theories they might embrace. So another way for voters to bring their existing knowledge to bear is to facilitate them in comparing the referendum issue to their existing political knowledge. For instance, a vote on a EU Treaty could be linked to a more general attitude about the EU. There is some evidence to indicate that when campaigns are more intense, voters are better informed and will be more likely to rely on more sophisticated criteria – such as attitudes – and less likely to rely on simple cues (Hobolt 2005). Campaigns will often see the different sides seeking to characterise the issue in different ways, thus bringing in different attitudes. Media research uses the term 'framing' to describe this process: a referendum on an EU treaty might be about jobs, or about sovereignty, one on divorce might be framed as one on human rights, on the importance of the family to social stability, or on church vs. state. Each frame could bring different attitudes and beliefs into play.

It is evident from countless studies of referendums that campaigns matter. Unlike most elections, dominated by well-known parties whose activities are the staple diet of news and current affairs programmes, in which campaign effects are generally seen as modest, referendum campaigns often see huge changes. The apparent drop in support for the change to widen the scope for Oireachtas Inquiries was startling. In opinion polls carried out by various companies from September 2011 up to the week before the vote, support was extensive, with a B&A *Sunday Times* poll putting it at 81% and an IPSOS MRBI *Irish Times* poll putting it at 74%. 'Don't Knows' were 6% and 19% respectively. However, the scale of the changes is far from unusual (although not normally so apparent in the final week). The potential impact of the campaign should be greater the less the issue taps into core beliefs and ideology,

and the less political parties and important groups are aligned in traditional ways on the issue (LeDuc 2002b, 2003). Schmitt-Beck and Farrell (2002) argue that the decline in the old attachments to parties has created a more volatile electoral environment as the number of voters who make their decisions during campaigns has risen. Even in elections there has been a sharp rise in the number of voters who decide quite late in a campaign, leading to a growth in the importance of political campaigns and an increase in the unpredictability of campaign outcomes. Consequently, we can expect rather more volatility in public opinion when the issue at play is not about core beliefs and ideology, and when a referendum campaign is hard to locate within the main lines of political party competition.

An examination of existing research on referendum voting leads this research to explore a series of sub questions centring on the first question, why did people vote as they did in the Oireachtas Inquiry referendum? In other words why did people vote 'yes' or 'no'? This leads us to examine how much information did voters have on the issue to be decided? Where did voters acquire this information and how much did they trust the information that was available?

Results/Findings

Why Did People Vote As They Did?

We can begin by considering the ‘issue’ in its most simple form: did people favour Oireachtas Inquiries or not? It is striking that when asked, in the context of a battery of questions about possible political reforms, how voters agreed or disagreed with the statement that “*The Oireachtas should be able to hold inquiries into matters of general public importance*”. There was overwhelming support for this statement both within the electorate and among those who voted. Table 1 shows the result, and also the views of those who voted ‘yes’ and ‘no’ in the referendum. 74% of those who voted in the referendum favoured Oireachtas inquiries in principle and only 21% disagreed; among those who voted ‘yes’ 43%/47% ‘yes’ voters agreed with the principle, as did 31%/53% ‘no’ voters.

Table 1 Attitude towards Oireachtas Inquiry Reform in Principle

Q. The Oireachtas should be able to hold inquiries into matters of general public importance.

	Voted ‘yes’	Voted ‘no’	Total
<i>Oireachtas inquiry reform:</i>			
Against Inquiries in principle	3	18	21
Neither for nor against	1	6	5
Favour Inquiries in principle	43	31	74
Total	47	53	100

This Table is based just on the 719 people who voted in the referendum.

Cells are percentages of the total

Responses were on a fully labelled 7 point scale where 1 was disagree strongly and 7 was agree strongly and 4 was neither for nor against

This raises an interesting question: why did so many people (31% of the total) vote ‘no’ when they appear to support the idea behind the amendment? There are three possible explanations.

- (i) One answer may be that the actual proposal went beyond their conception of what would constitute inquiry reform, perhaps due to controversy surrounding the desirability of the Oireachtas reaching conclusions about individuals. In other words, the proposal went too far,

or people thought it did, and so it failed to capitalise on the reservoir of support for the principle.

- (ii) A further explanation would be that voters were not clear that the reform they wanted was what the amendment sought to bring about. It is not that the proposal went too far, but that the campaign for a 'yes' vote was not successful in explaining the reason for the amendment.
- (iii) Finally, a possible explanation would be that this particular 'issue' was not central to the decisions made by many voters, who instead chose to vote 'yes', or more often 'no', for other reasons.

We will return to the question of which of these applied, or at least applied to most people, later in the report.

Who Do Voters Recall As Campaigning?

The survey was designed to discover what people noticed during the campaign: who was arguing for a 'yes' or a 'no', how did voters feel about them. We also sought to identify the arguments that were being made, or at least the arguments that voters thought were being made. This helps us see how the issue itself was framed and how it related to other debates. We also asked voters to explain the reasons why they voted 'yes' or 'no'. It is important that we do not always take these 'reasons' at face value. Respondents provide them because an interviewer asked for them, but that does not necessarily mean that they were the conscious motives behind individual voting decisions at the time of the referendum. It is better to see them as post-hoc rationalisations, which are suggestive but which may or may not reflect the real reasons, or the underlying causes for a particular vote. We will set out the evidence for each of these questions here and later they will be discussed in greater detail.

On the question of who was arguing for a 'yes' or 'no', Fine Gael was identified as the most prominent 'yes' advocate (identified by (27%), then Labour (14%)). This may say no more than that people saw the government as being behind the referendum and so guessed that the government parties must have argued for it. On the 'no' side, voters identified Sinn Féin (10%) – incorrectly – then judges (8%) and some former Attorneys General (9%) (these may have been confused with judges) as most prominent, but clearly no group was strongly identified with either the 'yes' or (particularly) the 'no' campaign.

Explanations For 'yes' And 'no' Votes

Respondents were asked if they could recall arguments made by either side. Interviewers coded these into preset categories. The most common positive arguments in the campaign for a 'yes' were recalled by voters as being that the amendment would allow public inquiries into matters like the financial crisis (14%), and that it would save money on tribunals (13%). The major case against was that the amendment would give politicians too much power (27%) with small numbers recalling more specific claims that legal rights would be infringed (9%), that anyone could be investigated (4%) and that the amendment would take away from the powers of judges (4%). There is not a big difference here between the arguments attributed to the 'yes' and 'no' side, between those who voted 'yes' and those who voted 'no' although, 'too much power' was mentioned as an argument made by the 'no' side by 30% of 'no' voters but only 23% of 'yes' voters.

Asked why they themselves voted 'yes' or 'no', respondents unsurprisingly chose the same arguments. (Again, interviewers coded these into the preset categories.) On the 'yes' side the predominant explanation was that it would allow public inquiries into matters of public importance (25%) followed by that it would save money on tribunals (9%) and that family and friends were voting 'yes' (9%). The largest group simply said that it was 'appropriate' (36%). 'No' voters explained that politicians should not be given the right to investigate people (14%) (another 5% said too much power to the government) or interfere with the judicial system (12%), but people also said that they did not trust politicians (11%). The most common response, however, was that they did not actually know what the referendum was about (32%), and a further 7% indicated similar uncertainty in different words. Some respondents gave more than one response, but even if we allowed for this in the percentages the broad pattern would not change with the most common 'yes' and 'no' responses still being as above.

The numbers of people unable to rationalise voting 'no' beyond saying they did not know what the referendum was about is remarkable, and would seem to reflect poorly on the effectiveness of the campaign itself. Indeed, the apparent ignorance of the campaign comes though in a number of ways, summarised in Table 2. The figures show the proportions responding with a "don't know" answer to various questions, or an answer that is effectively "don't know". For instance, those who were coded as giving "no particular reason" as an answer to the question "Why did you vote this way?" have been classified here into the "Don't Know" category. However, we have not included as "Don't Knows" those who say they followed family and friends.

Table 2 Various Indicators of Low Knowledge

- Q You say you voted 'yes' ('no') for the Oireachtas Powers of Inquiry Referendum, what was the reason you voted this way?
- Q Can you recall who was making the case for a 'yes' ('no') vote for the Oireachtas Powers of Inquiry Referendum?
- Q What was the main argument, if any, being made by those campaigning for a 'yes' ('no') vote?

	Don't Know %
Why I voted 'yes'	18*
Why I voted 'no'	44**
Recall arguments for a 'yes' vote ('yes' voters)	42
Recall arguments for a 'yes' vote ('no' voters)	47
Recall arguments for a 'no' vote ('yes' voters)	50
Recall arguments for a 'no' vote ('no' voters)	42
Recall who argued for a 'yes'?	50
Recall who argued for a 'no'?	57

This table is based just on the 719 people who voted in the referendum

* includes 'no particular reason' and 'did not know what it was about' as well as 'don't know'

** includes 'did not know what it was about', 'not enough information', 'only found out on election day', and 'no particular reason' as well as 'don't know'.

Approximately fifty per cent could not say who argued for a 'yes', or a 'no' or what the arguments were on each side; nor could they provide an explanation in terms of the issue itself for their choice (to vote 'no'), while the most common reason for a 'yes' vote – it was appropriate – provides us with little confidence that respondents could have elaborated on why it was or was not appropriate.

Knowledge and Usefulness of Various Sources of Information

We can pursue this matter of information further. Respondents were also asked how knowledgeable they themselves felt they were about the objectives of the Oireachtas Inquiry referendum, and asked to respond using a 10 point scale with 10 marked as Extremely Knowledgeable and 1 as Not at all Knowledgeable. The mean score was 5.0 among voters (4.6 in the sample as a whole), but there are statistically significant differences between 'yes' and 'no' voters: the former averaged 5.3 and the latter 4.8. 'No' voters felt less knowledgeable than 'yes' voters did. This reflects differences at the lower extreme, as 33% of 'no' voters scored themselves in the range 1-3, compared with just 24% of 'yes' voters. We will address later the level of

actual knowledge among voters found by our survey. We also used the survey to ask more questions about the sources of campaign information: where did it come from, how much were different sources trusted and how much influence voters thought these sources had on their own decisions.

Table 3 Usefulness of Various Sources of Information

Q: Can you tell me how useful you found the following sources of information about the Oireachtas Powers of Inquiry Referendum?

	Very useful (4/5) %
Referendum Commission's adverts	14
Referendum Commission's information booklet	18
Internet	19
Friend/colleagues	22
News articles or stories	28
TV/radio discussion programmes	36

This Table is based just on the 719 people who voted in the referendum.

Responses were on a 5-point scale where 1 was not at all useful and 5 very useful.

Table 3 shows the sources identified in the questionnaire and the percentage of voters who rated each of those as particularly useful. (A 5-point scale was employed with the lower end labelled 'Not at all Useful' and the upper end 'Very Useful'.) The most obvious feature here is that people tended to find the print and broadcast media the most useful sources. However, one third of all voters found none of these sources to be particularly useful – scoring them at 3 or less– and another 20% rated only one source as useful. In almost all cases this was a media source. Output from the Referendum Commission was very rarely seen as useful in isolation from other sources. This suggests its output has mainly a supplementary value, when it is seen as useful at all. There is also a clear relationship between perceived usefulness of sources and voting behaviour: 64% of those finding no source useful voted 'no', whilst only 50% of those finding one or two useful did so and only 43% of those finding more than two sources useful.

This very clear result further underlines the link described above between voting 'no' and feeling inadequately informed which came through in the explanations provided for voting and the relationship between subjective knowledge and the vote.

Trust in Various Sources of Information

Table 4 Levels of Trust in Sources of Information

Q To what extent do you trust the information provided to you in relation to the Oireachtas Powers of Inquiry Referendum?

	High trust (4/5) %
Politicians	9
Information from the internet	11
Media coverage	25
Some Former Attorneys General	27
Referendum Commission	35
Legal experts	37

This Table is based just on the 719 people who voted in the referendum.

Responses were on a 5-point scale where 1 was not at all trusted and 5 very trusted.

Table 4 shows the extent of trust in various sources, again rated on a 5-point scale. We will define high levels of trust here as a score of 4 or 5. To a significant degree, those who trust one source tend to trust others, but there are also signs that some former Attorneys General and legal experts are trusted by a different group than expresses trust in other sources. The low rating for politicians is striking. It may be misleading, as the term groups all politicians together and almost certainly understates the regard respondents might have for those of a particular party, or some of their own local TDs. Media coverage may suffer in a similar way: respondents probably have more faith in particular presenters or newspapers than the ‘the media’ as a whole. Even so, almost a third, 30%, rated none of these sources as highly trusted.

We looked for any evidence of an association between general levels of trust and the direction of the vote – were those who trusted more sources more likely to vote ‘yes’ – but found no such link. However, there is a very noticeable association between trust in legal experts and some former Attorneys General and voting ‘no’. Forty-seven per cent of those with low trust (score 1/3) in the former Attorneys General voted ‘no’ compared with 70% of those with high levels of trust (score 4/5), and a similar, although weaker, pattern can be seen in the case of legal experts: 50% and 59% voting ‘no’ at low and high levels of trust respectively. Of course “some former Attorneys General” are a specific group when it comes to trust and influence.

In contrast, when it comes to media the object and probably the message is much more diverse. The media is extensive and the argument in one article may be very different from another; similarly the position of someone who dominates one TV programme may be for the referendum while another dominant voice in another programme may be against. The other striking association is between trust in politicians and voting 'yes' or 'no'. Voting 'no' was almost twice as likely amongst those with low trust in politicians (56%) as those with high trust (30%). We suggest that this is tied up not just with the source of arguments but also with the proposal itself, which essentially gave greater powers to the Oireachtas and so to politicians.

Influence of Various Sources of Information

Table 5 What Source had the Most Influence?

Q To what extent do you believe that each of the following had an influence on how you decided to vote on the Oireachtas Powers of Inquiry Referendum?

	High influence (4/5) %
Referendum Commission	12
Some Former Attorneys General	23
Political debates and politicians' views	24
Family and friends, colleagues	27
Specific TV or radio broadcast	29
Media coverage	30

This Table is based just on the 719 people who voted in the referendum.

Responses were on a 5-point scale where 1 was not at all influential and 5 very influential.

Results shown in Table 5 on the self-perceived influence of different sources echo those on usefulness, underlining the influence of media coverage. We define high influence as a rating of 4 or 5. Again there is a tendency for those who ascribe influence to one source to ascribe it to another, but assessments of the media and political debates are most closely associated. Almost a quarter of (voting) respondents mention the intervention by some former Attorneys General here as highly influential (23%), but it is also evident that politicians had a significant level of influence (24%), as did discussions within personal networks (27%). Few see the Referendum Commission as influential (12%), perhaps reflecting its role in providing information rather than an argument for a particular side.

Once again, 30% rated none of these as highly influential: i.e. rated none at 4 or 5. In respect of five of these sources – media in general, specific TV or radio, political debates, family and friends and the Referendum Commission – those seeing each as influential were less likely to vote ‘no’, although sometimes by a small percentage. The major exception, and it is also the clearest association, is with respect to some former Attorneys General: 69% of those ascribing high influence to them voted ‘no’, as opposed to 49% of those ascribing low influence, a difference which is very significant statistically.

These results may be seen again to suggest that a significant reason for the ‘no’ vote was a perceived lack of useful information, but the intervention by some former Attorneys General is a significant exception. This constitutes a very specific source of information whose message in their “Irish Times” letter was critical of the proposed change (whether or not it was perceived as such). The Referendum Commission is also a specific source, but its efforts were intended to be balanced and the other sources would have provided a variety of messages, depending on the family, the programme, and the views of a politician. The influence of some former Attorney Generals, such as it was, was thus more likely to have been in a single direction, although, perhaps surprisingly, only 77% of those who thought the some former Attorneys General were “very influential” actually voted ‘no’.

Experts were perhaps likely to have had a particular impact given that this was a low intensity, or low-key campaign, co-scheduled with the presidential election that dominated discussion and airtime. Zaller (1992) and Sniderman (2000) have both explored the role such experts may have when utilised as information short cuts by voters. Observing the Oireachtas Inquiry referendum campaign, there was no apparent high profile non-party political grouping on the ‘yes’ side of the debate.

The Influence of the Political Parties

Most studies have also found partisanship, or being a supporter of a political party, matters as a cue in referendums, at least to the extent that parties take positions on the issue. Political partisanship, beyond a simple vote for a party in an election, is not comparatively strong in contemporary Ireland by comparison to some other countries and previous decades, but there are some clear differences between different sets of supporters. The ‘no’ vote was strongest (65%) among those who said they would vote Fianna Fáil if there were to be an election tomorrow and weakest among Fine Gael voters (37%). Labour and Sinn Féin supporters were in the middle (55% and 57% respectively), but still clearly voting ‘no’. Supporters of other parties and independents also voted ‘no’ by a ratio of two to one. The opposition of

Fianna Fáil voters is particularly noteworthy given that Fianna Fáil supported the amendment, although as we have already seen there was very little recognition of this among voters. The nature of the cue offered by the party here, however, is less about what the party says than about what was provided by the relationship between the government and the opposition. The particular opposition of Fianna Fáil voters is evident. Even when they agreed with the notion of Oireachtas reform (see above) Fianna Fáil voters were still marginally less likely to vote 'yes' than 'no' (47% to 53%) while Fine Gael voters who agreed voted 'yes' by 70% to 30% and Labour by 55% to 45% and Sinn Féin 51% to 49%.

This association between party vote and referendum vote was not at all clear in the pre-referendum polls. For instance, in the IPSOS MRBI Irish Times poll taken on 22 October 2011, 'no' support was at 20% overall (57% 'yes' and 23% undecided or would not vote/would not say) and 21% among Fianna Fáil voters, 16% Fine Gael, 24% Labour and 29% Sinn Féin. Clearly the shift to a 'no' vote in the last week was considerable in each of these groups, but the change was by far the most dramatic among Fianna Fáil voters.

Overall conclusion and interaction of various factors

Multivariate Analysis

The many items discussed above are far from being independent of one another. There is a tendency for those trusting one source to trust others, or those who value one source to value others; those favouring government parties may trust something like the Referendum Commission more than others do, while we would expect those who find more sources useful to feel better informed. Accordingly, a multivariate analysis was conducted. Such analysis is valuable because it can look at the association between each of these items and the vote in a way that holds all other variables constant, allowing us to look at each association under the condition that all other things are equal.

To do this, we used an analytic technique called multiple regression. We included a number of items on the vote and then reduced the set by dropping items whose effects were so small in the sample that it might not be present in the wider population. The resulting set of items is concise, but it provides the basis for an accurate prediction of the voting behaviour of three quarters of all cases, a reasonable result with this sort of data. We started with all of the usefulness items and all of the trust items, plus partisanship, self-reported knowledge, the ability to provide a description of the 'yes' and 'no' arguments and attitude towards

Oireachtas reform with respect to inquiries. We also added a few items of real knowledge: that some former Attorneys General wrote a letter criticising the proposal, that the Seanad could not inquire into anything it wanted to and that all parties supported the referendum wording in the Oireachtas. It should also be noted that this is a very simple model, one that assumes, amongst other things, that the relationships are all linear; i.e., more of one thing will have the same effect regardless of the values of other variables.

Table 6 shows the outcome. The major factors predicting a ‘no’ vote are (1) attitudes to the issue itself (2) trust in particular sources, notably some former Attorneys General (positive) and the Referendum Commission and politicians (negative), (3) knowledge, both subjective (which is negative) and various items of actual knowledge, including knowing the campaign arguments for a ‘no’ vote, knowing that the recent Seanad inquiry exceeded its limits and knowing that some former Attorneys General argued against change and finally (4) partisanship, (not) voting Fine Gael.

Table 6 Expected ‘no’ Vote Under Simulated Conditions

<i>Multiple regression showing expected ‘no’ vote under simulated conditions</i>	
	‘no’ vote would change by:
<i>Issues</i>	
All favour Oireachtas inquiries	-23%
<i>Trust</i>	
None trust former AGs	-21%
None trust legal experts	-8%
All trust politicians	-22%
All trust Referendum Commission	-11%
<i>Knowledge</i>	
None know former AGs criticised change	-2%
None know limits to Seanad inquiries	-7%
All don’t know ‘no’ arguments	-10%
All feel adequately informed	-11%
All Referendum Commission ads useful	-17%
<i>Partisanship</i>	
all would vote fg	-17%

This Table is based just on the 719 people who voted in the referendum. Table shows change in ‘no’ outcome if variable at its maximum/minimum value and all others at their mean value.

Predictive model correctly classifies 76% of cases: McFadden’s adjusted R^2 0.26.

We have shown the importance of each factor here by carrying out a ‘what if..?’ experiment, showing in statistical terms how different the outcome would have been if the distribution of and evaluations of these different factors had been other than they were. For instance, about 1/3 of respondents said they would vote Fine Gael, but given that Fine Gael voters were more inclined to vote ‘yes’, what would have happened had all voters favoured Fine Gael? The answer is that the ‘no’ side would have dropped by 17 percentage points. This large change relative to the actual result comes about because of two separate things: because Fine Gael voters were rather more likely to vote ‘yes’, and because most people were not Fine Gael voters, so changing the balance makes quite a big difference. An even bigger difference would occur if all voters trusted politicians, because in reality most voters did not, and those who did were much more likely to vote ‘yes’.

In simulating these effects all other factors are held constant. This is of course unrealistic as we might expect some interrelationships between, for instance, voting Fine Gael and trusting certain sources. It also seems unlikely that if nobody knew what some former Attorneys General had said, that trusting them could have made any difference. However, this artificial exercise does allow us to identify and illustrate the importance of certain factors to the outcome.

We have generally used the term “association” here in talking about the statistical link between the different factors measured here and the vote, but we are interested in associations because they are one way of finding out what factors actually were important in a causal sense, something we can infer from certain patterns of association as well as from some of the things our respondents said, or did not say. Of course association is not the same as cause. For instance, the association here between trusting some former Attorneys General and voting ‘no’ could occur because a message is accepted from a trusted source, but it could also be that those who voted ‘no’ were more trusting of a source which conveyed a message that accorded with their own views. For this reason our conclusions as to which factors were more or less important are those that are suggested by the particular analysis done here. It would require a very different study, and a much more extensive one, carried out during the campaign, to isolate the importance of different factors in a way that would establish absolutely whether A led to B or B to A in this particular campaign.

Bearing these caveats in mind we can now revisit the three reasons we suggested (please see pages 11 and 12) for why some might favour inquiries but might not support the referendum. The first was that the proposal was perceived to go too far. This was to some extent the argument of some former Attorneys General who said

the proposals as worded would seriously weaken the rights of any individuals subjected to such inquiries. It is reasonable to suggest that the 'step too far' explanation has some merit.

The second was that many people were not able to connect their attitudes towards the idea of the Oireachtas holding inquiries to the changes proposed in this referendum. Self-reported knowledge features in this final model, and self-reported knowledge is also associated with the 'usefulness' of the sources of information that we asked about. This final model also shows that those who recalled the Referendum Commission's campaign ads as being useful were more likely to vote 'yes' rather than 'no'. A similar effect is evident for those who trusted the Referendum Commission. This is evidence for suggesting that the 'yes' side was unable to mobilise those who should have been in favour, in part because many people did not understand what the amendment was designed to achieve and why this would be desirable. In summary, it is likely that the yes vote would have been higher if the electorate had judged itself to be better informed or had found certain sources of information more useful, or if a greater number had trusted the Referendum Commission,

We included a number of items with correct 'yes' or 'no' answers to ascertain what people did know rather than just what they thought they knew. Some pieces of particular knowledge were associated with the 'yes' vote, but the most significant pieces of particular knowledge contributed to a 'no', rather than to a 'yes' vote.

This raises a difficulty since it might be suggested that while perceived lack of knowledge was associated with a 'no' vote, greater actual knowledge was also associated with 'no' vote. However, the ability to recall and explain the arguments in the campaign – real knowledge – was linked to a 'yes'. Moreover, analysis of the responses to the true/false questions indicated that these did not provide the basis for a scale of knowledge. In other words, they did not all measure the same thing. There is no basis for simply adding up correct responses and treating this as a measure of how well-informed each respondent was. In fact, one correct answer was associated strongly with a 'yes' vote and two others were associated with a 'no' while the other three showed no association. Viewed simply as separate items two particular items featured in the model above. Those who correctly acknowledged that some former Attorneys General had argued against the change, and who knew that there were limits to the Seanad's powers of inquiry were more likely to vote 'no'.

We made the point above that despite its statistical complexity this was a simple model. It is arguable that some relationships are much more complex. For instance, it is possible that levels of information would have different effects depending on whether someone was in favour of, or against the idea of inquiries. It might be extrapolated from this that better information should simply bring an individual's vote in line with their attitude. This means that more information would help to ensure that more of those who were against inquiries voted 'no', but would help the 'yes' side by bringing more people who favoured inquiries to vote 'yes'. Further analysis shows clearly that those who favoured the principle but voted 'no' were much less able to identify useful sources of information than were those who voted 'yes'. (The number who voted 'yes', but disapproved in principle is too small for useful analysis.) Thus there was a reservoir of support for the inquiry principle that was not mobilised in favour of the proposal.

The third explanation for the apparent inconsistency between attitude and vote is that people voted 'yes' or 'no' for reasons other than the issue itself. This appears to be the case from some of the explanations given by voters themselves, who justified a 'no' vote in terms of being given and possessing too little information, but that is also consistent with our second explanation: people did not know enough to vote in accordance with their attitude to reform. A stronger case can be made that the strongly positive link between support for a party other than Fine Gael and voting 'no' suggests an unwillingness by some voters to support proposals from a government run by, or perhaps dominated by, a party different to their own. Alternatively, we could conceive this as indicating a lack of trust in the predominant source of arguments for a 'yes' vote. It seems likely that both of these have some validity. Yet it is not possible to see the vote simply as a rejection of a government inspired referendum. This would make it hard to understand why most people voted so overwhelmingly for the proposal to cut judges' pay in the other referendum. It might be suggested that the judges' pay vote was a simpler one, and so it was less likely that decisions would be influenced by extraneous factors. This would accord with previous research but we don't find this a very convincing argument in this case, as the two votes were on the same day and it seems unlikely that voters would signal their opposition to the government strongly in one vote without doing so in another. Partisanship and opposition to the government was a factor, but it was hardly a very strong one in itself. What is clear is that effectiveness and cost dominated justifications for a 'yes' vote while fears of giving more power to those who were not to be trusted dominated the justifications for a 'no', and the latter is related to partisanship, or the party a voter has indicated they would vote for.

Focus Group Initial Findings

The qualitative results reinforce most key aspects of the telephone poll findings. The reasons people gave for voting 'no' were consistent with the findings of the quantitative study. Participants were asked a series of questions around their voting decision which included "For those that voted 'yes', explain why? For those that voted no, explain why? How confident were they in their own vote? How well informed were they about what they were being asked to vote on? What level of knowledge did they feel they had?"

Uncertainty about the specifics of the Oireachtas inquiry proposal came out strongly as a reason to vote 'no', as did fears of giving more power to politicians. There were also signs that people felt the Constitution deserved more respect, arguing that changes should be signalled well before the vote rather than at what was perceived as being at the last minute. There was resentment at this, and confusion about what the change was designed to do. Those on the 'yes' side also echoed the findings in the telephone poll: it was appropriate to give the Oireachtas more powers and this mechanism could save on the vast sums spent on tribunals.

The focus groups also provided further illustration of the ineffectiveness of the campaign for a 'yes' vote. There seemed to be a clearer recall of the intervention by some former Attorneys General than there was of any other group or individual(s) and there was general lack of clarity regarding where the different political parties stood.

Conclusions- In Summary [Qualitative Findings]

- Underlying support with 74% of all voters in support of Oireachtas inquiries in principle.
- There was a very high level of ignorance of the issues with between 40% and 50% of all voters unable to recall the arguments for either a 'yes' or a 'no' vote.
- Similar numbers could not recall who made the arguments for a vote in either direction.
- Some 44% of voters could not give cogent reasons for why they voted 'no', underlining the common practice of "if you don't know, vote 'no'".
- However, there is a clear association between trust in legal experts and some former Attorneys General and voting 'no', as there was between knowing these made a case for a 'no' vote and voting 'no'.

- Partisanship mattered with the particular support for 'yes' among Fine Gael voters.
- Evidence suggests that the 'yes' side was unable to mobilise those who should have been in favour.
- But there is also support for the suggestion that for some voters this was a bigger change than they could accept.

Agreement with Possible Political Reforms

The RED C study also sought to establish public opinion on other aspects of the reform agenda, including some of the items listed in the Programme for Government. We now turn to our second question: what does the public think about the political reform agenda to which the government is committed? It must be said again that telephone poll answers on issues that have not yet been subject to intensive public debate may prove a poor guide to what would happen in a future referendum. The experience of the Oireachtas Inquiry referendum as well as many others in Ireland and elsewhere makes that clear. Even so, this provides some pointers to what might be more and less popular.

Table 7. Support for Various Reforms

Q I would like you to consider each of the following possible political reforms and tell me how much do you agree or disagree with each?

<i>Reform:</i>	% agree (5/7)
The number of TDs should be significantly reduced	87%
The Oireachtas should be able to hold inquiries into matters of general public importance	75%
Same sex marriages should be allowed in the Constitution	73%
Local government should be given power to raise and to manage their own finances	62%
The Seanad should be abolished	59%
The terms of the Presidency should be reduced from 7 years to 5	54%
The offence of blasphemy should be removed from the Constitution	53%
References to women's life within the home should be removed from the Constitution	51%
The voting system PR-STV (Single Transferable Vote) electoral system should be replaced	34%

Table is based on all 1005 respondents. Responses were on a 7-point labelled scale where 1 was disagree strongly, 7 agree strongly and 4 neither agree nor disagree.

Questions were asked about nine reforms, some requiring a referendum and some not. The results are summarised in Table 7. We have grouped scores of 5, 6 and 7 as all were labelled as indicating agreement. There was majority support for all but electoral reform, which was firmly opposed. However, opinion was reasonably

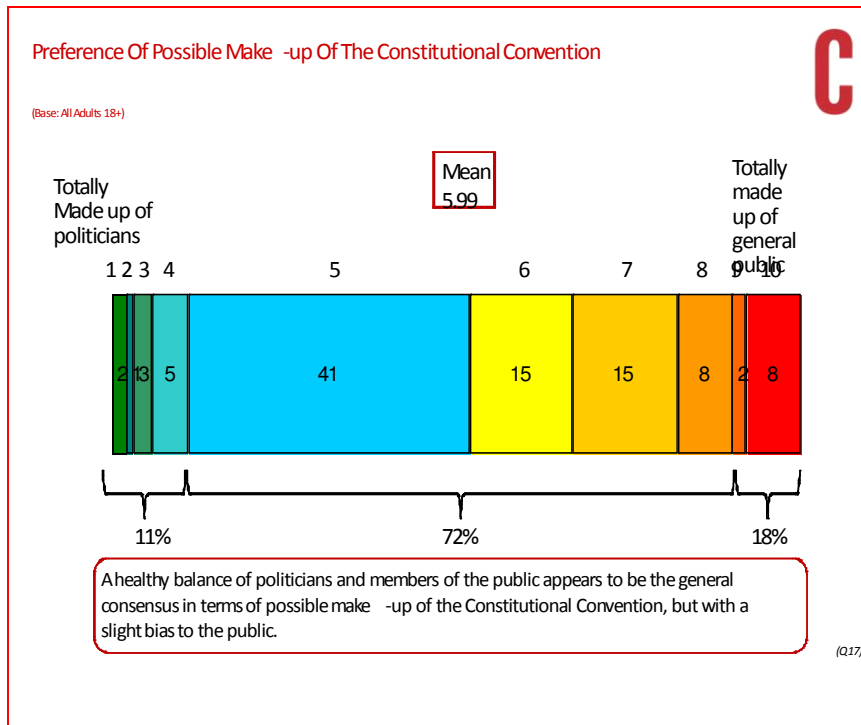
evenly divided on some of the others including reducing the presidential term, removing blasphemy from the Constitution and removing the reference to a woman's life in the home from the Constitution. There was high agreement with reducing the number of TDs, and fairly high support for allowing same sex marriage, as well as the principle that the Oireachtas should be able to hold inquiries into matters of general public importance - 3 in 5 of those who had voted 'no', were actually in agreement with this.

This is a fairly eclectic list and it is not surprising to find that there is little sign of a 'pro-reform' group of voters as such. In general, knowing someone is in favour of one reform is a very poor guide to predicting their views on the other reforms. There is a slight tendency for those who favour abolition of the Seanad to favour reduction in the number of TDs, and those who favour same sex marriage are more likely to be keen to remove the offence of blasphemy and the place of women in the home from the constitution, but the tendency is slight. Nor is there any generally strong tendency of 'yes' or 'no' voters to support reforms, although 'no' voters are slightly less likely to favour abolishing the Seanad or increasing the power of local government, but are more likely to favour removal of the offence of blasphemy. Government party supporters are marginally more likely to support some of the institutional reforms, though not electoral reform where they are more likely to disagree with any change, but are less likely to favour the changes to rights in the constitution, although differences are all very small.

Preferences for Make-up of a Constitutional Convention

We also asked about voters' preferences for a Constitutional Convention and what its structure should be. Respondents were told that the government has said it will set up a Constitutional Convention with representatives of the public, experts and politicians to discuss and analyse possible constitutional reforms before having referendums. They were then asked: Now I would like you to think about the possible make up of the Constitutional Convention. Thinking of a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is totally made up of politicians and 10 is totally made up of the general public, where would you place yourself on the scale in terms of preference. It is worth noting that most people will not have thought about this before and this may explain the very high number opting for the (apparently) middle ground option 5. Nonetheless, as Figure 2 shows, there is a notable tendency to favour a preference for a convention which includes, but by no means consists solely of, members of the public.

Figure 2. Attitudes on the Composition of a Citizens Assembly



This area was followed up in some detail in the focus groups. When first asked about the issue many were unsure and hesitant about how or why the public would be consulted. However, when the facilitator briefly outlined the practice of a citizen assembly based on experience in British Columbia (BC) in Canada the reaction was generally very positive. The individuals in the groups could now picture how the public could get involved. The aspects that were particularly well received were the random and non-partisan recruitment of the BC assembly. There were numerous positive individual references to the fact that it's "people like us".

The groups also debated how the participants should be enlisted, and there was a focus on ensuring that those with a special interest could not guarantee themselves a space. The preferred option was random selection with the opportunity to accept or decline depending on personal circumstances. There was also some hesitancy over giving up time and people appeared to generally prefer the idea of a mix of evenings and weekends as well as working days as long as they would not lose out financially.

Individuals also asked a lot of questions about payments and expenses and so on. Overall the consensus was that it would need to be wholly transparent, people were

also concerned about excessive expenditure on such assemblies – although reasonable expenses and a small financial reward for participants was considered acceptable.

The individual focus group participants were also clear that if there was to be one strand of a Constitutional Convention that was made up of citizens it would need to be exclusive to citizens with politicians and experts only acting as informants or advisers in order to avoid the possibility that they could dominate proceedings.

Lessons For Future Votes

We have documented the reasons that lay behind the decisions of the voters in the October 2011 Oireachtas Inquiry referendum, relying largely on the telephone poll evidence. This final section synthesises the polling evidence with more extensive output from the four focus groups that were conducted. It addresses the third question of the research, what lessons can be learned for future votes on reform?

Focus Group Evidence

Four focus groups were conducted and a substantial portion of these concentrated on aspects of campaign design and deployment. We have to remember here that the individual responses from the focus groups cannot be generalised to the population or to the Irish people as a whole, rather they provide a useful method for examining preferences in more depth. We know from the polling evidence presented above that many more voters were much less informed than they should be in an ideal world. Indeed the focus groups appeared conscious of this and a core theme emerging from the focus groups was that voters felt that more information should be made available to them.

A number of general recommendations emerged from the focus group discussions. These are summarised below and provide the starting point for more detailed discussion:

- More information should be provided through a wider diversity of media;
- More information should be provided from a wider variety of sources; and
- The campaign should be developed over a longer period of time.

More Information through a Diversity of Media

In general – reflecting evidence from comparable countries – we found that people consider broadcast media to be among the most useful sources of information. Table 3 demonstrated that TV/Radio discussion programmes were of greatest use in providing information during the campaign. This was affirmed by voters in the focus groups who provided further detail on how television content could be maximised during political campaigns on both sides of the referendum question.

Several participants mentioned that the campaign should not be confined to RTÉ stations and that a wide selection of programmes should be targeted. Local radio was also mentioned as an important source of political information. As the government and Referendum Commission cannot direct programme content in either public or privately owned media, implementation of this recommendation would have to be demand-led with voters and those on both sides of any campaign pressing stations to increase their public affairs content. In addition to programme content, voters requested a more extensive advertising campaign by groups involved in the referendum campaign. However, arising from the McKenna Judgments, the government is precluded from using state resources to promote either side of a referendum campaign.

Table 3 also provided evidence on how respondents viewed news articles or stories and the internet. Some 28% of people found news articles or stories very useful while 19% found the internet very useful. It was noticeable in the focus groups that younger age cohorts favoured campaign changes that would make greater use of social media. Facebook and Twitter were the most popular social media platforms cited while blogs were recommended for more extended debate and argument. Examples of successful social media campaigns from both the general election and the presidential election were provided. Some participants suggested that social media could also be used in advance of campaigns to consult with the electorate on their preferences. Recommendations on greater use of social media are consistent with research on post-modern campaigning in the twenty first century (see Prior in Niemi, Weisberg & Kimball 2011). Focus group voters also argued for the targeting of programmes across the entire day and outside the traditional news cycle. This is consistent with work by Baum and Jamison (2011) that suggests that 'soft' news sources can be a particularly important source of political information for inattentive voters.

More Information from a Wider Variety of Sources

Voters were especially keen to hear from voices outside the political environment in television and radio debates. These could be individuals with specialist knowledge or experience and the list of suggested contributors included business people, trade unionists, media professionals, economists and other academics. Voters involved in the focus groups also suggested that the involvement of civil society organisations in debates would also be useful. The research literature shows that citizen deliberation processes can also be powerful forums as the members themselves are likely to act as ambassadors, providing a source of non-partisan, but arguably expert advocacy.

Focus group respondents indicated that non-political party contributors would be expected to participate on both sides of an issue.

The Campaign Should be Developed Over a Longer Period of Time

In the focus groups, voters were keen that the referendum campaign in the media should be developed over a longer period of time. This would alert the electorate to the forthcoming decision, give more time for consideration of the issue and allow voters the opportunity to seek out information and opinions from a variety of different sources. Voters were keen that all broadcast media should allocate more time to discussion of the referendum issue during radio and television programmes. There are also concerns around holding a referendum at the same time as a separate highly engaging political contest. Of course this increases turnout, but it may also have the effect of crowding out the information campaign of a less politically charged referendum issue. However, it is reasonable for us to conclude from the evidence presented that there is a good argument for beginning the referendum campaign well before the vote.

The Role of the Referendum Commission

Focus group respondents were clear that they would like to have access to arguments in favour of and against the proposed change during future referendum campaigns. However, this request is difficult for the Referendum Commission in particular to accommodate within the current legislative framework. Under the Referendum Act of 1998, a Referendum Commission is established for each referendum, but is constrained by a series of decisions (including the McKenna Judgements). In its first iteration, the Referendum Commission was empowered to argue both sides of a referendum issue, but this requirement has been removed, as it was thought that many voters had found the provision of 'yes' and 'no' arguments offered directly by the Commission quite confusing. Currently, the main focus of the campaign conducted by the Referendum Commission is to provide 'objective' information. Voters' opinions on the effectiveness of Referendum Commission campaigns have to be interpreted against the backdrop of these legislative constraints.

Results from the telephone poll showed that voters have a fair level of trust in the Referendum Commission, but that is not matched by their perception of the usefulness of its communications. From the analysis of the poll, it is clear that those

who most need the Commission to provide information appear to derive the least benefit from it. Almost all of the poll respondents who found it relatively useful found at least one other source useful, suggesting its material has at best a supplementary value. A similar theme emerged from the some of the focus group participants who were in general unenthusiastic about leaflets, which they described as “junk mail” and “old fashioned”. Yet many suggested that the Referendum Commission should provide both summary and detailed leaflets and online information catering for voters with different levels of political information and interest. Synthesising the evidence from both strands of the research leads us to conclude that the Commission could do more to provide for the less well-informed. However, it is clear that it would be a challenging task within the existing framework. Legislators would be advised to pay some attention to the role played by international comparators (see e.g. IDEA 2008).

The Role of the Political Parties

It is clear from the quantitative analysis that partisan cues worked somewhat along traditional government and opposition lines with many voters seemingly unaware of whether their party was in favour of the reform proposal or not. Political parties will have an impact even if they do nothing, although not necessarily in the direction they favour. The view of those in the focus groups was that parties could do more and there was a general lack of clarity regarding where different parties stood. While the number and variety of media have increased exponentially in recent years, there is still a preference for political parties to engage in direct campaigning. Furthermore, focus group voters confirmed that they had little direct contact from any political party in the course of the campaign.

Focus group members indicated that they see direct contact from political representatives as an essential element of an effective referendum campaign. Even though there was some distrust of politicians, in the focus groups many voters were clear that they would like to hear from their own local representatives on referendum issues. There is a wide debate on the manner in which political party cues and local representatives can influence voters (see Bullock 2011) but a preference for contact with local political representatives is consistent with research findings from the 2011 Irish National Election Study. There were a variety of direct campaigning options mentioned by voters; canvassing at shopping centres, sporting events and in their homes. All options were encouraged. Town hall meetings were mentioned, however many admitted that they would not attend these.

Some in the focus groups were also keen that the parties as well as the Referendum Commission should engage in information provision and while posters are a much maligned feature of Irish elections, they fulfil a specific role in political information. They are a useful mechanism for alerting voters to forthcoming referendums and many voters mentioned this.

Lessons Summary

The campaign improvements outlined in the preceding sections are drawn from the focus group evidence collected and analysed during the research. These recommendations resonate with the findings arising from the quantitative study where voters felt ill-informed and indicated that many of the expected sources of information or the referendum campaign were not felt to be useful, or were little trusted.

Generally, the recommendations from the focus group and the telephone poll are also consistent with international research on effective campaign communications. The recommendations provided by voters include both direct and indirect methods of campaigning. The indirect elements of the campaign include information provided by the media, debates and discussion in the media and online material.

Providing for a well-informed electorate is a very serious challenge for all those involved in referendum campaigns in Ireland. The collected wisdom of all the voters in this study points towards the need for: information campaigns to be developed over a longer period of time; for information to be transmitted in many different ways, with special emphasis on the broadcast media. Finally, voters expressed a wish to hear opinions on proposed changes from a wide variety of groups and personnel outside of the party political environment.

Report Conclusion

This report presented evidence from a study of voting behaviour on the Oireachtas Inquiry referendum in October 2011. The mixed method study addressed three questions.

- Why did people vote as they did in the Oireachtas Inquiry referendum?
- What does the public think about the political reform agenda to which the government is committed?
- What lessons can be learned for future votes on reform?

The evidence points to a number of conclusions. There was widespread support for the principle of providing inquiry powers for the Oireachtas. Despite this, a majority of voters voted against the proposal. Four factors emerged as important in explaining why voters made their decision: attitude to Oireachtas inquiries in principle, levels of trust in sources, extent of knowledge and partisanship. There was widespread support for the *idea* of Oireachtas inquiries, but there was evidence to suggest that the changes proposed went too far for some who favoured such inquiries in principle; there is also clear evidence of uncertainty and confusion amongst many voters, something that tended to prompt a ‘no’ vote. Partisanship and degrees of trust in those arguing for and particularly against proposals also had an effect independently of attitudes to the principle.

Voters on both sides of the proposal were critical of the information campaign that was conducted. The quantitative results demonstrated that close to 50% of voters could not recall the specifics of the campaign on either the ‘yes’ or ‘no’ side. At the same time 44% of ‘no’ voters did not actually know what the referendum was about. This raises questions about the effectiveness of the referendum campaign.

The research here also explored attitudes to the political reform agenda. Apart from electoral reform, a majority of voters supported all but one of the reform proposals presented, with varying degrees of strength. Voters were also favourably disposed to a Constitutional Convention, especially if had a strong role for “ordinary” citizens.

Core messages of the international research literature on referendums, supported by evidence from Irish referendums, including the Oireachtas Inquiry referendum, are that voting behaviour can be volatile and that voters rarely have strong opinions

on political issues which are not derived from their core values or partisan orientation. Consequently, opinions expressed on issues, such as political reform, which have not been subject to debate and scrutiny are subject to change. Campaigns matter in referendums.

The preceding “Lessons for Future Votes” section presented a series of recommendations that could be implemented in future referendum campaigns. The primary recommendation is for a more extensive and a more varied campaign with a greater role for those from outside the normal political party arena to provide voters with the information they need on the particular issue of each referendum.

Summary of the Quantitative Findings

- Underlying support with 74% of all voters in support of Oireachtas inquiries in principle.
- There was a very high level of ignorance of the issues with between 40% and 50% of all voters unable to recall the arguments for either a 'yes' or a 'no' vote.
- Similar numbers could not recall who made the arguments for a vote in either direction.
- Some 44% of voters could not give cogent reasons for why they voted 'no', underlining the common practice of "if you don't know, vote 'no'".
- However, there is a clear association between trust in legal experts and some former Attorneys General and voting 'no', as there was between knowing these made a case for a 'no' vote and voting 'no'.
- Partisanship mattered with the particular support for 'yes' among Fine Gael voters.
- Evidence suggests that the 'yes' side was unable to mobilise those who should have been in favour.
- But there is also support for the suggestion that for some voters this was a bigger change than they could accept.

Summary of the Qualitative Findings

The qualitative strand of the research focused on the information campaign conducted for the Oireachtas Inquiry referendum and how information campaigns could be improved at future contests. The main findings are listed below.

Voters would like more time to consider referendum proposals and requested that referendum campaigns are allocated a longer period of time.

They requested more extensive use of diverse campaign methods. The campaign techniques listed included both direct and indirect communication measures. Direct campaign communications included canvassing and erecting posters, while among the indirect measures suggested were greater use of radio and television programming, increased use of social media and more news articles on the referendum proposals.

Finally, voters indicated that they would welcome contributions from groups and individuals coming from outside the political environment, including business people, trade unionists, media professionals, economists and other academics. Voters were also favourably disposed toward more extensive citizen involvement and were interested in a citizen's assembly as a mode of extending citizen participation.

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Appendix I

Questionnaire

Nov 2011

POST REFERENDUM RESEARCH

ASK ALL AGED 18+

Q.1. Can you tell me whether or not you voted in each of the following?

- a. Presidential election
- b. Oireachtas Powers of Inquiry Referendum
- c. Judges' Pay Referendum

ASK ALL

Q.3 Can you tell me on a scale of 1 to 10, how knowledgeable you felt you were about the objectives of the Oireachtas Powers of Inquiry Referendum, where 1 is not at all knowledgeable and 10 is extremely knowledgeable?

Not Knowledgeable	At	All									Extremely
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		

ASK ALL WHO VOTED AT Q1

Q.4 Did you vote 'yes' in favour or NO against each of the following referendums;

- a Oireachtas Powers of Inquiry Referendum;
- b Judges Pay Referendum

- 'yes'
- No
- Refused

ASK ALL WHO VOTED AT Q1

Q.5 You say you voted 'yes'/NO (insert as appropriate) for the Oireachtas Powers of Inquiry Referendum, what was the reason you voted this way? **PROBE TO PRE-CODES. RECORD FIRST AND OTHER MENTION**

- If 'yes';**
 Felt it was appropriate to vote 'yes'
 Didn't know what it was about
 To allow TDs / the Oireachtas to investigate issues of national importance
 My family/friends were voting 'yes'
 Parliaments in other countries have these powers
 No particular reason
 Other Please Specify _____
- If No;**
 Didn't know what it was about
 Felt it was inappropriate to vote 'yes'
 Don't Trust Politicians
 Powers interfere with the judicial / legal system
 I believe inquiries would be biased
 My family / friends were voting no
 Only found out about it the day of the election
 Don't believe politicians should have the right to investigate people
 Don't see the point of it

No particular reason Other Please Specify _____
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ASK ALL

- Q.6 Can you tell me how useful you found the following sources of information about the Oireachtas Powers of Inquiry Referendum? Please use a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 is very useful and 1 is not at all useful
PROBE TO PRECODES. MULTICODE

Referendum Commission's adverts
TV/ Radio discussion programmes
Referendum Commission's information booklet
Newspaper articles or stories
Family/Friends/colleagues
Internet
Other _____

ASK ALL

- Q.9a Can you recall who was making the case for a 'yes' vote for the Powers of Inquiry Referendum? **DO NOT READ OUT. PROBE TO PRE-CODES**
- Q.9b Can you recall who was making the case for a no vote for the Oireachtas Powers of Inquiry Referendum? **DO NOT READ OUT. PROBE TO PRE-CODES**

Political Party
Fianna Fáil
Fine Gael
Labour
Sinn Féin
Green Party
Independent candidate
Judges
Some Former Attorneys General
Journalists/Commentators
Referendum Commission
Business Leaders
Other (write in)
Don't Know

- Q.10a What was the main argument, if any, being made by those campaigning for a 'yes' vote? **DO NOT READ OUT. PROBE TO PRE-CODES**

Allows political representatives to make findings against individuals in the public interest
It would allow a public inquiry into the causes of the financial and economic crisis and the role played by bankers, developers and others
Saves money otherwise wasted on Tribunals
Strengthens powers of the Dáil / Seanad
All parliaments have inquiry powers
No clear argument made
Other (write in) _____
Don't know

- Q.10b What was the main argument, if any, being made by those campaigning for no vote? **DO NOT READ OUT. PROBE TO PRE-CODES**

Gives politicians too much power
Anyone could be subject to investigation by politicians
Eliminates legal & constitutional rights
Takes away from the role of judges in our democracy
Constitutional amendment was badly drafted
Effect of proposed constitutional change unclear
No clear argument made
Other (write in) _____
Don't know

ASK ALL WHO VOTED AT Q1

Q.11 To what extent do you believe that each of the following had an influence on how you decided to vote on the Oireachtas Powers of Inquiry Referendum? Please use a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 is had a strong influence and 1 is had no influence at all.

Media coverage generally
 Political debates & politicians' views
 Friends/family/colleagues
 Some Former Attorneys General
 Referendum Commission
 Specific TV or radio broadcasts

Q.13 For each of the following statements I read out, can you please tell me for each, if you believe this is a correct or incorrect statement?

- The Abbeylara judgement prevented the Oireachtas from making **any** inquiries into matters of public interest [false]
- A group of several former Attorneys General published a letter in the last week of the Presidential election campaign critical of the wording of the Oireachtas Inquiries referendum [true]
- The wording of the Oireachtas Inquiries referendum was approved by both of the government parties as well as FF and SF in the Dáil [true]
- The Referendum Commission explained that it was not possible to say what would be the role of the courts in constraining Oireachtas Inquiries if the referendum were to be passed [true]
- The Seanad can now investigate the behaviour of any member without the involvement of courts [false]
- The DIRT Inquiry was a Tribunal set up by Bertie Ahern's government in the 1990s to uncover tax evasion [false]

Q.14 To what extent do you trust the information provided to you in relation to the Oireachtas Powers of Inquiry Referendum from the following sources? Please use a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is do not trust at all, and 5 is trust completely.

Media coverage
 Politicians
 Referendum Commission
 Some Former Attorneys General
 Legal experts
 Information from the internet

Q.16 I would like you to consider each of the following possible political reforms and tell me how much do you agree or disagree with each?

READ OUT – ROTATE ORDER ?		Disagree Strongly	Disagree	Disagree slightly	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree Slightly	Agree	Agree Strongly
	The Seanad should be abolished	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	The Oireachtas should be able to hold inquiries into matters of general public importance	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	The number of TDs should be significantly reduced	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Local government should be given power to raise and to manage their own finances	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	The offence of blasphemy should be removed from the Constitution	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Same sex marriage should be allowed in the Constitution	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Reference to women's life within the home should be removed from the Constitution	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	The terms of the President should be reduced from 7 to 5 years	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	The voting system PR-STV (Single Transferable Vote) electoral system should be replaced	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

READ OUT INTRO: The Government has said it will set up a Constitutional Convention with representatives of the public, experts and politicians to discuss and analyse possible constitutional reforms before having referendums.

Q.17 Now I would like you to think about the possible make up of the constitutional convention. Thinking of a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is totally made up of politicians and 10 is totally made up of the general public, where would you place yourself on the scale in terms of preference.

