

Moral framing and referendum politics: Navigating the empathy battlefield

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Abstract

Frames enable individuals to locate and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large. In this article, we study the framing of moral issues with the help of Moral Foundations Theory and by relying on rich qualitative data. Existing studies are primarily based on laboratory experiments, without a focus on how such processes are shaped in a real-life setting. Through a detailed study of the 2018 Irish referendum on abortion, we ask: How is moral framing used in a referendum setting? This case is important not only because referendum campaigns may have higher chances of influencing public opinion than election campaigns but also because of the highly contentious nature of abortion and the recent societal changes in the Irish context. Based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with campaigners and politicians, as well as focus groups with voters, we find that the campaigners from opposing sides used moral foundations (the Care foundation) deliberately in their campaign to appeal to undecided voters, focusing on the health of women or the plight of unborn babies. Our findings also show that not every moral foundation is relevant for the campaigners due to the national and historical context.

KEYWORDS

abortion, campaign, framing theory, Ireland, Moral Foundations Theory, moral framing, referendum

INTRODUCTION

Political actors do not present issues objectively, as they emphasize and de-emphasize certain aspects of the issue under discussion. These “frames” enable individuals to locate and label

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occurrences within their life space and the world at large (Goffman, 1974). In the last decades, this phenomenon has received significant scholarly attention through discussion of the kinds of frames that are more influential and the effect they have on public opinion and societal change.

In this article, we are interested in the framing of moral issues. Politics of morality include questions surrounding capital punishment, abortion, homosexual rights, and stem cell research (e.g., Engeli et al., 2012). What makes moral issues theoretically unique in the study of framing is that they deal with fundamental human concerns that most people in a society can “readily grasp.” On the one hand, they are very familiar and allow the public to fall back onto their usual views on the topic. On the other hand, because of their ethical complexity, emotional intensity, and links to scientific and economic fields, they open the door to new ideas and arguments, which could potentially offer the basis for public opinion shifts.

Existing studies on framing of moral issues are primarily based on laboratory experiments, without a focus on how such processes are shaped in a real-life setting. Referendums present a unique opportunity—a natural experiment—to investigate the framing process. Voters often have existing opinions on these moral issues, but political actors can also present a fresh perspective on the question, which has happened many times in referendums on moral matters. Moreover, in referendums, campaigners may need to go beyond their usual support base and appeal to the undecided, middle-ground voters to reach the 50% winning threshold. This core strategy renders moral framing more necessary to appeal to uncertain voters. Despite its inherent theoretical importance, there is limited research on framing of moral issues in referendums. How are moral frames used strategically to shape a voter's decision? How might moral frames activate specific moral foundations? In what ways can moral framing build and strengthen collective identity?

We study these key questions by using the real-world case study of the 2018 Irish abortion referendum and by relying on rich qualitative data. We have data from post-referendum *interviews with campaigners* who actively participated in the campaign, pre-referendum *interviews with elected politicians* who were in government in the period leading up to the referendum, and, finally, pre-referendum *focus groups* with members of the electorate who were planning to vote in the referendum (16 in-depth interviews and 18 focus groups in total). Framing of moral issues involves questions of birth, death, and sex—intimate physical experiences of human beings (Studlar et al., 2013). Abortion is one of the most contentious and fiercely debated moral issues, as it relates to all three of those dimensions. Moreover, Ireland provides a particularly interesting societal context due to the historical authority of the Catholic Church and the relatively recent societal secular changes (e.g., the 1995 divorce referendum, the 2015 same-sex marriage referendum). The 2018 abortion referendum proposed to repeal the Eighth Amendment and broaden abortion access to women within Ireland. Although the final result of the referendum was 66.4% in favor of repealing the Eighth Amendment, a third of the population was still undecided several months before the vote (Leahy, 2017). In our article, we show that this middle ground was struggling to decide how to vote and did not connect with the black-and-white moral stance of either the pro-choice or pro-life extremes within the abortion debate. Unlike the previous debates around divorce and same-sex marriage, there were higher levels of shame and secrecy surrounding abortion that also made it more difficult to access and empathize with personal stories. Our data demonstrate that the overall societal discourse was aggressive, negative, and divisive in terms of collective identity, which made undecided voters uncomfortable with engaging in the debate. We argue that the campaigns found a new moral ground in this challenging context, one based on care and compassion, and shifted the abortion debate to a new discursive space. This case therefore provides a unique opportunity to study the shifts in moral framing.

Our article is structured as follows. We first discuss framing theory and Moral Foundations Theory (MFT). The way an issue is presented can produce dramatic differences in public

opinion (Chong & Druckman, 2007). MFT, in turn, suggests that framing of moral issues tends to build on six psychological foundations—Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, Purity, and Liberty (Haidt, 2012). These approaches allow us to question why specific moral frames might resonate with different audiences and contexts. We then explore referendum politics and how and when campaign framing can make an influence on public opinion. The next part of the article presents our research methodology and the case study of the 2018 Irish referendum on abortion. This section places our prior discussion of moral framing into a real-world setting and shows that there is a complex relationship between moral foundations, social identity, and societal change. Our interest lies not in measuring *how much* the campaign had an impact on individuals but instead in exploring *how* campaigners approach moral frames strategically in referendums (interview data) and *how* politicians and citizens interpret and process these moral frames at an individual and collective level (interviews and focus group data). We triangulate interview data from campaigners after the campaign, with voter focus groups and politician interviews before and during the campaign.

Four master themes emerged from our data analysis: the existence of the moral dilemma for undecided voters, the use of the Care moral foundation from both Yes and No campaigners to help appeal to the middle ground, the decision to make the suffering of women and unborn babies visible to voters to build empathy, and the specific decision of both campaigns to shape a collective positive societal identity around either supporting women (“Together for Yes”) or saving the lives of unborn babies (“Save the 8th”). Together, these themes demonstrate how campaigners from both sides used moral framing around Care to appeal to the undecided voters of Ireland and help them navigate the empathy battlefield around abortion.

Importantly, campaigners from both sides brought up moral foundations themselves and explained how they made strategic use of the Care moral foundation, in contrast with the more traditional pro-choice Fairness/Liberty moral foundations and the traditional pro-life Purity/Authority moral foundations. However, the Yes and No campaigns channeled the moral framing of Care in different directions, where the Yes campaign focused on the distress and health of women and the No campaign focused on the plight of unborn babies. Our findings, based on a real-world case instead of a laboratory setting, also show that not every moral foundation is relevant for the campaigners due to the national and historical context. Campaigners mentioned that the political context, rise of feminism, and decline in the popularity of the Church limited the use and appeal of certain moral foundations. The strategic use of moral framing, moral foundations, and social identity can thus influence referendum politics on moral issues. These findings also have relevance for how moral framing can build more inclusive participative political discourse and leverage direct democracy in future referendums.

FRAMING MORAL ISSUES

Framing is “a process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue” (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 104). Importantly, not every frame is equally effective in swaying public opinion. Research on political psychology shows that people draw their opinions from the set of available and accessible beliefs stored in memory and then select which frame is more applicable to the situation (Chong & Druckman, 2007). The literature on social movements shows similar findings on frame strength/resonance (Benford & Snow, 2000). Frames coming from credible sources and those that appeal to cultural values also enjoy higher strength (e.g., Druckman, 2001). Public opinion research adds a variety of other factors that impact their effectiveness. Emotionally interesting, negative, and concrete news stories are more easily remembered than others (e.g., Brader & Marcus, 2013; Druckman & McDermott, 2008; Jerit & Barabas, 2006).

While we know a lot about frame effectiveness, we know much less about the role of moral framing. The seminal work of Lakoff (2006) has separated frames into “deep” and “surface” frames. Whereas deep frames connect to values systems and are more foundational and abstract, surface frames are closer to the simple meanings of words. Research shows that the moral tones of an argument can also render an argument strong and resonant, as moral judgments are automatic and unconscious (Clifford & Jerit, 2013). Scholars have been working on how moral thinking could become part of the framing process, but there is still an important gap in this field.

In the last decade, there has been increased scholarly interest in the moral foundations of individuals’ social and political attitudes (e.g., Haidt, 2012; Haidt & Joseph, 2007). MFT suggests that moral intuitions are based on six psychological foundations. *Care* relates to human sensitivity to prevent suffering, and to empathize and care for others; *Fairness* is based on justice, inequality, reciprocity, and unbiased treatment; *Loyalty* is built around group-based orientation; *Authority* relates to traditions, hierarchical social orders, and respecting those with power; and *Purity* centers around an appreciation for an elevated way of life, and a concern for cultural sacredness (Day et al., 2014, p. 1560). A sixth foundation, *Liberty*, relates to economic or social self-determination. We include this last foundation in our work because of its central role in debates on abortion, although we acknowledge that there is less empirical work on it (e.g., Harper & Hogue, 2019; Iyer et al., 2012). Studies in the United States show that liberals base their views predominantly on the Care and Fairness pillars when making moral judgments. Conservatives, on the other hand, tend to endorse all foundations (e.g., Geese et al., 2009; Haidt, 2012), but they value Loyalty, Authority, and Purity more than liberals do (e.g., war, tax policy, same-sex marriage; Feinberg & Willer, 2015, p. 1679).

On the key question of whether moral attitudes can be changed through political rhetoric, there are studies providing evidence that public opinion on moral issues such as same-sex marriage, the death penalty, or gun policy can change as a result of framing (e.g., Baunach, 2012; Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2011). To take an example, pro-environment frames often emphasize the harm (Care) pollution causes to the environment. But Feinberg and Willer (2013) show that if this particular frame is based instead on the conservative value of Purity, with an emphasis on keeping forests, drinking water, and skies pure, conservatives are much more likely to agree with it.

Although there is growing evidence that framing based on moral foundations contributes to public opinion shifts, there has not been research on “how different framing strategies map to specific moral foundations and how this connection might apply differentially across segments of the public” (Nisbet et al., 2012, p. 32). Below, we seek to understand how moral campaigns are run on the ground in a referendum setting.

FRAMING MORAL ISSUES IN REFERENDUM DEBATES

The way that an issue is framed can produce dramatic differences in public opinion, and this happens more often in referendums than in regular elections. The main difference is that referendums focus on a specific question, which can range from a proposal with which the public is highly familiar to one that is complex and technical (LeDuc, 2002). There are three main types of referendums. When the issue is complex and voters have little knowledge, as in the case of the 2011 Parliamentary (Oireachtas) Inquiries referendum in Ireland, public opinion can shift significantly over the course of the campaign (e.g., Atikcan, 2015b; Suiter & Reidy, 2015). When the referendum is on a well-known issue, such as the 1995 sovereignty referendum in Quebec, the referendum campaign can resemble an election campaign and public opinion can remain highly stable (e.g., Nadeau et al., 1999). Referendums on moral issues could fall in the middle on this spectrum, as the

topic would be familiar but the campaign could potentially introduce a new aspect to the public's way of thinking, as it did in the 1986 Irish referendum on divorce (e.g., Darcy & Laver, 1990).

This is why campaigners often have a key role in defining the meaning of the referendum proposal. Moreover, their core strategy is to reach the winning majority of 50%, as opposed to mobilizing a more limited and familiar voter base (e.g., Atikcan et al., 2020; Usherwood & Wright, 2017). Although there is a vibrant academic literature on campaign framing and its impact on voting behavior in referendums, the importance of moral framing and the relatively recent findings on the success of appealing to opponents' values have not yet been studied in detail. So far, only the Brexit referendum debate has been mapped onto the foundations of MFT (Harper & Hogue, 2019; Smith, 2019, 2021). In this project, we explore additional aspects—how campaigners use moral framing strategically, how they match the referendum issue with the relevant moral foundations, and how politicians and citizens interpret the moral framing of the issue at hand.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To investigate this phenomenon, we study the framing of the abortion issue in the 2018 Irish referendum, which took place on May 25, 2018. Our goal is not to measure how much the campaign had an impact on the referendum outcome but to uncover the degree to which moral framing shaped the understanding of the referendum proposal in a real-world setting. We offer an exploratory qualitative interpretative study and use three types of data to analyze the moral terrain of the campaign.

First, we have in-depth *interview data from campaigners* and researchers who actively participated in the campaign. These eight post-referendum interviews were conducted by the first author via Skype/Teams or phone mainly in 2020. They were semi-structured and based on opportunity and snowball sampling, which led to uneven but high-profile interviews on both sides. The goal of these interviews was to understand the degree to which a moral framing was used consciously and strategically by the campaigners both in their preparations and during the campaign itself.

Second, we have in-depth *interview data from elected politicians* who were in government in the period leading up to the 2018 Irish abortion referendum. These eight pre-referendum interviews were conducted in person by the second author during July and August 2017. They were semi-structured and selected to equally represent different political viewpoints. The aim of these interviews was to ask key politicians from across the spectrum their views on the moral framing of the debate, in real time, as the long campaign kicked off.

Third, we have detailed *data from 18 focus groups*, each group composed of eight members of the electorate who were planning to vote in the Irish abortion referendum in 2018. These pre-referendum focus groups were conducted in person by the second author on four separate occasions: December 2016, July 2017, February 2018, and May 2018. They were semi-structured and based on targeted recruitment based on their “likely voting”—Yes, Undecided, and No—with a higher focus on Undecided voter groups as the campaign progressed. The goal of these focus groups was to explore the moral framing of the debate by the public and to observe how it evolved during this key time period, before the vote. The selection criteria and locations of the focus groups were based on likely voting pattern in the referendum based on the RTE/Behavior and Attitudes exit polling data of the electorate from February 2016.¹ The detailed list of interviewees, criteria for sampling, and interview questionnaires, as well as the detailed list of focus groups, recruitment screeners, and discussion guides, are presented in the online appendix.

¹ <https://www.rte.ie/documents/news/rte-exit-poll-report.pdf>.

Once the three data sets were complete, we took three steps to analyze them. First, to operationalize “moral framing,” we used the Moral Foundations dictionary to identify the keywords that relate to morality in general and to each foundation specifically (Graham et al., 2013).² Second, we analyzed each data set and looked for the presence/absence of *explicit* and *implicit* links to moral framing. We conceptualized an explicit link as a direct reference to moral foundations terminology and an implicit link as a suggestion of the relevant moral foundations. In the campaigner interview data, we assessed the degree to which they structured their campaign arguments *explicitly* using a moral framing. In the politician interviews and citizen focus groups, we studied the sense making of politicians and citizens in real time as it *implicitly* reflected moral framing. In a third and final step, we triangulated our findings across the three data sets and constructed a working framework or gestalt to help illustrate relationships between the perspectives of the samples.

Our data show explicit and implicit links to moral framing and foundations in all three subgroups, and they emerge under *four master themes*: moral dilemma, Care foundation, making victims visible, and societal identity. In the following section, we present data from each of our three data sets under these four headings to highlight their links to one another. The narrative and the quotes are selected as representative of their subgroups.

RESEARCH FINDINGS: 2018 IRISH ABORTION REFERENDUM DEBATE

Ireland has had a long debate and a constitutional ban on abortion, with referendums in 1983, 1992, 2002, and 2018. In the early 1980s, the issue evolved around the centrality of women's rights for the development of Irish identity, and the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution effectively banned abortion by giving equal right to life to the mother and the unborn (Mullally, 2005). In 1992, the issue became highly politicized when the High Court granted an injunction to prevent a 14-year-old girl, who had become pregnant as a result of rape, from traveling to access an abortion (Field, 2018). The Supreme Court decided to overturn this injunction, arguing that an abortion would be necessary to safeguard the “equal right to life of the mother,” as X was at risk of death by suicide. In 2002, a highly divided public voted against (50.4% to 49.6%) a further proposal that would have tightened the constitutional ban on abortion by removing the threat of a mother's suicide as valid grounds for an abortion. Revealing a significant shift of opinion, on May 25, 2018, the Irish public voted in favor (66.4%) of repealing the Eighth Amendment.³ Before the 2018 referendum, abortion was only permitted if the woman's life was at risk but not in cases of rape, incest, or fetal abnormality. After the vote, Ireland legalized abortion care on a woman's own indication in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.⁴

In the 2018 referendum, on the Yes side, the umbrella campaign was called Together for Yes, encompassing “everyone from establishment figures to anarcho-feminists” (Field, 2018, p. 619). On the No side, there were two organizations. Love Both was the campaign run by the Pro-Life Campaign. Save the 8th was an umbrella organization drawing its main support from Youth Defence and the Life Institute. The Iona Institute, with links to the Catholic Church, acted as a mediator and coordinator between the two campaigns (Field, 2018).

Studies looking into voting behavior in Irish moral referendums point to the shifting percentages of conservative and liberal views in the population (Sinnott, 2002). Both the 2015 same-sex

² <https://moralfoundations.org/wp-content/uploads/files/downloads/moral%20foundations%20dictionary.dic>.

³ The referendum had a single question (repealing the Eighth Amendment), and there were no other referendums or national elections that year.

⁴ <https://www.ippf.org/abortion-and-referendum-ireland>.

marriage and 2018 abortion referendums delivered pro-liberalization results despite the conservative reputation of Irish voters, and both featured innovative citizens' assemblies using deliberative mini-publics of randomly selected citizens (Elkink et al., 2020; Farrell et al., 2019). The 2018 referendum result is explained primarily by voters' issue positions on abortion, their church attendance, and age, which implies that a relatively more liberal generation is replacing a relatively more conservative generation of voters (Elkink et al., 2020).

In addition to this long-term shift, campaign-related factors have also been shown to shape public opinion in referendums on moral issues. In line with the core campaign strategy of reaching the 50% threshold, referendum voters are often split into three categories: those favoring a conservative perspective, those favoring a liberal perspective, and those who form the middle ground. Sinnott (2002) stresses the importance of the centrists/pragmatists as the crucial swing group because they are particularly open to persuasion. It is this group that we are particularly interested in. Although long-term factors were key in explaining the result, we trace the extent to which moral framing and appealing to the values of the opposing side shaped the perspective of the campaigners, politicians, and citizens.

Four master themes emerge in our qualitative analysis, connecting the perspectives of campaigners, politicians, and citizens: the moral dilemma for undecided voters, the use of the Care moral foundation to appeal to the middle ground, the decision to make the suffering of women and unborn babies visible to voters to build empathy, and the decision to shape a collective positive societal identity. We present our data below under these four themes, providing evidence from the three data sets.

Theme 1: The moral dilemma for undecided voters

One of the most important themes across interview and focus group data was the fact that this referendum was based on a "moral dilemma." All respondents recognized the moral rift the society experienced, and the blurriness of right and wrong. The campaigner interview data show that they were aware of this challenge and tried to build their message on moral grounds to reach the undecided middle. This insight is supported by politician interviews and focus group data where they also voice the moral conflict they sought to navigate.

Campaigner interview data

Interviewees on both sides explained that opinion polling in the last years leading up to the referendum had been showing a majority in favor of making abortion legal. However, they all underlined that it was not a predetermined result either. There was a sizable group of the electorate who were morally conflicted and who had important worries about the scope of the liberalization. Both sides explained that they put voters into segments of conditional and unconditional Yes/No voters.

Importantly, both sides were aware of moral foundations, and there was an explicit link to MFT. They brought this up in the interviews on their own and explained how they actively included moral foundations in their campaign research and preparations. Those who conducted research and worked on framing explicitly mentioned the use of MFT, and the campaigners referred to these moral foundations as the "moral urgency" or "moral value" of their campaign. On the Yes side, campaign strategist of Together for Yes Adam May explained that their main goal was to reach the "concerned Center."⁵ Deirdre Duffy, campaign manager of

⁵ Interview, June 2, 2020.

Together for Yes, added that they targeted the one-third in the middle who were undecided.⁶ May explained their realization that Care was the most important dimension for undecided voters and that it appealed to both Yes and No voters.⁷ Through research, they noticed that the middle group in this referendum was thoughtful and caring toward the issue of abortion and wanted gradual change. This middle group wanted the importance of developing life to be acknowledged, which they thought was lost in the traditional pro-choice communications. Ivana Bacik, Labour Party senator and Yes campaigner, noted that a reasonable and nonconfrontational tone was key in approaching the undecided.⁸

On the No side, Gerard O'Neill, who conducted the opinion research for the No campaign, also stressed that the undecided segments were highly important.⁹ He explained that they used MFT and studied all pillars, but that they chose to focus mostly on Care and Fairness due to their shared nature for all voters.¹⁰ In particular, the Love Both campaign on the No side built on the Care foundation by stressing the love for both mothers and babies.

Interviewees from both sides mentioned an interest in Care/Fairness pillars in reaching the morally conflicted middle ground precisely because they were common to both liberals and conservatives. Both sides also stressed the importance of Care and Fairness in the 2015 same-sex marriage campaign. As O'Neill put it: "They [Care/Fairness] are the moral foundations that tend to be decisive in terms of messages that resonate."¹¹

Politician interview data

Mid-campaign interviews with politicians from both sides implicitly demonstrated that they were indeed wrestling with this moral dilemma. As one No politician explained, "I'm a pro-lifer but I have heard these terrible stories in my clinics, and it makes me angry when I hear stories of rape and incest and makes me wonder if I am doing the right thing."¹² An undecided politician expanded his moral predicament, saying, "I used to be really pro-life but now I would like to do something to help people in difficulty, without following the path of UK and opening the flood-gates."¹³ In both cases, it is visible how the Purity moral dogma around "abortion as an absolute wrong" is being overtaken by a concern with Care for the suffering of Irish citizens.

Focus group data

The focus groups highlighted the moral dilemma implicitly. This was indeed around Care concerns, which split the undecided middle. An undecided voter expressed her moral reservation, saying, "I've had canvassers say, 'My body my decision,' and I'm a feminist myself, but I work with disabled children and it's not that simple."¹⁴ An undecided voter empathized with the moral dilemma of a woman considering an abortion: "No women would

⁶ Interview, May 29, 2020.

⁷ Interview, June 2, 2020.

⁸ Interview, June 10, 2020.

⁹ Interview, May 22, 2020.

¹⁰ Interview, May 22, 2020.

¹¹ Interview, May 22, 2020.

¹² Politician interview, August 2017.

¹³ Politician interview, July 2017.

¹⁴ Focus group, female, Dublin, May 2018.

make this decision lightly, having one [an abortion] is going to affect the rest of her life and not having one is going to affect the rest of her life.”¹⁵ An undecided man explained that he found the moral conflict around abortion much more challenging than the moral conflict around same-sex marriage, saying: “This is not the same as the same-sex referendum. There are no happy endings. There was no harm in allowing gay marriage; we just had to get used to the idea.”¹⁶

Theme 2: “Caring” for whom? Using the Care moral foundation to appeal to the middle ground

Another important theme across interview and focus group data was the centrality of caring in the abortion debate. However, this also triggered a debate on *whom* to care for: the woman or the unborn child? For the campaigners, the choice of Care foundation was critical to reach the undecided voters, and they needed to explain their choice carefully in their campaign communications. Politician interviews and focus group data, in turn, demonstrate how they struggled to weigh the needs of women against those of unborn babies.

Campaigner interview data

The discussion of Care was explicit in the data, but it was different on the two sides: abortion as a matter of care rather than a choice on the Yes side, and a matter of care for both mothers and babies on the No side.

The Yes camp mentioned that their main framing strategy was built on three Cs: care, compassion, and change. As Duffy explained, “Women who need abortions deserve to be *cared* for at home in Ireland by their doctors and their families. Life can be complicated and we need to be *compassionate* to people in tough circumstances. We need to *change* how Ireland treats women who become pregnant as a result of rape or who receive a devastating diagnosis of fatal fetal anomaly.”¹⁷ In the Yes campaign, cases of rape, incest, or fatal fetal abnormality received particular attention to support their argument on the “need” for abortion. On the No side, O’Neill indeed highlighted the success of this Yes camp strategy, as these were the hard cases in which a majority was saying they would agree to an abortion.¹⁸

From the eyes of the Yes campaign, the No camp’s “moral urgency was around [the] killing of another human being.”¹⁹ Within that there were two different arguments. The main framing strategy of the Save the 8th campaign was to stress abortion “on demand” and vulnerable groups and their rights, for instance, children with Down syndrome. The Love Both campaign was closer to the Care argument of the Yes side in that it called for caring for the baby and the mother, claiming the ownership of love.²⁰

¹⁵ Focus group, female, Westmeath, December 2016.

¹⁶ Focus group, male, Dublin, May 2018.

¹⁷ Interview, May 29, 2020.

¹⁸ Interview, May 22, 2020.

¹⁹ Interview with Deirdre Duffy, May 29, 2020.

²⁰ Interview with Gerard O’Neill, May 22, 2020.

Politician interview data

Interviews with politicians implicitly confirm that all sides were conscious of this “empathy battlefield” and the need to balance the needs of women and of nascent life. For all these politicians, there was the sense of “damned if you do and damned if you don’t,” as one No politician expressed it: “It’s a classic ‘no win’ situation.”²¹ Undecided politicians found themselves confronted by some members of the electorate who were passionately pro-life: “I hear, ‘What about the babies?’ Who will represent them/their rights?”²² Another undecided politician said, “I’m not a bad reader of politics and it will come down to whether we want Down syndrome children wiped out or not.”²³

Focus group data

In the focus groups, the link to the Care foundation was present but implicit. Many were torn about whether to feel empathy and compassion for the women or the unborn children. One Yes voter expressed this emotional conflict powerfully: “I am feminist and pro-choice but sometimes I shut down the emotion, a friend of mine was going to proceed with a pregnancy and then she found out it was twins and decided to abort, and I felt so sad, and I felt bad about feeling sad because I am a feminist.”²⁴ Voters also discussed weighing a young woman’s liberty against a future life. An undecided voter told his story about narrowly avoiding an abortion: “Nine years ago, she was 20 and I was 22 and she got pregnant and I wanted her to have an abortion and she refused and I look at my eight-year-old son, and I cry my eyes out that I could have wanted him not to exist.”²⁵ Another undecided voter wanted her daughter to have a choice despite her own decision to have a disabled child, saying, “I have a disabled son myself and it never came up that I would not have him, but I think of my own daughter now and I would not want her to have the life I had.”²⁶

Theme 3: Making the invisible victim visible to build empathy

Once the campaigners presented their proposed victims who needed care, women on the Yes side, and babies or mothers on the No side, they needed to make them visible for the public and connect their deep frames to surface frames. This meant that they needed to present their case with strong frames, presenting an emotionally appealing case and highlighting negative consequences. Campaigner interview data show that they used a host of strategies to make this possible. The politician interviews add that the Citizens’ Assembly provided the expert evidence to make victims visible and to encourage people to deliberate calmly. The focus group data demonstrate that these framing strategies resonated with them. Citizens referred to tangible images, stories, and individuals that helped them make their voting decision, especially as the campaign moved into the final phase before the referendum.

²¹ Politician interview, July 2017.

²² Politician interview, July 2017.

²³ Politician interview, July 2017.

²⁴ Focus group, female, Dublin, December 2016.

²⁵ Focus group, male, Dublin, December 2016.

²⁶ Focus group, female, Rural Cork, July 2017.

Campaigner interview data

Both sides explicitly discussed their framing strategies. The No side sought to make the victims visible by building its campaign on the potential consequences of the new abortion regime, arguing that it would bring a “license to kill.” The idea was to draw parallels to the United Kingdom’s abortion laws and use posters suggesting that “1 in 5 babies” or “90% of babies with Down syndrome” would be aborted because of the change. Campaign manager of the Save the 8th campaign John McGuirk explained that it came up in their research that the voters wanted to avoid the situation in the United Kingdom: “This was our best card and we played it.”²⁷ In their research, undecided voters were compassionate but also judgmental and wanted there to be a good reason for abortion, and this is why the absence of more moderate options was pitched as the main issue for the Save the 8th campaign. All interviewees acknowledged that this was the most successful strategy on the No side. However, Clare Daly noted that “to ignore Ireland’s abortion reality was hypocritical in the extreme.”²⁸

On the Yes side, Adam May explained that they made women’s suffering visible through medical professionals and women who had abortions in the past.²⁹ Co-director of Together for Yes Orla O’Connor mentioned that women explaining the trauma of travel and of situations such as fetal abnormality helped the public better understand the long-term harm the ban was causing.³⁰ The slogan “Sometimes a private matter needs public support” was used to make people think about a person in their life who might need their support. Ivana Bacik explained that in both the 2015 and 2018 referendums, through the Constitutional Convention and Citizens’ Assembly that preceded the votes, they learned the significance of evidence-based and personal stories in shaping individual views.³¹ In both cases, Bacik added, “Personal, compassionate, calm, reasonable and courteous conversations enabled the campaign to not antagonize or demonize the middle or firm groups.” Interviewees also mentioned that the Love Both campaign, on the No side, also learned from the 2015 referendum, and they similarly broadened the “circle of harm” to include the mothers alongside babies.

Politician interview data

Mid-campaign interviews with politicians corroborate these views. The discussion here is implicit, drawing particular attention to the role of the Citizens’ Assembly in making victims visible. One No politician expressed the value of the Citizens’ Assembly process: “The more people that are involved the better.... It included all sorts of people and walks of life.”³² Meanwhile, a Yes politician felt that the expert evidence had helped citizens to assess the relevant factors: “People seemed to be really influenced by objective, balanced views like Brian Murray’s legal opinion.”³³ Politicians were aware on a personal level of how the facts from the “other side” can sway opinion, with one Yes politician admitting: “I’ve always been pro-choice but when I heard about Iceland’s track record on abortion and Down syndrome, it affected me.”³⁴

²⁷ Interview, July 8, 2020.

²⁸ Interview, June 18, 2020.

²⁹ Interview, June 2, 2020.

³⁰ Interview, May 26, 2020.

³¹ Interview, June 10, 2020.

³² Politician interview, August 2017.

³³ Politician interview, August 2017.

³⁴ Politician interview, July 2017.

Focus group data

The focus groups implicitly brought up the need to understand the facts, the people, and the stories in deciding on the “victim” and making their final voting decision. An undecided voter talked about continually trying to listen to the facts and make up his mind, saying, “I’ve been listening to the facts, that doctor on the *Late Late* [popular talk show], we have to face up to this situation, I’m leaning towards yes ... my daughter is delighted.”³⁵

Focus groups also talked about the stories, imagery, and language used by both campaigns and how they helped them decide on the “right thing to do.” An undecided voter mentioned the emotive language of the No campaign: “You listen to Danny Healy-Rae and he must have said the words ‘the little babies’ about seven times when he made his speech, it gets to you.”³⁶ A Yes voter felt that the vivid imagery in the No campaign posters could resonate with younger people: “Younger people can be very vulnerable to those images. My son is doing a biomedical degree in college and he said they were all pro-life.”³⁷ An undecided voter found the Yes campaign stories won her over: “My opinion ... changed recently as I read a story about a woman whose baby was going to be severely brain damaged.... She had to go to UK for abortion as here she would have had to carry the baby to full term.”³⁸

Theme 4: Building a collective positive societal identity within the national context

As a final common theme, all three data sets discuss the referendum debate in relation to building a positive social identity in Ireland and the importance of the national context. Campaigner interview data show that although other moral foundations such as Liberty (bodily autonomy) or Purity (sanctity of human life) or Authority (traditional teachings on right to life) were theoretically available in discussing a societal identity, their use was restricted by the national political context. The politician interviewees agree that hard-left ideals around Liberty and Fairness would not be enough to create a new societal identity and to persuade the mainstream electorate in the contemporary political context. The focus group data show a similar struggle for the electorate in interpreting a new national identity that could allow abortion within Ireland, pitching a “caring Irish society” against a “pagan” or callous alternative society.

Campaigner interview data

For campaigners, the need to build a broad societal identity was central. All interviewees explicitly mentioned the 2015 same-sex marriage referendum as a model for the 2018 abortion referendum. Adam May explained that in 2015, they sought to “widen the circle of harm” and presented the ban on same-sex marriage as an insult and injury for the full family. This meant broadening the issue from a decision on specific individuals to one for a better Ireland, and a break with the past. Nonetheless, the national political context was an important limiting force on the use of certain moral foundations.

³⁵ Focus group, male, Dublin, May 2018.

³⁶ Focus group, male, Cork, February 2018.

³⁷ Focus group, male, Dublin, February 2018.

³⁸ Focus group, female, Dublin, February 2018.

On the Yes side, this was about moving beyond the Liberty foundation. Campaigners noted that arguments based solely on women's rights never fully resonated with the Irish electorate; the issue was a polarizing one in Irish culture, blocking their use for most middle-ground voters. Through research, Yes campaigners realized that “campaign-y messages with higher temperature such as bodily autonomy” did not work and that they needed to build a picture of “necessary and required” and not a “right.”³⁹ Words such as *choice*, *on demand/request*, and *unrestricted* were perceived negatively, whereas *care*, *personal decision*, *when required*, and *when medically necessary* were seen positively. Deirdre Duffy said, “People did not want to give human rights to women. Human rights are conceptual for people, but if we express it in healthcare, then people said yes okay.”⁴⁰ Ivana Bacik similarly noted: “I have been pro-choice for a long time, but we had to learn that choice terminology was off-putting. Assertion of a right to choose, this language did not appeal to the middle ground. But they understood the trauma of the ban.”⁴¹ This emphasis within the Yes camp caused a certain amount of soul-searching at the time. The agreed-upon focus on the “moveable middle,” including the recognition that human rights language did not resonate in the way that healthcare language did, was central in the communications strategy. This, Maeve Taylor, Director of Advocacy and Communications of the Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA), explained, was almost a form of censorship on using the terminology of human rights.⁴²

On the No side, campaigners acknowledged that the Purity and Authority moral foundations were not strong enough to win the majority of the electorate, as the Irish society had changed over time. O'Neill acknowledged that the Purity and Authority moral foundations were relevant, besides Care and Fairness, as these relate directly to “sanctity of human life” and traditional teachings on right to life” (mainly from a Catholic Church perspective). McGuirk pointed to the link between the pro-life movement and Christianity, and the importance of sanctity (Purity) and compassion (Care) as Christian words: “When you talk to older voters in private, people in their 60s and 70s, they are very religiously motivated and they would say this is demonic; That is how they feel.”⁴³ However, he noted that with the increasing anger toward the Church in Ireland, the meaning of compassion had changed over the years and the use of this foundation within a Christian context became more limited. They also suggested that these changes made fear-based religious arguments less resonant than they were back in the 1983 referendum. McGuirk explained the difficulties they had in renewing their message in 2018, given their voter base in the Save the 8th campaign: “We tried to center on the unborn child, the question of alternatives to abortion. All of these had worked back in 1983. Those messages all worked. Our supporters are older; many did not realize the world moved on; they did not notice that these messages were weak.”⁴⁴

Politician interview data

Politicians from all sides implicitly alluded to the same limitations within the changed national political context. It was hard to pitch an Irish identity around women's rights despite the importance they had gained since previous abortion referendums. As one No politician expressed

³⁹ Interview with Adam May, June 2, 2020.

⁴⁰ Interview, May 29, 2020.

⁴¹ Interview, June 10, 2020.

⁴² Interview, November 2, 2021.

⁴³ Interview, July 8, 2020.

⁴⁴ Interview, July 8, 2020.

it: “Hard-line feminism can alienate and scare men.”⁴⁵ An undecided politician wanted the Yes side to soften their demands, asking, “In this day and age—why not use contraception/morning after pill?”⁴⁶ A Yes politician warned: “The ‘hard left’ always trips ourselves up with [an] ‘all or nothing’ approach; we may need some pragmatism and compromise to win the day.”⁴⁷ An undecided politician similarly noted the need to move away from hard-line ideology and connect with the center-ground electorate: “Build a sense of shared responsibility to ‘look after our own’; there needs to be a softer campaign to win in middle Ireland.”⁴⁸

Focus group data

The focus groups also implicitly trace these limitations. The political context had moved on from an Authority foundation around Catholicism and obedience to clerical hierarchy, but there were still Catholic values embedded in the culture of Ireland. One undecided voter said, “In 1983, the church shouted at us from the pulpit and now they will probably have to stay quiet because we have had enough of being told what to do.”⁴⁹ Focus groups also supported the need to move beyond the Purity, Liberty, and Fairness moral foundations. One No voter said, “I’m not some raving pro-lifer, but I am against repeal for practical reasons.”⁵⁰ Similarly, a Yes voter said, “I’m not a feminist, but I do think we should look after women at home [in Ireland].”⁵¹

CONCLUSION

Our research focuses on a key issue in today’s politics, the framing of moral issues, by exploring its understudied connection to referendums. Most research on moral framing relies on laboratory research, and the 2018 Irish abortion referendum provides a fascinating real-life setting to study these dynamics. By using in-depth interview and focus group data, we present three key findings. First, we uncover four main themes—the moral dilemma, the key moral foundation(s) chosen to address this moral dilemma, the use of strategies to make the “victims” visible, and the societal identity and national context—that could be applied to other moral referendums as well. Our case shows the centrality of moral foundations in framing the choice. Campaigners use moral framing to appeal to the undecided middle to go beyond the 50% threshold. Interviewees mentioned MFT on their own and identified the Care/Fairness pillars as the key ones for reaching the middle-ground voters in general, regardless of the issue at hand. Moreover, our data reveal that campaigners used a similar strategy in the 2015 same-sex marriage referendum. This is in line with previous research that presented evidence of learning in European Union–related referendums (e.g., Atikcan, 2015a; Jahn & Storsved, 1995).

Second, campaigners from both sides used moral framing to project a positive social identity for Irish people, where the No campaign built a sense of saving the lives of unborn babies and the Yes campaign built a sense of showing solidarity and compassion for the distress of Irish women. Once again, there is evidence that this aspect has been present in previous moral

⁴⁵ Politician interview, August 2017.

⁴⁶ Politician interview, July 2017.

⁴⁷ Politician interview, July 2017.

⁴⁸ Politician interview, August 2017.

⁴⁹ Focus group, male, Cork, July 2017.

⁵⁰ Focus group, female, Cork, July 2017.

⁵¹ Focus group, female, Dublin, July 2017.

referendums. The Yes for Equality (2015) and Together for Yes (2018) campaigns sought to create a positive, unifying Irish identity and, in Taylor's words, showed that referendums could offer a "celebratory place" and a "societal conversation about inclusion and acceptance."⁵² This can be contrasted with the role of narrow national identity in the Brexit referendum (Henderson et al., 2016). Nonetheless, the national political context, through factors such as the decreasing and rising prominence of different social institutions, restricts the use and resonance of certain moral foundations with the broad electorate. Not every moral foundation would be easily accessible for the campaigners at any given time, nor would they work as well as they did in the past (Atikcan, 2018).

Third, our findings confirm the middle-ground position of moral referendums on the opinion volatility spectrum, halfway between unfamiliar and familiar referendum issues. Despite the moral and familiar nature of abortion, campaigners mention the complexities and technicalities within the issue, such as rape or fatal fetal anomalies or term limits. As Bacik put it: "Abortion can be very technical and difficult to explain too if you get into the legislation."⁵³ Such remarks suggest that moral issues such as abortion indeed belong to the middle, where framing and communication strategies can present a new angle of the issue.

This brings up the related question of whether framing of moral issues can change the outcome of referendums. In this case, we argue that although pretreatment effects were possibly present and long-term societal trends determined the result, there was still room for framing at two levels. First, the long-term societal change was accompanied by long-term frame change. For instance, Taylor explained the gradual framing work of IFPA and other organizations to shift the debate on the Eighth Amendment from being "the homogeneous moral position of the people" to an "obstacle to women's healthcare."⁵⁴ Second, during the campaign, a critical section of society was undecided, and their support depended on the context of the abortion, involving difficult judgments and technical aspects. The use of the Care foundation, as opposed to the more frequently used frame based on bodily autonomy, arguably contributed to the result by appealing to these undecided middle-ground voters. We do not suggest that bodily autonomy was not a motivation for Yes voters, but we highlight the importance of the Care foundation for the undecided and ambivalent voters. On this point, it is interesting to note that our findings mirror the laboratory findings of the extant literature, with the more liberal framing seemingly succeeding over the more conservative one. Previous research on MFT finds that when proponent and opponent moral language were equally prevalent, proponent arguments were more persuasive (Clifford et al., 2015; Clifford & Jerit, 2013). In both the 2018 abortion referendum and the 2015 referendum on same-sex marriage this seems to be the case, but it needs further research with individual-level analysis.

There are limitations to this research. While there is a substantial amount of literature suggesting that moral foundations do cause people to adopt preferences and positions on issues, there is also a body of literature suggesting that moral foundations are a cause of social identity (Ciuk, 2018; Hatemi et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2017) and that morality is applied differently based on the target's political identity (Walter & Redlawsk, 2019). There are also critiques of MFT. Moral conviction theory (Skitka et al., 2021) proposes that truly moral positions are rigid and inflexible and that moral issues are defined by the people who hold those views, rather than by researchers' moral categories, whereas dyadic morality theory (Schein & Gray, 2018) suggests that all moral evaluations are grounded in people's subjective perception of harm combined with normative expectations and negative affect.

⁵² Interview with Maeve Taylor, November 2, 2021.

⁵³ Interview, June 10, 2020.

⁵⁴ Interview with Maeve Taylor, November 2, 2021.

We accept that our research could relate to and partially support all of these theoretical frameworks and call for more research to disentangle these dynamics. To summarize, future research is necessary at various levels: first, to see whether our findings on the four master themes apply to other real-life settings; second, to check whether moral foundations other than Care also have specific strengths in different contexts; third, to explore in competitive contexts whether a more liberal framing of an issue wins over a more conservative one at the individual level; and, finally, to further explore the relationship between moral foundations and social identity alongside alternative theories.

Our research is exploratory and relies on subjective views of the participants. What it delivers is a mapping and triangulation exercise, uncovering the ways in which moral foundations are applied outside of a laboratory setting. These findings have implications for direct democracy. If certain moral foundations are stronger or more resonant than others, these might shape the dynamics of future referendums. Not only could they affect the outcome of future votes through the interaction between deep and surface frames, but also they could increase the deliberative power of referendums if they lead to more compassionate and unifying debates.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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