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The Influence of Turnout of the Results of the Referendum to Amend the Constitution to include a clause on the Rights of the Unborn

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I INTRODUCTION

The Referendum on the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution, held on 8th September, 1983, endorsed by a two-to-one majority the insertion into the Constitution of Ireland a clause concerning the right to life of the unborn. A feature of the poll that has attracted considerable attention was the low turnout. Only 54.6 per cent of the electorate voted in the Referendum, and the high abstention rate naturally fuelled speculation as to the "true" level of support for the amendment in the population as a whole.

One interpretation of the high abstention rate is that it represented a protest against the holding of the Referendum. Alternatively, the low turnout has been seen as a rejection of the substance of the proposed amendment by people who did not feel strongly enough to vote or were inhibited by public opinion from voting "no". The second interpretation implies that the "true" level of the "no" sentiment in the population is much higher than the 33 per cent of votes recorded in the Referendum. The possibility that the low turnout resulted in an understatement of the "true" level of support for the proposed amendment has not been as widely entertained, but the predictability of a "yes" majority might have reduced the incentive of those in

* Helpful comments were received from two referees.

favour to actually come out and vote.

Some indication of the characteristics of the non-voters can be gleaned from an analysis of those who stated in opinion polls that they did not intend to vote. The social and demographic characteristics of these respondents suggests that this group contained a slight preponderance of people likely to hold a "yes" opinion, such as small farmers, those aged over 50 and Ulster/Connacht residents (Jones, 1983). On the other hand, an examination of the pattern of turnout by constituency led Gallagher (1983) to conclude that "over the country as a whole, there is no relationship at all between the 'Yes-No' breakdown and the level of turnout." The aim of the present paper is to show that it is possible to make some inferences about the effect of turnout on the results of this Referendum.

II TURNOUT

The turnout in the Referendum (defined as the percentage of the electorate that voted) can be analysed under two headings: (i) the level of the turnout nationally and (ii) its regional pattern.

Nationally, 53.6 per cent of the electorate voted in this Referendum. This is considerably below the turnout in recent General Elections and in the 1972 Referendum on EEC membership, which ranged from 71 to 77 per cent, but similar to that recorded in the Referenda on Article 44 and Voting Age (51 per cent), and higher than that in the Referenda on Adoption and Senate Representation (29 per cent).

Garvin (1981) has drawn attention to the long-standing regional pattern of turnout in Irish elections. After 1923

> Dublin came to be overshadowed electorally by the country regions generally and by the heartland region in particular. The frontier region of Ulster also showed high turnout rates, and the highest such rates tended to be in central Munster (pp. 164-165).

Turnout is also analysed in Gillman (1973), who shows that it can be said to exhibit a stable regional pattern. McCarthy and Ryan (1975) demonstrate the consistency of the behaviour of the non-voting population from one poll to another. Although none of these studies explores the reasons for this persistent regional variation in turnout, they may be surmised to include variations in the accuracy of the Electoral Register, the proportion of the electorate away from home on the day of the poll and the intensity of interest in political and social issues. But, as Gillman points out, factors specific to each poll also seem to play a role.

To illustrate the importance of factors specific to the actual poll on the

turnout, the results of the Referendum may be compared with those of the General Election held in November 1982. These two polls were held in the same 41 constituencies. Turnout in the two polls is shown as TURN82 and TURN83 in the Data Appendix. In the Referendum the usual high turnout in the south and west of the country did not occur. On the other hand, there was a relatively high turnout in constituencies, such as those in Dublin, where turnout is normally low. Turnout in the Referendum as a percentage of turnout in the November 1982 General Election varied from 96.6 per cent in Dublin South East to 62.2 per cent in Mayo West. The correlation between turnout in the two polls is +0.41, which points to considerable independent variation in these two variables.

III REGRESSION ANALYSIS

To explore the effects of turnout on the Referendum vote it is helpful to have a model that accounts for as much as possible of the inter-constituency variation in the vote. The absence of systematic socio-economic data by constituency makes this a difficult task, but an obvious starting point is the pattern of voting in the previous General Election. The relevance of the distribution of the first preference vote in the preceding election to the pattern of voting in the Referendum is vindicated by the consideration that while Fianna Fáil proposed the wording and endorsed the amendment, Fine Gael, the Labour Party and the Workers' Party opposed it with various degrees of intensity. A general tendency for constituencies with high levels of Fianna Fáil support to record large "yes" votes has already been noted (Gallagher, 1983).

The data used in the regression analysis are listed in the Appendix. The simple correlation coefficients between these variables are shown in Table 1. Table 2 contains the regression results. The association between the pattern of first preference votes in the November 1982 General Election and the proportion voting "yes" (YES%) in the Referendum is shown in the first two equations. The correlation between the Fianna Fáil share of the vote (FF) and YES% is significant. The addition of the combined[1] shares of the Labour Party and the Workers' Party in the first preference vote (LABWP) increases the $\overline{R}^2$ slightly. As expected, the signs of the coefficients indicate that the higher FF, and the lower LABWP, the higher Yes%.[2]

1 LAB and WP were entered separately and the equality of their coefficients tested. As equality could not be rejected, all reported results are in terms of the combined LABWP variable.

2 No additional insights into the influence of party votes on the Referendum results would be obtained by, for example, adding a variable measuring Fine Gael's share of the vote because this would render the set of regressors collinear.

Table 1: *Correlation coefficients*

Simple correlation coefficients between the variables used in the study

	FF	LAB	WP	TURN82	TURN83	YES%	DROP
FF	1.00						
LAB	-0.29	1.00					
WP	-0.48	-0.04	1.00				
TURN82	0.44	-0.13	-0.45	1.00			
TURN83	-0.29	0.08	-0.11	0.41	1.00		
YES%	0.67	-0.31	-0.46	0.65	-0.13	1.00	
DROP	0.68	-0.19	-0.38	0.74	-0.32	0.77	1.00

Note: YES% = "yes" votes as % of valid poll in Referendum.
FF = Fianna Fáil's share of the first preference vote in the November 1982 General Election.
LABWP = combined share of Labour Party and Workers' Party in first preference vote in the November 1982 General Election.
TURN82 = turnout in the November 1983 General Election: valid poll as percentage of the electorate.
TURN82 = turnout in the Referendum: valid poll as percentage of the electorate.
DROP = difference between turnout in the Referendum and in the November 1982 General Election.
Data are listed in the Appendix.

The addition of a variable measuring the turnout in the Referendum (TURN83) does not raise $\bar{R}^2$. This supports Gallagher's contention that turnout of itself is not systematically related to the Referendum vote. The discussion of the regional pattern of the turnout in the Referendum above, however, drew attention to the need to focus on the manner in which on this occasion it differed from the "normal" pattern. For this reason it was decided to include in the regressions a variable measuring the fall in participation between the General Election and the Referendum (DROP= TURN82 - TURN83).[3] It may be seen from Equations 4 and 5 in Table 2 that the addition of this variable has an important effect on the results. In all cases DROP has a highly significant positive coefficient. The inclusion of DROP tends to reduce the significance of FF but enhances that of LABWP. The positive coefficient of DROP suggests that, other things equal, the larger the fall in turnout in the Referendum relative to the General Election, the higher the "yes" vote as a percentage of those voting. Alternatively, this result can be stated as showing that for a given level of turnout in 1982, the

3 This is only one of several ways of specifying this effect. TURN82 and TURN83 were also entered separately, and the ratio of the two (TURN83/TURN82) was tried. The results were not sensitive to these alternative specifications.

Table 2: *Regression results*

YES% is the dependent variable and t-ratios are beneath the coefficients. Data relate to the 41 Dáil constituencies.

Equation Number	*Intercept*	*Regressors* FF	*LABWP*	*TURN83*	*DROP*	$\bar{R}^2$
1.	17.5	+1.12 (5.6)				0.43
2.	31.1	+0.91 (4.0)	−0.34 (1.8)			0.46
3.	23.9	+0.94 (3.9)	−0.33 (1.6)	+0.11 (0.3)		0.45
4.	34.7	+0.27 (1.2)	−0.31 (2.0)		+1.25 (4.5)	0.65
5.	44.0		−0.38 (2.6)		+1.45 (6.6)	0.66

Note: YES% = "yes" votes as % of valid poll in Referendum.
FF = Fianna Fáil's share of the first preference vote in the November 1982 General Election.
LABWP = combined share of Labour Party and Workers' Party in first preference vote in the November 1982 General Election.
TURN83 = turnout in the Referendum: valid poll as percentage of the electorate.
DROP = difference between turnout in the Referendum and in the November 1982 General Election.
Data are listed in the Appendix.

higher the turnout in the Referendum the lower the "yes" vote. This result is very robust and insensitive to the combination of additional variables that is included in the regression.

IV IMPLICATIONS

The correlation between the drop in turnout and the outcome of the Referendum can be used to explore the hypothetical implications of a higher turnout.[4]

4 The method used is statistically similar to that adopted in Compton (1978) in assigning those who refused to answer the question on religion in the 1971 Census of Population in Northern Ireland to one or other of the religious affiliations. The voter transition probability approach (McCarthy and Ryan, 1975) could be used to provide estimates of how the non-voters in the Referendum voted in the preceding General Election, but not to answer the question posed here.

If the turnout in the Referendum had been as high as in the previous General Election (slightly higher than that in the Referendum on EEC membership), 463,000 additional votes would have been cast. If the turnout in each constituency had been the same as in 1982, the number of additional votes would have varied from 18,700 in Galway West to 1,200 in Dublin South East. Proportionately larger numbers of additional voters would have been recorded in constituencies where YES% was relatively high.

The effect of these hypothetical additional votes on the outcome of the Referendum can be explored only if an assumption is made on how to allocate them to "yes" or "no". One basis for making this allocation is the distribution of the votes actually cast in the constituencies to which the additional votes are assigned. One possible benchmark is to assume that the additional votes would have been distributed between "yes" and "no" in the same proportions as the votes actually recorded in the constituency. The result of a calculation based on this assumption is to raise the national proportion of "yes" votes from 66.9 to 67.7. The fact that the hypothetical YES% calculated in this manner is higher than the actual reflects the allocation of a disproportionate share of the additional votes to constituencies where a high YES% was recorded. But this basis for allocating the additional votes is conservative in as much as no allowance is made for the possibility that the non-voters were more likely than the voters within each constituency to have voted "yes", as is suggested by the strong positive inter-constituency correlation between YES% and TURN83. If this correlation holds within, as well as between, constituencies, there would be a higher proportion of "yes" votes among the additional votes than among those actually cast. Allowing for this factor in the allocation of the additional votes would raise the hypothetical national proportion voting "yes" still higher. Only if it is believed that the large abstention rate in constituencies with a high YES% reflected a covert "no" vote among people who were deterred by the force of local opinion or traditional party loyalty from actually voting is it possible to maintain that the fall in turnout led to an overstatement of the level of "yes" support. The strength of the positive correlation between DROP and YES% makes this interpretation implausible.

V CONCLUSION

The following conclusions are supported by the research presented in this Note.

1. The proportion voting "yes" in the Referendum is positively associated with the level of support for Fianna Fáil, and negatively associated with support for the Labour Party and the Workers' Party.

2. While there is no clear association between turnout in the Referendum and the pattern of the vote, there is a strong tendency for a high "yes" vote to have been recorded in constituencies where the drop in turnout relative to the November 1982 General Election was large. This suggests that the anti-amendment groups were more successful in mobilising their supporters than were those who promoted the amendment.
3. If the turnout in each constituency had been the same as in the preceding General Election and on the conservative assumption that the additional votes in each constituency were distributed yes/no in the same ratio as those actually cast in the constituency, the national proportion voting "yes" would have risen from 66.9 to 67.7 per cent of the valid poll.
4. If an allowance is made for the possibility, suggested by the very significant positive correlation between YES% and DROP between constituencies, that those who abstained in each constituency were more likely to have held a "yes" opinion than those who voted, a higher turnout would be estimated to have resulted in an even greater increase in the national proportion voting "yes".

The most important general conclusion from the study is that the level of support for the amendment in the population seems to have been higher than that indicated in the Referendum results.

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Appendix A: *Data*

Constituency	*YES%*	*FF*	*LABWP*	*TURN83*	*TURN82*	*DROP*
Carlow-Kilkenny	68.6	44.6	17.4	51.5	76.1	24.6
Cavan-Monaghan	81.6	54.0	0.0	54.9	77.5	22.6
Clare	73.7	56.1	5.2	48.6	75.4	26.8
Cork East	71.8	39.4	17.8	56.7	78.3	21.6
Cork North Central	64.8	42.5	17.4	48.5	67.6	19.1
Cork North West	81.7	44.4	6.6	61.6	82.6	21.0
Cork South Central	55.6	39.7	16.1	55.4	74.2	18.8
Cork South West	77.0	41.7	0.0	57.5	81.0	23.5
Donegal North East	83.0	34.7	1.8	52.8	73.7	20.9
Donegal South West	82.3	54.8	6.1	46.9	71.7	24.8
Dublin Central	62.0	41.7	12.4	49.3	59.3	10.0
Dublin North	53.8	47.3	12.4	51.8	70.0	18.2
Dublin North Central	57.3	48.7	11.2	60.5	73.1	12.6
Dublin North East	49.3	42.8	18.9	58.2	72.2	14.0
Dublin North West	52.5	40.2	26.2	49.2	63.9	14.7
Dublin South	45.4	36.6	8.2	61.7	73.4	11.7
Dublin South Central	56.5	37.1	22.2	50.6	62.3	11.7
Dublin South East	49.3	31.1	19.4	53.1	55.0	1.9
Dublin South West	49.2	36.5	27.0	55.0	69.2	14.2
Dublin West	54.7	36.6	18.6	52.1	66.8	14.7
Dun Laoghaire	42.1	30.0	14.9	58.1	71.3	13.1
Galway East	80.4	51.5	2.8	49.5	78.1	28.6
Galway West	64.4	53.3	12.6	40.8	64.6	23.8
Kerry North	76.9	51.2	28.9	53.3	77.8	24.5
Kerry South	81.9	45.8	25.2	53.9	79.2	25.3
Kildare	59.6	47.8	15.2	48.0	71.8	23.8
Laois-Offaly	77.7	50.3	3.7	54.6	76.6	22.0
Limerick East	68.5	46.5	10.1	55.5	73.0	17.5
Limerick West	79.2	62.2	0.0	54.0	76.8	22.8
Longford-Westmeath	76.5	53.0	3.8	52.5	75.6	23.1
Louth	70.2	43.1	16.2	54.7	75.4	20.7
Mayo East	83.9	53.2	1.4	50.8	75.5	24.7
Mayo West	81.2	52.9	4.2	46.4	74.5	28.1
Meath	72.8	47.5	16.2	53.8	76.4	22.6
Roscommon	83.5	53.3	0.0	54.2	81.0	26.8
Sligo-Leitrim	77.1	53.0	1.2	54.1	79.0	24.9
Tipperary North	79.5	49.0	22.3	57.9	81.1	23.1
Tipperary South	76.1	46.4	20.0	53.0	76.2	23.2
Waterford	68.7	38.9	14.8	52.9	76.1	23.2
Wexford	72.7	46.2	11.6	58.6	72.6	14.0
Wicklow	57.1	35.7	26.5	53.3	72.6	19.3

Source: Trench (1982) and newspaper accounts of the Referendum results.