



OCGG Government Section

Advice Program  
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Ratification

# Lisbon vs Dublin - How to Win the Referendum

Recommendation to  
the European Council  
Ireland

by André Nilsen

Ireland will try a second time to ratify the Lisbon Treaty in a referendum expected in the autumn of 2009, having failed in the first attempt on 12 June 2008. The government hopes the concessions it secured at the European Council on 11-12 December 2008 – i.e. one commissioner per state and legally binding guarantees on abortion, taxation, and neutrality – will suffice to sway people in favour.

## A B L E A K P I C T U R E

The government's current strategy rests on a reassuring narrative: the failed referendum sparked an in-depth analysis, seeing parliamentary deliberations followed by public hearings, with the resulting recommendations effectively shaping the joint decision with the EU partners on the new way forward. This simple story will not by itself however

### MAIN POINTS

With an unpopular government, a disorganized pro-Lisbon movement, and a strong anti-Lisbon campaign, winning the new Irish referendum requires mobilizing domestic and European support, refocusing and reframing the issue, emphasizing the stakes, and improving public understanding.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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win the political battleground. What is needed is not only an elegant formula but broad support.

The anti-Lisbon campaign has mobilized again, and it is already showing strength. The pro-Lisbon side, meanwhile, has not really done anything yet. The idea of an NGO-driven movement was mooted by the government a few weeks ago but there have been no advances so far. There is therefore still no popular momentum able to carry the yes vote.

The government itself is sidelined due to intense pressures on several fronts. Economic recession, fiscal austerity, and policy U-turns – including the attempted withdrawal of free health care for senior citizens – have zapped its popularity. The sentiment on the street is dismal, “whatever the government says, we won’t support it.” EU Commissioner Wallström bleakly observed that at the moment the Irish would not vote yes even for three pints of Guinness. The government is therefore unlikely to carry the yes vote.

In fact, many people feel the only way to get rid of the government is to reject the Lisbon Treaty. A no vote would most likely trigger a general election. The people could of course instead vent their anger at the government in the regular lo-

cal and European elections. But a general election would unlikely be called simply in response to setbacks in secondary elections.

## VICTORY IS POSSIBLE

The challenge is steep but success is achievable. Here is what needs to be done to turn the tide, win the referendum, and save the Lisbon Treaty:

1. Boost the pro-Lisbon movement. All-out NGO support and wide-ranging civil society engagement will be critical to carry the yes vote.
2. Refocus the issue. Most critically, the Lisbon Treaty referendum must not be allowed to be reduced to a government popularity poll. We all remember the outcome in France in 2005. More generally, it should be separated from the regular local, national, and European elections. Opposition, media, academia, and business all have a responsibility to make the case.
3. Involve the EU partners. Before the first referendum, their strategy was to not interfere. They deemed it a domestic issue, which also was the view of the government. German Chancellor Merkel

nonetheless showed her friendly interest, and this was seen as very positive. French President Sarkozy moreover lent his unmistakable energy, and although this in the beginning was badly received, it was later enthusiastically welcomed. Despite this, the EU partners generally refrained from playing any active part, opting for only limited visits and little public diplomacy.

Awaiting the second referendum, they are again reluctant to intervene. Those with friendly reputations could however compensate for the weak standing of the government, supplying vital credibility to the Lisbon Treaty. In fact, this may apply to not only their governments but also their oppositions. EU-sceptic Czech President Klaus is widely disliked after his visit, for example, so all EU-supportive Czech groups have earned sympathy and could in turn provide support. In various ways, the EU partners should now reach out their hands, and if required take out their wallets, explaining the bright future for Ireland in Europe under the Lisbon Treaty.

4. Reframe the issue. It is not just a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, it is indeed a vote on the EU. The unification of Europe is a political journey. The 26 other member states have agreed their destina-

tion. The single dissenting member state will of course not be forced to continue the trip but will equally of course not be allowed to cancel the flight. Ireland will eventually either have to ratify the Lisbon Treaty or step out of the EU.

5. Emphasize the stakes. Ireland might be able to keep some economic benefits such as some form of limited membership of the Euro and the Single Market after leaving the EU by instead making special arrangements and joining the EFTA. But it would lose a seat, voice, and vote at the tables taking decisions, making policies, and shaping regulations. It would also lose its so far enormous financial assistance. That could be a serious challenge not only in agriculture but, especially given the current economic climate, also in industry and services. Indeed, Ireland has just recently received support for the dioxine scandal and requested compensation for job losses as Dell moved to Poland. It would in addition lose its unique position as a portal for US companies to the EU market. With Ireland in a politically void, economically marginal, and legally uncertain position, the UK would be the better, safer choice. The political and economic losses could therefore be disastrous.

6. Improve public understanding. Everyone should help convey a clear overview of what not only the Lisbon Treaty but also the EU really is all about. The anti-Lisbon campaign's false arguments about the Lisbon Treaty must be concisely rebutted with factual information. But one must not just get lost in technical points about the Lisbon Treaty, one must also place it in a larger perspective. The people's knowledge gaps about the EU must be carefully met with straightforward clarifications. One can then clearly demonstrate the overall benefits of the EU. All communications channels, moreover, should be used. Whereas the anti-Lisbon campaign has a sleek website and snappy leaflets like "10 points against Lisbon", the pro-Lisbon side so far has little effective material.

7. Try good old-fashioned horsetrading. The government should make concessions to dissatisfied groups to rally support for the Lisbon Treaty. Unions, farmers, and churches should all get a bite of the pie in return for if not active support then at least the absence of obstruction.

8. Reestablish the parliamentary subcommittee on the future of Ireland in the EU. This was a very successful body, so it should if possible play an even greater role.

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