Issue Specific Information and Voting Behavior: A study of the Lisbon Treaty referendum

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Studies of information and voting behavior are plagued by the difficulty of measuring voters’ knowledge about specific ballot issues. This study aims to overcome this problem by making use of a unique survey of academics studying and teaching international politics. Scholars of international politics were asked how they voted in the 2008 Irish referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. The voting behaviour of academics is compared to the voting behaviour of the general population, who had, on average, less information about the treaty and its consequences. Issue-specific information appears to have influenced both voter turnout and voters’ exposure to political messages concerning the treaty.
Vast sums of money are spent by political parties and non-governmental organizations to educate voters about key political issues. According to conventional wisdom, this is money well spent. An electorate of well-informed voters is believed by many to be necessary for the functioning of democracy. Better informed citizens are thought to be more likely to vote (e.g. Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Feddersen and Pesendorfer 1999, 1996; Lassen 2005; Hobolt 2005). Information is also credited with allowing individuals to link attitudes with specific policies (Hobolt 2005). Consequently, educating citizens about political issues is generally believed to be a worthwhile use of financial resources.

However, a debate exists over the importance of issue-specific information. Some scholars argue that voters do not need encyclopedic knowledge about specific ballot measures because they can use information shortcuts to vote as though they were well informed (Lupia 1994). Others claim that issue-specific information plays an important, systematic role in citizens’ voting behavior (Hobolt 2005, Gabel 1998). Attempts to mediate between these two arguments using empirical tests are plagued by the difficulty of measuring voters’ knowledge about specific ballot issues. Many studies rely on measures of voters’ general knowledge about politics. For example, some studies use as a proxy for political knowledge whether or not an individual reads a daily newspaper (Hobolt 2005). Although this variable is useful in measuring voters’ exposure to print media, it is an imprecise measure of voters’ information about specific ballot issues. Survey respondents may report that they read a daily newspaper even if they only look at the daily weather report, for example. Such individuals may be no more informed about specific ballot issues than individuals that do not report reading a daily paper (Gerber, Karlan, Bergan 2009).
The difficulty of accurately measuring voters’ information about specific ballot issues is a challenge for which few satisfactory solutions have been proposed to date. As Converse notes, “the degree of heterogeneity [of political information] is widely underestimated and the implications of that dramatic heterogeneity seem even less well understood (2000: 332). The current study aims to overcome this challenge by making use of a unique survey of voters that have high levels of information about the sole ballot issue. Specifically, academics studying and/or teaching international politics in Ireland were asked how they voted in the June 2008 referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. In this referendum, there was a single issue to decide – whether to approve or reject the Lisbon Treaty. The treaty included several important changes to the European Union (EU) governance including a new post called High Representative, a redistribution of voting weights between the EU member states, new powers for the European Commission, European Parliament and European Court of Justice and the removal of national vetoes in a number of areas. The Lisbon Treaty was described by proponents as an attempt to streamline European Union (EU) institutions to make the enlarged bloc of 27 states function better. Opponents of the treaty argued it was part of a federalist agenda that threatened national sovereignty.

The Irish Republic was the only country to hold a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. Under EU rules, the treaty had to be ratified by all 27 member states before coming into force. However, most EU leaders argued that Lisbon merely amended earlier treaties and that there was therefore no need for a referendum. The Irish Republic was obliged to hold a referendum because of an Irish Supreme Court ruling in 1987, saying that any major amendment to an EU treaty entails an amendment to the Irish constitution.
The Lisbon Treaty was rejected by Irish voters in June 2008. However, it passed with overwhelming support in a second referendum in the Irish Republic on 2 October 2009. The Lisbon Treaty became law on 1 December 2009 – eight years after European leaders launched the treaty process in an attempt to make the EU "more democratic, more transparent and more efficient".

Academics studying and/or teaching international politics had more knowledge about the treaty and its consequences than the general public on average. This fact is evidenced by the active participation of many scholars in the public debate over the Lisbon Treaty. Many academics studying and teaching international politics spoke knowledgably about the Lisbon Treaty in the media prior to the 2008 referendum. Furthermore, the European Union is an important component of many international politics courses and degree programs in Ireland. In fact, seventy-nine percent of the academics surveyed said that the European Union constituted a substantial component of their courses on international politics and/or international relations. Given this, Irish-based scholars of international politics likely had greater knowledge about the Lisbon Treaty and its consequences for the EU, as compared to the general public.

In the current study, the voting behaviour of academics is compared to the voting behaviour of the general population. This comparison sheds new light on the role of issue-specific information in voting behaviour. Issue-specific information appears to have influenced both voter turnout and voters’ exposure to political messages about the treaty. The following section describes briefly the three surveys used in the current study.
Surveys

Academics studying and/or teaching international politics in Ireland were surveyed in late 2008. This survey was conducted as part of a larger survey project on teaching, research and international policy (TRIPS) in 10 countries. The World Higher Education Database (IAU/UNESCO) List of accredited schools was used to compile a list of the relevant academic institutions in Ireland. University, department, and staff web pages were used to identify academics at these institutions that taught or studied international politics and/or international relations, broadly defined. \(^1\) Phone calls and emails to relevant departments and staff members were also made to ensure that all relevant academic staff were included.

In total, forty-two individuals were identified that researched and/or taught international politics and/or international relations in Ireland. In September 2008, emails were sent to each of these individuals, in which they were asked to fill out an online survey. The emails contained a live link to the web survey. Confidentiality was promised to all respondents. If respondents failed to complete the survey, four additional follow-up emails were sent asking them to respond. In the end, 31 people responded giving a response rate of 74\%. \(^2\)

\(^1\)Any academic staff member in a politics, government or political science department with transnational research interests qualified. Staff members with research interests such as international political economy, international security, foreign policy, etc. were included.

\(^2\) This was the second highest response rate among the 10 survey countries (Jordan, Maliniak, Oakes, Peterson and Tierney 2009). One possible explanation for the high response rate in Ireland is the relatively small size of the academic community in the Republic.
By design, the TRIPS survey contained several questions identical to those in two surveys of the general population conducted around the same time. The first general survey, the Flash Eurobarometer survey, was conducted from June 13 to June 15, 2008 at the request of the European Commission Representation in Ireland. This survey randomly selected 2000 respondents aged 18 and older. The main objective of the Eurobarometer survey was to understand the reasons for citizens’ nonparticipation in the 2008 referendum.

The second general survey was commissioned by the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs to understand why people voted yes or no on the Lisbon Treaty. This survey was conducted by Millward Brown Irish Marketing Surveys between July 24 and July 31, 2008. The results are reported and summarized by Sinnott et al. (2009). The sample size was 2,101.

It is possible, of course, that respondents in the Eurobarometer and Millward Brown surveys included some professors of international politics and/or other individuals with high levels of issue-specific information. However, this possibility would bias downwards any reported information effect. In other words, the heterogeneity of respondents in Eurobarometer and Millward Brown surveys biases against finding an effect of issue-specific information on voting behavior. Any reported informational effects may therefore be viewed as a lower bound.

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3 While the general population surveys were designed explicitly to elicit responses about the 2008 Lisbon Treaty referendum, the survey of academic was designed to understand the profile and practices of scholars of international politics in Ireland and 9 other countries.
Comparing turnout

The game-theoretic model of voting by Feddersen and Pesendorfer (1996, 1999) demonstrates the importance of information for turnout. In this model, some voters are informed about a referendum issue while others are not. The model demonstrates that it can be optimal for uninformed voters to abstain from voting even though they may prefer one alternative to the other. The reason is that by abstaining they effectively defer the choice to the informed voter who, by definition, votes for the “correct” policy. The central prediction of this model is that more informed citizens are more likely to vote while less informed citizens are more likely to abstain. In the context of the Irish referendum, this theoretical prediction suggests that academics with an expertise in international politics and/or international relations will be more likely to vote on the Lisbon Treaty than members of the general public.

To test this expectation, the turnout rate in the 2008 referendum is compared to the turnout rate amongst scholars of international politics. The official turnout figure in the 2008 referendum was 53.1 percent of eligible voters (Eurobarometer). Among scholars of international politics the reported turnout rate was notably higher; fifty-seven percent of respondents in the academic survey said they voted in the 2008 referendum.¹ One potential interpretation of this difference is that scholars of international politics were more likely to vote in the referendum because they were better informed about the issues surrounding the Lisbon Treaty. Although this is

¹ The turnout rate amongst academics would be higher if it was possible to exclude those respondents that were not eligible to vote in the referendum due to citizenship. Although data on respondent’s country of origin are available in the TRIPS survey, this does not accurately measure respondent’s eligibility to vote as they may have been naturalized.
just one of many possible explanations, further responses from the general population surveys provide added support for this interpretation.

Over half of the people who did not vote in the referendum said this was due to a lack of understanding of the issues (Eurobarometer). More precisely, 52.3 percent of respondents the Eurobarometer survey reported that they did not vote in the referendum because they felt they did not understand the issues raised by the Lisbon Treaty. In the Millward Brown survey, 46 percent of those respondents who did not vote gave as the reason for their abstention some variation of lack of understanding or lack of information as their reason for not voting (Sinnott et al. 2009).

Many voters evidently felt unable to make an informed decision about the Lisbon Treaty. To make such a decision, voters had to first identify their own preferences about Ireland's role in Europe and European integration more generally. They then had to decide how the Lisbon Treaty related to their preferences regarding EU integration and expansion. Further complicating voters’ decision was the question of what would happen if the Treaty was rejected by Irish voters. Would a rejection of the Lisbon Treaty lead to the continuation of the status quo or to an entirely new situation? Making a competent and reasoned decision over these issues requires a substantial amount of information and scholars of international politics were far more likely to have the necessary facts.

Comparing votes

According to official results, 46.6 percent of voters voted in favour of the Lisbon Treaty. Support for the treaty was significantly higher among scholars of international politics. Fifty-eight percent of academics that voted in the referendum reported that they voted for the Lisbon Treaty. This large difference in support for the treaty may be explained in part by education. Individuals with higher levels of
education were more likely to support the Lisbon Treaty. As reported in the Eurobarometer survey, 52 percent of respondents with a college education voted in favour of the treaty while only 39 percent of respondents with less than 15 years of education voted yes. This observation is consistent with the idea that voters with higher levels of education will generally be more favourable to European integration because they are better able to exploit the economic opportunities created by market liberalization in the EU (Gabel 1998). Individuals who believe they will benefit economically from European integration are more likely to vote yes in EU referendum (Gabel 1998).

However, education explains only part of the difference in support for the Lisbon Treaty between academics and the general population. Scholars of international politics were more supportive of the Lisbon Treaty than highly educated voters working in other professions. Fifty-two percent of college-educated people voted yes while fifty-eight percent of international politics scholars voted in favour of the treaty. This difference suggests that education alone does not explain entirely the high level of support for Lisbon among scholars of international politics. Instead, issue-specific information appears to play an important role in voting behavior. Given their academic expertise, scholars of international politics had a better understanding of the Lisbon Treaty and its consequences for Ireland. This issue-specific information may help to explain why scholars of international politics were generally more supportive of the treaty than other highly educated voters.⁵

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⁵ An obvious alternative explanation is that scholars of international politics have higher levels of education than college educated voters. However, there is no theoretical reason to believe that there a PhD would have a substantive effect above and beyond a college degree. Ideally, the relevant comparison group would be other
Although scholars of international politics were, on average, more supportive of the Lisbon Treaty than the general public, academics reported being relatively more unsatisfied with the European Union. Seventeen percent of scholars reported being very unsatisfied with the way policies and decisions are made in the European Union while only 7% of the general public reported being very unsatisfied. One interpretation of this finding may be that scholars of international politics believed that the Lisbon Treaty would help to improve the way policies and decisions are made in the European Union. This might explain why scholars expressed more negative views towards the EU than the general public and yet tended to be more supportive of the Lisbon Treaty.

**Comparing exposure to political messages**

Previous research suggests that people with higher levels of cognitive engagement with an issue are more likely to be exposed to and comprehend political messages concerning the issue (Zaller 1992: 58). In the context of the Irish referendum, this suggests that scholars of international politics would be more likely to be exposed to political messages concerning the Lisbon Treaty than members of the general public. To examine this possibility, responses to a question asked in both the TRIPS survey and the Millward Brown survey are compared. The question asks respondents how useful they found the leaflets/brochures circulated by the parties and organizations regarding the Lisbon Treaty. Twenty percent of the general population responded that they did not notice or come across such leaflets/brochures. In contrast, only nine percent of academics responded that they did not notice or come across such materials. This supports the idea that people with a greater level of cognitive voters with PhD in different fields. Unfortunately, the Eurobarometer data are not fine-grained enough to make this comparison.
engagement with an issue are more likely to be exposed to political messages concerning the issue (Zaller 1992). In this case, academics specializing in international politics and international relations reported higher rates of exposure to political messages concerning the Lisbon Treaty.

However, the receipt of political messages does not necessarily imply that an individual will internalize the messages and act in accordance with them. Zaller (1992) argues that people tend to resist arguments that are inconsistent with their political predispositions. Although better informed people are exposed to more political communication, they will be more selective in deciding which communications to internalize. Evidence from the Irish surveys provides suggestive evidence of this proposition.

Seventy percent of international politics scholars reported that the leaflets/brochures circulated by the parties and organizations campaigning for a “No” vote on the Lisbon Treaty were of little or no value. In contrast, only 47 percent of the general population found these leaflets of little or no value. In fact, 25 percent of the general population reported that the “No” leaflets were very or somewhat valuable. Only 13 percent of international politics scholars found these leaflets to be of some value and no scholars found the leaflets to be very valuable. Academics may have drawn on their own expertise and knowledge to decide about the treaty rather than the leaflets. This would be consistent with the argument that well-informed voters rely less frequently on cues when making their decisions (Hobolt 2005). Alternatively, these results may reflect the fact that scholars of international politics tended to be more supportive of the Lisbon Treaty than the general public, as discussed above. Professors may therefore have discounted campaign materials from the “No” side. This would be consistent with Zaller’s argument that better informed people are more
selective in deciding which communications to internalize and only follow recommendations that are consistent with their predispositions. Academics may have resisted the “No” arguments because they were inconsistent with their predispositions and they possessed the contextual information necessary to perceive the relationship between the message and the predisposition.

**Conclusion**

Evidence from a novel survey of academics with expertise in the lone ballot proposition in the 2008 Lisbon Treaty referendum suggests that issue-specific information plays an important role in voting behavior. This study contributes to the debate over the importance of issue-specific information. Some scholars argue that issue-specific information is not necessary for voters to behave “as if” they were informed (Lupia 1994). However, the survey responses reported here suggest that citizens with high levels of issue-specific information are more likely to vote than citizens with less specific knowledge. Additionally, citizens with high levels of issue-specific information are more likely to be exposed to and comprehend political messages concerning the issue.

This study has important implications for scholars and policy makers alike. For policy makers, this study suggests that efforts to increase voter turnout should focus on specific ballot issues rather than general “get out the vote” messages. For scholars of voting behaviour, the current study points to the importance of refining measures of voters’ information. This study suggests a potential way to do so, namely by oversampling “experts”. Expert surveys, like the TRIPS survey of international politics scholars, provide a unique opportunity to examine the voting behaviour of individuals with high levels of information about specific ballot issues.
There are, however, several important caveats to keep in mind. First, the survey of scholars of international politics in Ireland has a relatively small number of respondents. This does not reflect a low response rate but rather the small size of the Irish academy. The results must therefore be treated with some caution. The comparisons must also be interpreted cautiously given the potential danger of ecological fallacy. Despite these caveats, this study suggests a new and potentially useful way to measure voters’ issue-specific information. By comparing expert surveys to surveys of the general population, studies like this one can potentially offer new insights into the importance of issue-specific information for voting behaviour.
References


Table 1: Did you vote in the referendum?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% Yes</th>
<th>% No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eurobarometer</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Millward Brown</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRIPS</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>43</td>
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**Table 2: How did you vote?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% In Favour</th>
<th>% Against</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eurobarometer</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eurobarometer (College educated only)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Millward Brown</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRIPS</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>42</td>
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Table 3: How satisfied are you with the way policies and decisions are made in the European Union?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TRIPS</th>
<th>Millward Brown</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very satisfied</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very unsatisfied</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4: How useful, did you find the leaflets/brochures circulated by the parties and organizations campaigning for a “NO” vote on the Lisbon Treaty?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>Millward Brown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Valuable</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat valuable</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of little or no value</td>
<td>69.6</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not notice or come across</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure/ Don’t know</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
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