



**Post Lisbon Treaty Referendum  
Research Findings  
September 2008**

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## Executive Summary

This report contains the results of research conducted by Millward Brown IMS on behalf of the Department of Foreign Affairs following the result of the Lisbon Treaty referendum on June 12<sup>th</sup> 2008.

The quantitative research consisted of a national opinion poll of 2,101 adults aged 18+. All respondents were on the electoral register and all were Irish citizens i.e. eligible to vote in the recent referendum. The poll was conducted between July 24<sup>th</sup> and July 31<sup>st</sup> 2008. Twelve focus groups were also conducted with a cross section of voter types and demographic groupings. The focus groups were held between the 28<sup>th</sup> of July and the 6<sup>th</sup> of August 2008. (See Appendix for full methodological details).

The following comprise the key findings of the research.

- Turnout for the Lisbon Treaty referendum was 53%, well in excess of the 35% who voted on the first Nice Treaty. The decisive issue was the increase in No voters as a proportion of the total electorate (from 18% at Nice 2 to 28% in June 2008), rather than Yes voters staying at home – which was the key difference between the first and second Nice referenda.
- The main reason for abstaining in this referendum was lack of understanding/knowledge (46%), which is far in excess of any other voluntary or circumstantial reason given for not voting.
- Sixty percent of Irish voters believe that Ireland's interests are best pursued by remaining fully involved in the EU. Fewer than 1 in 5 of the electorate (18%) believe Ireland's interests are best served by opting to be less involved.
- Despite the referendum outcome, Irish people remain amongst the most positive nations in terms of attitudes towards the EU – 73% consider EU membership to be a good thing (*Source: Eurobarometer National Report Ireland 69.2, Spring 2008*). In this study, positive attitudes to the EU stood at 70%, and even among No voters, 63% think the EU is a good thing, well ahead of the EU average of 52%.
- Of all voters, on both sides, some 23% of can be described as 'Soft' voters based on the level of conviction they had when casting their vote (they had some reservations/doubts or were not at all certain). Yes and No voters split evenly between 'Hard' (more convinced) and Soft voters. However, both quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests that the vote may actually have been considerably 'Softer' than this on both sides.
- The key demographic groups in terms of opposition to the Treaty were, 25-34 year olds (59%), the C2 and DE socio economic groups (63% and 65%) and women (56%). Amongst the main political parties, 63% of Fianna Fail supporters voted for the Treaty, 52% of Fine Gael supporters also voted in favour of it. Labour and Green party supporters both voted against (61% and 53% respectively) as did Sinn Fein supporters (88%).\*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The question asked respondents which party they felt close to, not which party they would vote for. It is therefore not comparable with a standard opinion poll measure of party support.

- Much of the Yes vote is underpinned by a strong general feeling of pro-Europeanism rather than Treaty specific motivations. A secondary reason for voting Yes is 'following advice' (22%). The main source of this advice was the government (12%).
- The main reason cited for voting No was 'lack of knowledge/information/ understanding' at 42%. There can be little doubt that this emerged as the primary reason for people voting No.
- Twenty-six percent of No voters mentioned Treaty specific elements that were of concern to them, 20% cited general issues around the referendum, whilst 16% mentioned issues specifically to do with loss of power/independence. All of these specific areas were more likely to have been mentioned by Hard No voters.
- Immigration did not emerge as a significant reason for voting No at a spontaneous level. However it is clear that No voters view immigration considerably less positively than Yes voters in terms of making Ireland a better place to live. This is backed up by the focus group evidence – particularly amongst the C2DE socio-economic group who were more likely to feel their jobs and pay may be under threat from immigration.
- 'No' voters were far more likely to believe that erosion of Irish neutrality, end of control over abortion and conscription to a European army were part of the Lisbon Treaty, revealing key cracks in the debate.
- Loss of Commissioner was also a common concern on the No side. Focus groups revealed that many people believed that the loss of a Commissioner would mean Ireland would have no voice in Europe at all.
- At a wider level, an EU knowledge deficit is clearly present which has undoubtedly contributed to the No vote. This was evidenced in both the opinion poll and the focus group research. Knowledge of EU institutions and how they work appears to be particularly low. The difficulty of advocating a referendum that is based on the premise of institutional reform in this environment is apparent.
- The national media and discussions with family, friends and colleagues were ranked as the most valuable sources of campaign information.
- Yes and No voters differ in terms of the perceived impact on Ireland of the No vote. Yes voters are much more likely than No voters to say our economic prospects have weakened and far fewer are likely to say they remain unchanged (47% versus 66%).
- Fewer voters (on either side) believe that our influence in the EU remains unchanged. Yes and No voters differ markedly on whether our influence has weakened (51% versus 20%). Just over 1 in 5 (22%) of No voters believe that Ireland's position has been strengthened – possibly due to an expectation that Ireland is in a position to renegotiate the treaty.
- When asked directly, respondents cited the issue of protection of workers' rights as being "very important" more often than any other issue (of a defined set of issues) relating to Ireland and the EU. Retaining control over public services in the future was similarly cited. Although workers' rights and public services did not feature as issues of concern in the

focus groups or to any great extent in the open-ended questions, they made some contribution to the different attitudinal profiles of Yes and No voters. However, the key areas of divergence between the Yes and No sides are retaining military neutrality, preventing excessive EU regulation, the rotating loss of the Commissioner and retaining full control over abortion laws. The focus groups reinforce these indications as to where the main battlegrounds between the Yes and No sides lay, with retaining full control over Corporate Tax also featuring as an issue.

- Knowledge of the EU in general and knowledge/understanding of the Treaty in particular are significant issues. Concerns over specific aspects of the Treaty loom large, particularly perceptions of an erosion of neutrality, the Commissioner issue (which many do not seem to properly understand), Corporate tax and to a lesser degree abortion. The focus group results supported these findings.
- Advocating institutional reform to voters who have such sketchy knowledge of how the EU operates is a very difficult task. Communication about the European Union needs to revert to first principles in order to help people understand how the institutions work, Ireland's role within them, and how Lisbon would affect this.

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