

# **Direct Democracy and Party Behaviour in the Republic of Ireland: A Campaign Finance Perspective**

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# **Direct Democracy and Party Behaviour in the Republic of Ireland: A Campaign Finance Perspective**

Studies on the Irish referendum experience have generally accepted that political parties play a fundamental role in the direct democratic process. While this is rarely problematized, parties often campaign in referendums in order to steer them towards outcomes that are strategically beneficial. Contemporary research on Irish referendums has delved into how parties shape their campaigns to achieve these goals, but a more preliminary question is still to be addressed: to what extent do parties participate in referendum campaigns? This paper attempts to do so by examining campaign expenditure, which offers a concrete quantitative indicator for party engagement vis-à-vis referendums. Departing from theory on party behaviour and referendum instrumentalization, the article takes into account Irish regulations on campaign finance before offering a descriptive and explorative comparison of the expenditure of Irish political parties in recent referendum campaigns. Several patterns within the data are then discussed in light of potential influential factors identified in previous scholarly work. Results suggest that a referendum's topic and its salience in the public sphere, as well as a party's financial resources and government status, could explain party behaviour in Irish referendum campaigns, and a set of congruent hypotheses for future research are formulated in the conclusion.

Keywords: Referendums; Political Parties; Political Finance

## Introduction

The Republic of Ireland takes up a unique space in the European direct democracy sphere due to its strong referendum tradition. As of March 2024, 40 constitutional referendums have been held, making Ireland the country with the third highest frequency of national referendums in Europe behind only Switzerland and Italy. This has spurred many scholars to study Irish direct democratic processes, paying great attention to the general referendum experience and their history (Barrett, 2017; Gallagher, 1996; Gilland, 1999; O'Mahoney, 1998, 2009), as well as voter behaviour (Garry, Marsh & Sinnott, 2005; Sinnott, 1995) and the procedures, campaigns, turnout, and outcomes of specific high profile votes (see for instance Field, 2018; MacCarthaigh & Martin, 2015; Quinlan, 2009, 2012). Most, if not all of these studies comfortably embrace the notion that political parties and politicians play a fundamental role in referendum processes (see also Gallagher, 2011; Sinnott, 2002), even though it goes against the ideal of direct democracy as an uninterrupted link between the will of the people and a policy decision (Gilland Lutz & Hug, 2010). Instead, party involvement in direct democratic processes in Ireland is treated as a *fait accompli*, with some evidence suggesting that it might even be necessary for the proper functioning of direct democracy. Sinnott (2002, p. 824), for instance, shows that disengagement by several parties in the run-up to the 2001 Nice Treaty referendum led to a lack of understanding by voters of what was at stake, in turn resulting to low turnout and a *no*-vote.

Nevertheless, political reality seems far removed from this idea of parties being driven by a noble goal to inform voters or encourage the proper workings of direct democracy. Instead, referendum instrumentalization literature argues that they mainly aim to shape the outcomes of these votes in ways that are strategically beneficial, for instance, by improving their position in the electoral arena (Closa, 2007; Hollander,

2019). Most notably, parties attempt to influence voter behaviour through campaigning, which tends to be more successful compared to elections since referendums take place in a more volatile information context (De Vreese & Semetko, 2004, p. 3; Smith, 2021, p. 11). Considering that referendums have increasingly become a defining but often polarizing feature of contemporary democratic practice (see for instance LeDuc, 2003, pp. 21-22; Qvortrup, 2018, pp. 264-266), it is clear that exploring and understanding party behaviour when it comes to referendum campaigns has become a vitally important frontier for political scientists.

Existing studies on the topic with respect to the Republic of Ireland have responded to this challenge by exploring how parties tend to shape the content of their referendum campaigns, often in combination with examinations of voters' reactions to these efforts (for instance Quinlan, 2009; Elkind, Farrell, Reidy and Suiter, 2017; Suiter & Reidy, 2015). However, such perspectives tend to forego the more fundamental question on the extent to which Irish parties decide to participate in referendum campaigns in the first place, which is arguably crucial if one wants to fully understand and explain party behaviour vis-à-vis referendums. What do we know about their engagement in these campaigns, what patterns might be distinguished and which factors might potentially impact their behaviour? This study aims to address these rudimentary questions from a political finance perspective. As Paulissen and Maddens (2023) argue, the concrete expenditure (or lack thereof) of parties in referendum campaigns offers a concrete proximal indicator for their levels of engagement. While existing political finance studies on Ireland have traditionally been occupied with party spending in election campaigns (Benoit & Marsh, 2003; 2008; Sudulich & Wall, 2011), this study offers a first look at expenditure patterns when it comes to direct democracy processes in Ireland. As such, the article aspires to answer the following research question: *To*

*what extent do Irish political parties engage financially in referendum campaigns, and which factors might offer an explanation for their engagement?*

The next section discusses the theoretical background for the paper, built on party behaviour and referendum instrumentalization literature. After examining the legal framework surrounding referendum campaign finance in Ireland, I clarify the data collection that eventually leads to a descriptive and explorative mapping of the expenditure of Irish political parties in several recent referendum campaigns. Data is presented dating back to 1995, but is only complete for the five votes organised between 2015 and 2019. As such, in lieu of a sufficiently large sample that would allow for quantitative analysis, this study opts for an inductive approach by descriptively comparing discernible patterns in the expenditure data to potentially explanatory factors previously identified in scholarly work. Based on this exercise, a set of hypotheses congruent with the observed patterns is then formulated in the discussion and conclusion, which can be tested in future research.

### **Theoretical Background: Party Behaviour and Referendum Instrumentalization**

Party involvement in Irish direct democratic processes is not a contemporary phenomenon, as shown by early referendum experience in Ireland (see Gallagher, 1996; O'Neill, 2000). The first post-independence constitution of 1922 allowed for a comparatively exceptional inclusion of popular control in the Irish political constellation through Articles 47, 48 and 50 (O'Neill, 2000, p. 306). Article 47 was particularly unique, in that it allowed for a corrective referendum on a bill passing through the Oireachtas to be triggered by a sizeable minority. Yet, the possibility for referendums was heavily restricted by the then governing Cumann na nGaedheal party (the precursor of Fine Gael) in 1928, who argued that it would encroach on the pureness

and simplicity of representative democracy. Scholars have argued, however, that other motives were in play. For one, the party was allegedly “uncomfortable with the prospect of loss and control represented by the initiative and referendum” (Ward, 1994, in Gallagher, 1996, p. 87). Additionally, it might have feared the populist and well-organised nature of opposition party Fianna Fáil, which was therefore “better placed to conduct a successful Referendum and or Initiative Campaign” (O’Neill, 2000, p. 309).

Cumann na nGaedheal thus restricted the possibility for corrective, minority-triggered referendums out of fear that Fianna Fáil, or another party, could use them to threaten its position of power. This fits within the theorem of *political agency* (Closa, 2007; Hollander, 2019), grounded in rational choice institutionalism and the idea that parties interact with referendums with particular (strategic) motives in mind. It argues that the use of referendums generally has the goal to strengthen the position of the political actors that initiate them, often being the executive or legislative majority (see for instance Gherghina, 2019; Hollander, 2019; Nemčok & Spáč, 2019). One might question, however, whether this theorem is still applicable to contemporary Ireland, since referendums have been exclusively *mandatory*<sup>1</sup> ever since the promulgation of the new constitution in 1937. These votes are “constitutionally prescribed” and “held to revise [Ireland’s] constitution or to decide on other issues of major political significance, such as transfer of national sovereignty” (Hollander, 2019, p. 48). Hence, one could argue they are not directly triggered by anyone except the constitution, and

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<sup>1</sup> The Irish constitution also allows for the so-called ordinary referendum. This can only take place if the Irish president receives a joint petition from both houses of the Oireachtas, in which it would declare that a certain proposed Bill is of such importance for the nation that the decision to have it become law should be left to the Irish people. To date, such a referendum has never been held.

direct control over the referendum process by any actor is, in theory, limited; instead, such referendums offer a check to the ruling majority and thus warrant popular sovereignty (Bogdanor, 1981; Setälä, 1999). However, this assessment would forego the critical and significant influence the government (technically parliament) still has over the process of Irish constitutional referendums; at the very least, the ruling majority still has “medium-level control” (Setälä, 2006) over their initiation, since it more often than not takes the initiative to revise the constitution (Gallagher, 1996). The effect is amplified due to both chambers of parliament deciding by simple majority on whether to accept a constitutional amendment. As such, in practice, the ruling majority, and the political parties in general, hold control over referendum processes in Ireland.

When theorizing about what could then motivate a party to instrumentalize a referendum, the political agency theorem applies insights from literature on party behaviour. The traditional view of political parties is that they are driven by three main objectives: maximizing electoral support (i.e. *vote-seeking*), controlling political office (i.e. *office-seeking*), and influencing public policy (i.e. *policy-seeking*) (Budge and Laver, 1986; Downs, 1957; Leiersen, 1968; Riker, 1962; Strom, 1990). However, Strom's (1990) behavioural theory of competitive political parties argues that these objectives are not mutually exclusive. Instead, parties operate within a behavioural space where they balance their office, vote, and policy-seeking motives, and in which their exact position is defined by their organizational and institutional environments. Based on this framework, Hollander (2019) distinguishes between act-contingent and outcome-contingent motives for parties specific for initiating referendums. The former refers to the organization of the referendum as the primary objective, serving specific office or vote-seeking objectives within the broader political competition. In contrast, the latter prioritizes the outcome of the referendum, which can potentially increase the

power of political actors relative to their competitors (Hollander, 2019, p. 70), with policy-seeking being the main objective here.

Existing research shows that this paradigm of party behaviour concerning referendum instrumentalization can be applied to the Irish context, providing further evidence that strategic motives drive party behaviour despite these votes being technically mandatory. Reidy, Suiter, Elkins and Farrel (2021, p. 333), for instance, argue that coalition politics played “an important supporting role” in the call for the 2015 marriage equality and 2018 abortion referendums: in the case of the former, Labour’s push for marriage equality during the 2011 general election campaign led to the issue being included in the government coalition agreement between the party and Fine Gael. Where Labour thus had outcome-contingent, policy-seeking motives to initiate a referendum, Fine Gael seemed to have been driven by the act-contingent motive of office-seeking, supporting Labour’s call in order to be assured being part of the government. Equally, in the leadup to the abortion referendum, the support of independent parliamentarian Katherine Zappone for the new minority government in 2016 was contingent on the promise that government would deal with the abortion provision in the constitution. As such, the parties involved again seemed to be driven by office-seeking motives. Finally, the increased level of support for left-leaning parties in parliament after 2011 arguably gave their representatives the impetus to pursue policies through direct democratic votes. At the same time, vote-seeking motives could also have played a role, with representatives driven by fear of potentially losing their newly acquired position in parliament if they did not fulfil the expectations of the electorate.

In contrast with how Irish political parties might instrumentalize referendums, contemporary research is yet to adequately examine the extent to which said parties engage in a direct democratic campaign once it has been initiated. This study attempts



to uncover this phenomenon through the use of a political finance lens, quantifying party engagement in a referendum campaign in terms of how much a party spends on it. Referendum campaign finance is still quite an underexplored field, as scholarly attention has mainly been devoted to (regulations on) election campaigns (for instance Horncastle, 2022; Johnston, Pattie, Cutts, Fieldhouse & Fisher, 2011). Similar work on direct democratic votes usually only focus on the regulatory regimes governing referendum campaign finance (for instance Lutz & Hug, 2010; Qvortrup, 2021; Reidy & Suiter, 2015), and less so on how campaigning actors behave within these contexts (Paulissen & Maddens, 2023). The Irish case, then, offers an interesting subject for further exploration of this phenomenon due to its comparatively high frequency of referendum use.

### **The Irish Regulatory Regime on Referendum Campaign Finance**

Political parties are always bound by the regulatory context within which they operate, and comparative studies on political finance regulations have shown that these can strongly affect the extent to which parties behave financially (see for instance Smulders & Maddens, 2019). Hence, being cognizant of the Irish regulatory regime when it comes to referendum campaign finance is vital when trying to understand parties' expenditure habits. Until the mid-1990s, the general regulatory context when it came to money in Irish politics was overall relatively lax; while parties were not allowed to use public funding for their campaigning activities, they could, however, "rely on other sources of funding without running the risk of being examined very closely" (Gilland Lutz, 2010, p. 117). From 1995 onwards, however, Ireland has made large strides towards a more transparent and well-regulated regime, introducing restrictions on political donations as well as obliging parties to report on their election expenses (Oireachtas Library & Research Service, 2022, p. 8). Many of these regulations also

apply to referendum campaigns; while there exists specific legislation on referendums in the form of the Referendum Acts 1992 to 2022, the Electoral Acts 1992 to 2022 form the actual basis of the referendum campaign finance regulations, along with a pair of court cases. Firstly, in the so-called McKenna Judgement of 1995, the Supreme Court decided that the government was not allowed to spend public money by funding the referendum campaigns of political parties, or any other actor, if the vote was considered one-sided. As Gilland Lutz (2010, p. 124) notes, while McKenna did not rule out public funding for referendums but instead made it contingent on both sides in a campaign being funded equally, Ireland resolutely chose for a ‘no public funding’ policy. As such, no public funding for referendum campaigns exist to date, even though there have been multiple efforts to achieve otherwise (Gilland Lutz, 2010, p. 125). Additionally, a second court case, Coughlan v. Broadcasting Complaints Commission and RTE (2000), has forced the public service broadcaster to divide airtime equally among campaigning sides.

Ireland thus has a referendum campaign finance regime that offers no direct public funding and a limited form of indirect public funding. At the same time, it does not limit the spending of actors participating in said campaigns (which can be both political parties as well as any third party actor). As such, campaigning actors rely heavily on *private income* in the form of donations to fund their activities, since they are equally not allowed to use any other form of state funding for their campaigns. The regime governing these contributions is quite lenient: the general stipulations set out in the Electoral Act 1997 and its subsequent amendments state that foreign interests are the only type of entity that are banned from donating to campaigning parties. Additionally, anonymous donations over €100 (in value) cannot be accepted, nor can cash donations

over €200 or of the same value in cryptocurrency, and there exists an annual limit of €2500 (in value) that a donor can contribute to a political party.

The area in which Ireland has made the most significant strides towards a stricter political finance regime has been *reporting, oversight and transparency*. A core role in this regard was played by the aforementioned SIPO Commission, one that has been taken over by the newly created Electoral Commission. Under the Electoral Act 1997 (as amended), political parties are required to file annual reports of donations and expenses with the commission, which are made available to the public. Donations need to be reported when they are over €1500. Third party actors, when they accept donations of more than €100, have to register with the Commission and are then obliged to file reports on the donations they receive, while they also have to adhere to the aforementioned donation limits. From a donor's perspective, corporate entities cannot donate more than €200 unless they register with the Standards Commission. Finally, with the introduction of the Electoral Reform Act 2022, Ireland has introduced requirements specifically for online political advertising, including displaying in an ad whether micro-targeting was applied in the placement, display or promotion of the online political ad, and the total amount paid for the ad.

### **Mapping Referendum Campaign Financing by Irish Political Parties**

Given the regulatory context within which Irish parties operate when it comes to referendum campaigns, how does this then translate into concrete party expenditure behaviour? To examine this, and thereby answer the first part of the research question of this paper, data was collected on parties who have had a representation in the Dáil Éireann during any of the referendum campaigns for which data could be retrieved. Data on party expenditure is freely available on the website of the Standards in Public Office Commission (SIPO) dating back to 2015, the first year that parties were required

to make public their expenses in reported accounts<sup>2</sup>. Campaigns before 2015, however, proved more difficult; fieldwork was conducted from February to May 2023, and in total, six<sup>3</sup> parties were contacted multiple times both through email and by telephone, being Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin, Fine Gael, the Green Party, the Labour Party and the Socialist Party. Out of those parties, only Fine Gael gave access to additional data with estimations on what the party approximately spent in the 2002 Nice Treaty referendum, as well as the two Lisbon Treaty referendums in 2008 and 2009. Additionally, there was some data publicly available on two parties, being the Labour Party and Sinn Féin. In the case of the former, detailed financial papers covering the period 1995-2009 were available in the archives they donated to the National Library (Labour Party, 2014). For the latter, accounts dating back to 2007 are publicly available on their website (Sinn Féin, 2007). In total, this resulted in party expenditure data for 20 referendums, dating back to the 1995 referendum on the removal of the constitutional prohibition on divorce. At the time of writing, the 2024 votes on the Care and Family Bills had only just been held, and as such, no data on party spending in these campaigns is available yet.

With regards to the expenditure amounts reported, one has to take into account the important caveat that this is most likely merely an indication/approximation of how much a party actually spent in the respective referendum campaigns. The phenomenon

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<sup>2</sup> Specified in the Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act 2012, which amends the Electoral Act of 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Some of the parties currently active in the Irish political arena have only been established after 2014, making it obsolete to inform with them for any pre-2015 referendums (the latest of which was organized in 2013). These are the Anti-Austerity Alliance (since 2017 known as Solidarity), People Before Profit, Renua Ireland, the Social Democrats and Independents 4 Change.

of undisclosed campaign-related spending, often termed *dark money*, is a universal issue for democracy (see for instance Geoghegan, 2020; Torres-Spelliscy, 2017).

Campaigning actors frequently either do not report spending at all, or pass money through other organisations in order to circumvent expenditure limits or disclosure legislation. The fact that this issue also occurs when it comes to parties campaigning in direct democratic votes is illustrated by the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. Here, the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) was able to circumvent campaign spending limits by donating £825,000 to Yes Scotland Limited, the lead campaigning organization in favour of Scottish independence (Paulissen & Maddens, 2023, p. 36). As first-hand data on party expenditure (for instance through bank account statements) is not available, the amounts shown in this study might not offer a completely accurate picture of spending by Irish political parties. However, they still remain an important approximation of the extent to which they decided to engage in referendum campaigns, as one can expect the reported amounts to be similar to the actual amounts in terms to how they relate to each other.

Table 1 gives an overview of the absolute (i.e. non-indexed) expenditure numbers of Irish political parties for the referendum campaigns on which data could be collected. Note that the numbers for Labour campaign expenditure for the Lisbon referendums are estimations; while the exact spending numbers were unavailable, the party budgeted the reported amounts for these campaigns. They therefore illustrate a clear desire to be active in said campaigns, and to a high extent as well, and thus the budgeted numbers have been included here. An initial observation that can be made is that the expenditure levels are relatively low when compared to the spending in the general election campaigns for 2016 and 2020, as shown in Table 2. For instance, Fine Gael spent ten times as much in the general election of 2016 when compared to the

2015 referendum campaign on same sex marriage. Thus, even though parties are not limited in their spending when it comes to referendum campaigns, it has not led to extreme or disproportionate expenditure patterns. Additionally, when looking into post-2015 referendums, parties have generally not spent money in more than one referendum campaign, except for Fine Gael, Sinn Féin and AAA/Solidarity-People Before Profit. Fine Gael is clearly the biggest spender since 2015, followed by Labour and Fianna Fáil with over 150,000 EUR less. Sinn Féin is the best of the rest, spending about 10,000 EUR more than any party remaining. Finally, it is important to note that when two referendums occur in the same year (i.e. 2015 and 2018), parties elect to spend in one of the two campaigns, but not in both.

[\[Table 1\]](#)

[\[Table 2\]](#)

### **Comparing Expenditure Patterns: Identifying Potential Explanatory Factors**

Which patterns can be identified in the data, and how can these potentially be explained? As the pre-2015 referendums suffer from missing values, the paper focuses only on the five most recent votes on which data is available: the 2015 marriage equality and presidential age referendums, the 2018 abortion and blasphemy referendums and the 2019 vote on divorce. The resulting sample is quite small (53 party decisions to engage to a certain extent with a campaign), making it difficult to make any sweeping, generalizable remarks on what drives party expenditure in referendum campaigns. Nevertheless, as the phenomenon is still relatively underexplored, it remains valuable to descriptively explore these cases and compare any discernible patterns to findings from previous scholarly work. This allows for insights and tentative hypotheses to be induced, which can then be tested in future studies with larger samples that allow for correlation-based analysis.

The following sections explore how party participation, in terms of expenditure, relates to a set of potentially explanatory factors that are situated on the referendum and the party level. In the case of the former, these are the referendum's topic, its salience in the public sphere, and whether or not the vote overlaps with elections. In the case of the latter, these are a party's financial resources and government status. A final important note to make is that when one compares expenditure over time, there are intricate complexities because of inflation; in order to control for this, monetary amounts are indexed with the use of the Consumer Price Index (CPI), which "measures the overall change in the prices of goods and services that people typically buy over time" (Central Statistics Office, n.d.). Using December 2006 as a base, all monetary amounts are indexed with the following formula:

$$\text{Indexed Amount} = \text{Original Amount} \times \frac{100 (\text{CPI December 2006})}{\text{CPI Month of Related Referendum}}$$

### ***Referendum Topic and Public Salience***

Two closely-related potential drivers of party participation in referendum campaigns that are identified in previous scholarly work are the topic up for vote, as well as its salience in the public sphere. Irish referendums can be broadly distinguished as dealing with either (1) moral and social policy issues, (2) international treaties affecting sovereignty, or (3) aspects of political and legal design (Sinnott, 2002). One could intuitively expect those referendums in policy category (1) to generally be more salient in nature. The Irish state as envisioned in the 1937 constitution was built largely on catholic principles (Reidy et al., 2021, p. 325), and votes on those topics thus arguably lead to a more intense debate since they draw from a deep conservative-liberal cleavage that has permeated Irish politics since the 1980s (*Ibid.*). However, the literature has largely pointed towards an opposite relation, where Irish parties are argued to generally

prefer to remain on the sidelines during campaigns on moral and social referendums due to how divisive they tend to be in the public sphere (see for instance Reidy, 2020). In a similar vein, Sinnott (2002, p. 825) argues that the referendum process in Ireland operates as a safeguard for its party system, effectively insulating it “against the impact of contentious issues”. In other words, since more important questions, such as those along the aforementioned conservative-liberal cleavage, often end up being addressed through referendums, they are not explicitly party-politicised. By this reasoning, party behaviour in direct democratic contexts is conceptualised as mainly driven by office and/or vote-seeking objectives. Parties are thought to be conscious of potential electoral costs that come with participating in a referendum campaign and experience these as effectively outweighing the benefits of campaigning.

However, the argument that moral and social issues, and publicly salient topics in general, deter parties from participating in referendum campaigns disregards the potential benefits they might equally create. For instance, the media attention that comes with these votes might drive parties to become (more) active in a campaign in order to profile themselves. At the same time, parties might also take into account the costs of *non*-participation. For one, they may look ineffectual if they fail to engage with an issue that people clearly care about. Secondly, if parties are thought of as the ‘owner’ of the issue up for vote, i.e. voters mainly identify that issue with said party, they are essentially expected to be active on those issues (Walgrave, Tresch & Lefevere, 2015, p. 780). Low or non-participation might then result in alienation of these voters, which allows other parties to essentially ‘trespass’ or ‘converge’ on these issues and potentially even take over their ownership (*Ibid.*). Finally, it could also be the case that a highly salient referendum in the public sphere overlaps with policy goals of one or



more parties, as has been the case with European integration in Ireland. Here, Sinnott (2002) argues that parties cannot as easily afford absence in the campaign:

Evidence on voting behaviour in EU referendums also shows that parties can pay a high price for disengagement from the referendum process. In the case of the first referendum on the Nice Treaty (June 2001), the price was an extremely high level of abstention that was due largely to voter confusion and was the main factor leading to the NO vote. In short, there are limits to the extent to which the organs of representative democracy can, or can afford to, distance themselves from the process of direct democracy. (Sinnott, 2002, p. 825)

In such a context, parties are conceptualised as driven by policy-seeking objectives instead. A referendum's issue might be so salient that parties forego the long-term electoral benefits or costs associated with intervening in a referendum and instead focus on achieving important constitutional change and policy.

Table 3 relates party expenditure in referendum campaigns to the respective topic up for vote, as well as the salience of that topic in the public sphere, in order to see if recent referendums show any evidence in favour of the two strands of thought laid out above. Based on Sinnott (2002)'s aforementioned typology, the overview essentially distinguishes between votes on moral and social issues, and those that are on other topics. The public salience of a referendum is operationalized through the use of Google Trends data for Ireland, which provides information on how popular specific search terms on Google have been over certain amounts of time. It does this by offering an interest score from 0-100 "which reflects how many searches have been done for the particular term relative to the total number of searches done on Google" (Google News Initiative, n.d.) on a specific day or in a specific month, depending on the period of time that is being studied. Google Trends allows for comparing searches for multiple terms at

once, in which case an interest score of 100 is given to the term with the highest relative number of searches in a single day/month. All other interest scores, whether for that specific term or for others, are the result of dividing the searches for that term on a specific day or month by the highest relative number (which corresponds with interest score 100). For this study, Google Trends data is used for the period 2015-2019 for five search terms coinciding with the names of the studied referendums: *abortion*, *blasphemy*, *marriage*, *divorce* and *presidential age*. For each referendum, the variable takes the highest interest score for its respective search term in the month leading up to their referendum.

[\[Table 3\]](#)

Since 2015, parties have only participated in the campaigns of referendums that are on moral and social issues. Within those votes, the rate of participation is much higher in the marriage equality (6/12 parties) and abortion referendums (6/10 parties) than in the divorce one (2/10 parties), which corresponds with their respective levels of public salience. The results thus suggest that the decision to participate might depend on the topic of the referendum and its salience within the public sphere. In the case of the latter, this relation is not necessarily perfectly linear, as the blasphemy referendum had a higher level of public salience than the vote on divorce did. In contrast, if one looks at how salience in the public sphere relates to the expenditure amounts, there is no overall pattern that can be discerned. For instance, Sinn Féin spends much more in the two referendums with higher interest scores, but in the case of Fine Gael, spending in the abortion and divorce referendums are nearly equal.

### ***Financial Firepower, Electoral Overlap and Part of Government***

An important party characteristic that has been found to potentially influence the extent of their engagement in a referendum campaign is their capacity to overcome the

opportunity costs of participation, i.e. the financial resources that need to be invested in order to cultivate a presence in a campaign. In this context, Paulissen and Maddens (2023, p. 30) found evidence suggesting that in the United Kingdom, the amount of financial resources available to a party is influential for its behaviour in a referendum campaign. Here, parties with higher incomes always spent more if they participated. One could intuitively expect a similar dynamic to be at play in the Irish referendum context: campaigning requires sizeable monetary resources, and parties only have a finite amount of finances to spend. As such, these costs will naturally be easier to overcome for parties whose pool of financial resources is larger. At the same time, from a resource maximalization perspective, this expected effect will arguably go hand in hand with another potential factor, i.e. whether or not there is electoral overlap. When a referendum coincides with European, general, local or by-elections, parties will need to make a decision on how to best divide their resources. If parties, as some argue (cf. above), are indeed mainly driven by vote or office-seeking objectives, it is likely that electoral overlap will have a limiting effect on the resources they spend in referendum campaigns, as the benefits of spending in an election campaign will be perceived as higher. Such a potential effect was previously argued by Suiter and Reidy (2015, p. 190) in the context of the two 2011 referendums, where parties “were focused on the presidential election and directed very few resources towards the referendum”.

Additionally, it was discussed earlier that parties might have different reasons to initiate referendums, with some motives being ‘outcome-contingent’, i.e. initiating a referendum in order to reach a specific policy goal (Hollander, 2019, p. 70). It follows that parties who played a role in the initiation process can be expected to be more inclined to participate in the corresponding referendum campaign. Since the power of initiative when it comes to Irish referendums is effectively in the hands of the ruling

majority (cf. above), it seems likely that there is a link between a party's involvement in a referendum campaign and whether or not they were in government at the time of the vote's initiation. This conceptualizes parties as vote-seekers, but office-seeking incentives could also be at play in this scenario. This is because one can expect a party in government to want to sustain a good relationship with a coalition partner who is strongly in favour of the amendment, instead of striving for policy change themselves.

Table 4 explores how party participation varies based on the financial resources they have available by comparing it to their (indexed) revenue in the year of the referendum, as reported in the yearly statements. It also shows the relation to electoral overlap, i.e. whether or not there was a local, general, presidential, European or by-election in the year of the referendum and, if so, whether this took place during the referendum campaigns (i.e. the month before the polling date). Finally, a party being in government at the time of the referendum sees the party's (non-)expenditure being highlighted in bold. The results indicate that since 2015, parties with incomes lower than 250,000 (indexed) EUR generally do not participate in referendum campaigns. At the same time, there are multiple instances where parties have very high levels of income but decide not to participate, especially in the case of Fianna Fáil. This suggests that the amount of resources available is above all a limiting factor, but not necessarily a pushing one. Interesting in this respect is the 2015 marriage equality referendum, which seems to indicate a mediating effect of the previously discussed level of public salience: smaller parties such as the Anti-Austerity Alliance and People Before Profit, as well as the aforementioned and much larger Fianna Fáil party, all decide to participate in this campaign, which was shown to be by far the most salient out of the five votes. This suggests that as an issue becomes more important, parties are more likely to participate

even if their resources are low. However, no discernible patterns were observed concerning electoral overlap or a party being in government or not.

[\[Table 4\]](#)

Looking then at the amounts that parties spend when they participate, a relation to the financial resources a party has available comes to the fore once again. In this case, it is particularly meaningful that the expenditure relative to income stays relatively similar and particularly low. Renua Ireland in the 2018 abortion referendum is an outlier, spending nearly 5% of their income, while Labour, the Anti-Austerity Alliance and People Before Profit in the 2015 marriage equality referendum are the only other parties with an expenditure share over 2%. Similarly, there also appears to be a relation with the government status of a party, with parties in government routinely being the highest spenders (although Fianna Fáil comes awfully close in 2015). In contrast, no relation with electoral overlap was discerned.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study set out to respond to the challenge of exploring and understanding party behaviour in Irish direct democratic processes by descriptively examining the extent to which parties participate in referendum campaigns and what factors might offer potential explanatory value for this phenomenon. It does so from a political finance perspective, treating the expenditure of a party in a referendum campaign as a proximal indicator for its engagement. As such, the paper firstly examined the concrete regulatory framework within which Irish parties operate, showing that the state refuses to offer public funding to parties for campaigning in a referendum, and does not allow them to use other sources of public money for this purpose either. At the same time, Ireland does not limit the expenditure of parties in these campaigns. One can argue that this

offers great advantage to the older and richer parties with larger support bases, as it makes parties fully dependent on private income for financing their campaign activity. Additionally, as donors are limited annually to contributing €2500 (in value), those parties with large support bases should be better off than smaller parties who have fewer benefactors, even if these prove to be very wealthy. However, a first examination of the spending habits of Irish parties in referendum campaigns dating back to 1995 showed that this regulatory environment did not translate into extreme disparity in terms of large vs. small parties, as spending was generally well below what would usually be spent in election campaigns. This was even the case in high-profile and more polarizing referendums, such as the 2015 marriage equality or 2018 abortion votes.

The second part of this paper examined how discernible patterns in the data on party expenditure in Irish referendum campaigns compared to the findings of previous scholarly work. Several potentially explanatory factors that these studies highlighted were descriptively examined next to the spending data, and based on this exercise, it is possible to formulate a set of tentative hypotheses that could be tested by future research on larger samples. For one, the results seem to indicate that parties participate more frequently in referendum campaigns on moral and social issues than if they are on other topics. Similarly, the findings also suggest a positive relationship with the topic's level of salience in the public sphere. As such, previous claims that parties largely refrain from participating in referendums that are on moral and social issues or have a high public salience do not find any support in party behaviour tendencies in recent votes. Rather, these expenditure patterns seem to suggest that parties are in fact drawn to these types of referendums. This might have to do with the potential electoral benefits of cultivating a presence in a highly visible campaign, but parties could equally be weary of the costs of non-participation or aiming at achieving an important policy goal.

The mechanism behind this relationship might work in the other direction as well: as parties increasingly participate in a referendum campaign, it could heighten the salience of the vote in the public sphere as it is brought under the attention of the electorate. Nevertheless, the empirical evidence did not allow for hypothesizing on how these factors contribute to the *extent* to which a party engages in a campaign when it decides to participate. As such, two initial hypotheses can be induced based on the financial engagement of political parties in recent Irish referendums:

*H1: A party is more likely to participate in a referendum campaign in Ireland if the issue up for vote is on moral and social issues.*

*H2: There exists a positive relationship between a party's likelihood to participate in a referendum campaign in Ireland, and the salience of the issue up for vote in the public sphere.*

Next, the results suggest that Irish parties seem more likely to participate and spend more in referendum campaigns when their revenues are higher. Findings indicate that when parties engage in a campaign, their expenditures are very similar relative to their revenues, i.e. somewhere between 1 and 2 percent. Yet, there are some additional remarks to be made. For one, the resources available to a party appear to mainly be a limiting factor, and less of a pushing factor, when it comes to getting involved in a referendum campaign. There are plenty of cases where parties have very high levels of resources available to them, but still decide not to participate in a referendum. At the same time, parties tend not to participate when their income is below 250,000 (indexed) euros. In other words, resources are a *conditio sine qua non* for party involvement in a referendum campaign, but far from a sufficient one. Instead, it seems that the decision to invest depends for a large part on a mediating effect from the public salience of a

referendum. This is because the results show that smaller parties might overcome the limiting effect of their lack of resources when the referendum in question is on a topic that is highly salient in the public sphere, as was the case for many such party in the 2015 referendum on same sex marriage. Based on these considerations, I formulate the following hypotheses:

*H3a: There exists a positive but non-linear relationship between a party's likelihood to participation in a referendum campaign in Ireland, and the financial resources it has available. The more resources a party has, the weaker that this effect becomes.*

*H3b: There exists a positive, linear relationship between the extent to which a party engages in a referendum campaign in Ireland when it decides to participate, and the financial resources it has available.*

*H3c: The positive effect of the financial resources available to a party on its extent of participation in a referendum campaign in Ireland is mediated by the level of public salience of the issue up for vote.*

Finally, the results did not indicate any noticeable patterns when it comes to relations to electoral overlap, nor did it provide any evidence suggesting that being part of the government spurred parties to participate in a campaign. However, when government parties did participate in post-2015 referendums in Ireland, they were always the highest spenders. As such, it allows for the formulation of a final hypothesis:

*H4: Government parties are more likely to participate to a higher extent in a referendum campaign in Ireland than parties from the opposition.*



The last part of H4 gives rise to an aspect that future research would do well to also take into account when testing the hypothesis, namely the mechanisms that are in play on the other side of the aisle. This is because opposition parties might also have strong incentives to participate in referendums campaigns, particularly if they oppose the proposed change. Taking into account whether or not the latter is the case for these parties can help fine-tune the argumentation for confirming or rejecting H4. For instance, if parties that support the change do not invest their resources into campaigning for a government proposal, there is a stronger reason to believe that the mechanism at play is the one described in the hypothesis above.

In terms of limitations, this study dealt with a very small sample that did not allow for hypothesis-testing. Additionally, the reported amounts have a high likelihood of not being factual due to the aforementioned phenomenon of *dark money*, although they nevertheless carry value because of their relation to each other. Most striking, of course, is that it is not possible to immediately generalize the findings discussed above beyond the confines of the Republic of Ireland, or even to referendums that took place before 2015. Nevertheless, the in-depth descriptive exploration has allowed for the formulation of a set of inductive hypotheses, built on recent empirical data, which can be tested by future, more comparatively oriented research on a larger sample. Most importantly, however, is that this study has opened the door towards understanding party behaviour in direct democratic processes in Ireland, and that its results can be leveraged by future researchers to further explain the concrete campaign activity of these parties vis-à-vis referendums.

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## Tables

Table 1: Expenditure by Irish political parties in referendum campaigns since 1995.

	Labour	Fine Gael	Sinn Féin	Anti-Austerity Alliance <sup>a</sup>	Fianna Fáil	Green	People Before Profit <sup>a</sup>	Renua Ireland	Social Democrats	Independents 4 Change	Socialist Party <sup>a</sup>	Workers & Unempl. Action
1995 Divorce	17.085,56											
1996 Bail	2.040											
1997 Cabinet Confidentiality	-											
1998 Treaty of Amsterdam / Good Friday Agreement	6.844											
1999 Local Government Elections	5.478											
2001 Nice Treaty/Death Penalty/Rome Statute of ICC	-											
2002 Abortion (strengthen)	72.960											
2002 Nice Treaty	28.173	77.633										
2004 Irish Nationality	200											
2008 Lisbon Treaty	100.000 <sup>b</sup>	123.318	58.202									
2009 Lisbon Treaty	230.000 <sup>b</sup>	102.469	19.823									
2011 Salaries of Irish Judges/Oireachtas Inquiries			-									
2012 European Fiscal Compact			64.801									
2012 Children's rights			-									
2013 Seanad Abolition & New Court of Appeal			-									
2015 Marriage Equality	88.588	121.621	25.084	2.871	87.612	-	786	-	-	-	-	-
2015 Presidential Age	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2018 Abortion (repeal)	-	72.246	26.928		-	7.415	13.938	13.666	13.540	-		-
2018 Blasphemy	-	-	-		-	-	-	-	-	-		-
2019 Divorce	-	68.912	63		-	-	-		-	-		-

Notes: When it is known that a party did not participate in a campaign, it is indicated with “-“. If there is no data on expenditure, or the party did not exist at the time, the cell in question remains empty. Amounts before 2002 are in Pounds.

<sup>a</sup>Anti-Austerity Alliance (AAA) formed an electoral alliance with People Before Profit (PBP) in 2015, after the marriage equality and presidential age referendums; the party de-registered, and PBP changed its name to AAA-PBP until AAA took on its new name in 2017, Solidarity (and AAA-PBP became PBP-S). Hence, the column named PBP shows the expenditures for AAA-PBP/PBP-S from 2018 onwards. The Socialist Party deregistered as a party in 2017.

<sup>b</sup>Estimation, as this is what was budgeted for these respective campaigns. True expenditure data was not available.

Table 2. Party expenditure in 2016 and 2020 election campaigns in year of General Election. Source: SIPO Commission Political Party Accounts.

	2016	2020
AAA-PBP/PBP-S	12,588	10,479
Fianna Fáil	635,616	1,055,391
Fine Gael	1,468,849	952,467
Green Pary	3,510	86,435
Independents 4 Change	-	-
Labour	102,104	182,029
Renua Ireland	51,375	
Sinn Féin	313,812	232,485
Social Democrats	46,291	66,974
Socialist Party	-	
Workers & Unemployed Action	-	-

Notes: When it is known that a party did not participate in a campaign, it is indicated with “-“. If there is no data on expenditure, or the party did not exist at the time, the cell in question remains empty.

Table 3: Indexed referendum campaign expenditure by Irish political parties, related to the issue up for vote and its public salience (in brackets).

	Labour	Fine Gael	Sinn Féin	AAA	Fianna Fáil	Green	PBP	Renua Ireland	Social Democrats	Independents 4 Change	Socialist Party	Workers & Unempl. Action
2015 Marriage Equality (M&S, 100)	<b>83,259</b>	<b>114,305</b>	23,575	2,698	82,342	-	739	-	-	-	-	-
2015 Presidential Age (Other, 3)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2018 Abortion (M&S, 95)	-	<b>67,520</b>	25,166		-	6,930	13,026	12,772	12,654	-		-
2018 Blasphemy (Other, 38)	-	-	-		-	-	-	-	-	-		-
2019 Divorce (M&S, 16)	-	<b>63,748</b>	58		-	-	-	-	-	-		-

Notes: When it is known that a party did not participate in a campaign, it is indicated with “-“. If there is no data on expenditure, or the party did not exist at the time, the cell in question remains empty. Information in brackets in first column indicate topic up for vote (M&S = Moral and Social Issue) and public salience respectively.

Table 4. Indexed expenditure of Irish political parties, the % share of the expenditure of their indexed income in referendums after 2015, their government status, and the type of electoral overlap in those referendums (in brackets).

	2015 Marriage Equality (Campaign)	2015 Presidential Age (Campaign)	2018 Abortion (Year)	2018 Blasphemy (Campaign)	2019 Divorce (Campaign)
<b>Labour</b>	<b>83,259</b>	-	-	-	-
<i>Income</i>	3,631,128	3,631,128	1,619,913	1,619,913	1,630,570
<i>% Income</i>	2.29	-	-	-	-
<b>Fine Gael</b>	<b>114,305</b>	-	<b>67,520</b>	-	<b>63,748</b>
<i>Income</i>	6,771,195	6,771,195	5,934,482	5,934,482	5,834,607
<i>% Income.</i>	1.69	-	1.14	-	1.09
<b>Sinn Féin</b>	23,575	-	25,166	-	58
<i>Income</i>	2,447,490	2,447,490	3,495,710	3,495,710	3,662,213
<i>% Income.</i>	0.96	-	0.72	-	0.00
<b>AAA</b>	2,698	-			
<i>Income</i>	76,318	76,318			
<i>% Income.</i>	3.54	-			
<b>Fianna Fáil</b>	82,342	-	-	-	-
<i>Income</i>	4,800,485	4,800,485	6,504,651	6,504,651	7,290,142
<i>% Income.</i>	1.72	-	-	-	-
<b>Green</b>	-	-	6,930	-	-
<i>Income</i>	66,388	66,388	545,288	545,288	624,586
<i>% Income.</i>	-	-	1.27	-	-
<b>PBP</b>	739	-	13,026	-	-
<i>Income</i>	35,998	35,998	900,250	900,250	921,049
<i>% Income.</i>	2.05	-	1.45	-	-
<b>Renua Ireland</b>	-	-	12,772	-	-
<i>Income</i>	88,308	88,308	254,374	254,374	241,885
<i>% Income.</i>	-	-	5.02	-	-
<b>Social Democrats</b>	-	-	12,654	-	-
<i>Income</i>	15,782	15,782	607,417	607,417	600,516
<i>% Income.</i>	-	-	2.08	-	-
<b>Independents 4 Change</b>	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Income</i>	0	0	240,628	240,628	180,919
<i>% Income.</i>	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Socialist Party</b>	-	-			
<i>Income</i>	456,086	456,086			
<i>% Income.</i>	-	-			
<b>Workers &amp; Unemploy. Action</b>	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Income</i>	6,238	6,238	NA	NA	5,931
<i>% Income.</i>	-	-	-	-	-

Notes: When it is known that a party did not participate in a campaign, it is indicated with “-“. If there is no data on expenditure, or the party did not exist at the time, the cell in question remains empty. Information in brackets in first row indicate electoral overlap (Year = election happened in same year, Campaign = Election happened in the month preceding or following the referendum). Expenditure amounts in bold indicates that the respective party was in government at the time of initiation of the vote.