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Perspectives on the Seanad Referendum

Abstract

Accurate information on public opinion is a necessary condition for the effective functioning of democracies. For Lasswell, the open interplay of public opinion with policy is the 'distinguishing mark of popular rule' (1941). Yet, despite its importance, there is a distinct gap in methods and tools to understand large volumes of public opinion statements on any issue. The 2013 referendum in Ireland on the abolition of the Seanad (Senate) was a prominent example of this gap. Opinion polls were perceived as misleading in suggesting that the referendum was going to pass. Aiming to address opinion noise, and the polarity suggested by opinion polls, we conducted an online study of subjectivity in the week before polling. Using Q-methodology and the stream of public opinion generated during the campaign, we identified three main perspectives on the issue of Seanad abolition. One perspective was in favour of abolition, two opposed the proposal. We conclude that Q-methodology could be used to support opinion polling and political communication by providing a supporting context of the range of social perspectives on the issue at hand.

1. Introduction

Since the proliferation of the technique in the early to mid-twentieth century, "the opinion poll has steadily attained hegemonic status as the tool for measuring the 'will of the people' in modern democratic polities" (Sturgis & Smith 2010: 66). The perceived strength of polls is that they are based on scientific sampling methodology. This method enables inferences to be drawn from a small sample about the population at large. When correctly designed and implemented to achieve a balanced cross section of a population, it is a cost effective method of measuring some aspect of citizens' views or voting behavior during elections or plebiscites.

Proponents of standardized public opinion research emphasise its 'homology' with elections and, therefore its democratic character (e.g. Newport, 2004[1]). Polls are seen to support democracy, bringing the voice of the people to government and measure its responsiveness. In Ireland, polls reach up to 81% of the Irish population that are estimated to read mainstream newspapers (NewsBrands Ireland, 2015).

However, used as the primary tool for information on collective public opinion, opinion polls also present a number of normative and epistemological challenges. Studies show that opinion polls effect voting preference (Ansolabehere *et al*., 1994), voting intention (Gunther & Christen, 1999) and participation behaviour (Zerback *et al*., 2015). This this is reflected in the 'bandwagon' (Rothschild & Malhotra, 2014; Hodgson & Maloney, 2013); and 'underdog effect' phenomena

[1] Quoted in Perrin & McFarland

(Bischoff & Egbert, 2013). Zerback finds that individuals who find themselves in a minority on a social/moral issue are more likely to participate than individuals who perceive themselves to be in the majority (Zerback *et al*., 2015).

From an epistemological perspective, recent trends show a decline in the perceived accuracy of polls to predict referendum or election outcomes. This was most clearly seen in the case of the U.S. Presidential election in 2016, the 2015 Israeli parliamentary elections, and the U.K. referendum on leaving the European Union (Brexit) in 2016. Although research continues on why polls have been regarded as inaccurate some common reasons are well known. Nonresponse bias for example occurs when certain types of respondents systematically do not respond. A further bias is introduced in the reliance on landlines to contact respondents. Pew Research Centre notes that low response rates can be attributed to the decline in landlines and the rise of mobile phones which shows caller ID. It reports that the response rate has plummeted from 80 percent in the 1970s to just 8 percent in 2014. This also leads to higher costs for overcoming the low response rate and conducting a quality poll. Other possibilities are that respondents were not honest about their voting intention[2].

In light of these challenges, while acknowledging the unique strengths of opinion polling, the aim of this paper is to propose an additional method for generating knowledge on public opinion during referendum campaigns. The methodology proposed is Q-methodology. Q-methodology focuses on the qualitative attributes of public opinion and provides a nuanced understanding of the landscape of public opinion in terms of social perspectives. It was developed in the field of psychology for the purpose of studying subjectivity. It does not report in terms of the distribution of views within a

[2] Recent literature saying why polls fail to predict: Polls, the Election, and Public Health Research: Reaching the Hard to Reach https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5227954/

population (majority/minority). Rather, as Stephenson states, "The fundamental datum is a person's understanding of the controversy" (Stephenson, 1965: 265). Since its inception it has also been used as a method of informing large sample survey designs (Stephenson, 1953), Talbott, 2010). We apply this method in an analysis of public opinion in the week before a referendum on abolition of the second chamber (Seanad Eireann) in Ireland in October 2013.

The paper is structured as follows. We begin by setting out the challenges surrounding opinion polling identified in the literature. The second section provides the background on the case study: public opinion on the Seanad referendum question. We set out the main arguments on the issue during the campaign and report the results. The third section then turns to reflect on challenges posed by opinion polls as the source of information on collective opinion available during the campaign. The subsequent section reports on a Q-study of subjectivity on the debate conducted in the week of the referendum. We identify three social perspectives: Abolish the Seanad, Reform the Seanad and Mixed. We discuss the contribution of the findings to expand political knowledge during referendum campaigns and conclude with implications for future research directions.

Reflections on Opinion Polls as political information

Preceding the UK referendum on Leaving the European Union in 2016 and U.S. Presidential election 2016, a wide literature was already dedicated to questioning opinion polls and the extent to which they accurately reflect public opinion, their role in constructing publics, and their normative implications for democracy. As noted by Perrin & McFarland (2011) "There has been little sustained

engagement with theoretical issues" concerning surveys and polling. The first body of critique in the literature focuses on the accuracy of information provided by polls given methodological challenges in data collection. Issues include interviewer bias in the interview process, the effects of question wording, question order and bias that results from the exclusion of the preferences of a portion of the public who responds 'don't know' (Berinsky, 1999: 2). Another long standing challenge is the 'spiral of silence' (Neumann-Noelle, 1974). This theory holds that people's perceptions of the distribution of opinion in society, as perceived through the media, can affect their willingness to express their view for fear of isolation. As a result, on sensitive issues aggregate public opinion may not truly reflect collective public sentiment.

A further challenge impacting the accuracy of poll information is the relatively low distribution of political knowledge in society. Low levels and uneven social distribution of political knowledge can cause opinion surveys to misrepresent the full mix of voices (Althaus, 1998). Bishop (2004) argues that low levels of political knowledge and ambiguous questions combine to produce illusionary measures of the public will. As a result, Bishop notes, political polls in their current form are not useful tools for understanding how the public feels about specific political issues. Gans (2013) states, "Polls are not the best representative of the popular will, for people's answers to pollster questions are not quite the same as their opinions — or, for that matter, public opinion".

Another school of thought is dedicated to the impact of polling on democracy. According to some, polls represent not the aggregation of popular opinions but the reification of elite opinion (Beniger, 1992). Polling 'constructs' public opinion rather than being its authentic representation (Sturgis and Smith, 2010: 67, Boudreau & McCubbins, 2010; Bishop 2004). Polling thus becomes a

representational or performative act through which publics are born (ibid). In this strand, authors focus on the relationship between polling and aggregative /'show of hands' democracy and their concurrent emergence. Concerns include the promotion of populism over rational policy-making (Jacobs & Shapiro 2005:636 quoted in Mietzner, 2009: 96) and the use of polls as a "strategic instrument by politicians for their platforms and images" (Mietzner, 2009: 97).

Why opinion polls need to be supplemented

The challenges listed above suggest a need for additional sources of knowledge on collective public opinion particularly during referendum and election campaigns. Of particular interest are methods that that avoid reliance on the same assumptions required for accurate polling such as receiving an accurate, truthful response from a representative sample of the population.

Developments in this space are timely given the vast amounts of opinion data shared through the mainstream and social media and concern with both the reliability of polls and the reliability of news shared on social media under question. Where rapid advances in communications technology has enabled citizens to discuss and find information on the Internet, there is a need for a wider range of research methodologies during significant political and legislative events. As the outcome of the Irish referendum on Abolition of the Seanad in 2013 showed, there are gaps in the ability of opinion polls to capture how people are thinking on an issue. Polls and surveys can narrow the framing of issues and fail to explore the complexities and nuances in the issues involved.

We argue that a mixed method analysis of social discourses, using Q-methodology, can provide in-depth understanding of collective opinion on an issue in a way that is de-coupled from the

majoritarian/minority framework represented by polls. This method would not focus on just revealing a preference but revealing belief systems on the issue. The knowledge on belief systems and how they related to each other can be used to develop surveys and support the polling methodology.

As Stephenson states (1964)

> It consists, in its simplest terms, of replacing the current large-sample doctrine in the methodology of public opinion measurement by one which models the qualitative conditions……..and which requires for measurement purposes only small sets of persons (Stephenson, 1953) representing different apparent 'interests'.

As opposed to complete replacement we argue that this method can provide a different type of knowledge as well as supplementing and enhancing poll based research. Supporting this argument we conducted an analysis on discourses on the Seanad referendum. The aim was to research, given the flow of communication from the government and opposition parties, as well as civil society arguments, coherent perspectives on the issue of Seanad abolition.

2. Case study: The Seanad Referendum 2013

Background

The Seanad is the upper house in the Irish National Parliament (Oireachtas) which also includes the President and the lower House: Dáil Éireann (House of Representatives). It has 60 members (senators) 43 of whom are elected by five panels representing a range of vocational interests (that include members of the incoming Dáil, outgoing Senators, county councillors and county borough councillors); 6 of whom are elected by the graduates of two universities; and 11 of whom are the Taoiseach's nominees.

The Seanad has limited powers, particularly in respect to Money Bills (Bills for Government spending). These Bills must originate from the Dáil; the Seanad has only 21 days for their consideration and; the Seanad can only suggest recommendations not amendments. It does, however, have the right to invoke a procedure under Article 27 of the Constitution which permits a majority of Senators and one third of Dáil members to petition the President to not sign a bill but pass it directly to referendum. The Seanad also has some supervisory powers. With the Dáil, it can remove the President or a judge of the Supreme Court. It can also with the Dáil declare a state of emergency and annul statutory instruments. The role of the Seanad is to contribute four main features to the Irish parliamentary system: representation (different interests); independence; a potential veto; and burden sharing of parliamentary duties (Russell, 2001: 456).

However, the role of the Seanad has been a subject of debate since Irish independence. Between 1928 and 2015, 13 reports on Seanad Reform were published. They focused on its composition and electoral system (Report on the Reform of the Seanad, 2004). The most recent reviews have

concentrated primarily on its legitimacy problem stemming from its electoral system and it lack of distinctive role in the wider political system (Report of the working group on Seanad Reform, 2015; Report on the Reform of the Seanad, 2004). Despite their efforts to reform the Seanad, successive governments have failed to implement these reports (Murphy, 2016). It is argued that the Seanad represents political interests (primarily political party interests) rather than the intended vocational interests (Coakley, 2011, Chubb, 1970) making it difficult to it to carve out a particular role for itself in the bicameral system. Other criticisms include: the Seanad's elitist nature in terms of the special representation of NUI and TCD graduates (Murphy, 2016, Gallagher, 2005); the fact that it is 'sidelined and powerless with the policy process' (Russell, 2001: 454); and that its failure to reap the benefits of bicameralism is also compounded by its composition (Russell, 2001: 456)

On the other hand, those who defend it assert 'that despite its lack of power, it plays a useful role in the legislative process, as debates on bills are usually conducted in a more reflective, constructive, and non-party spirit than in the Dáil (Gallagher, 2005:234). Gallagher views the presence of the University Senators as an 'independent and innovative force' (2005:233). Indeed, the range of views and debate on the Seanad supports Russell's claim that the 'debate in Ireland focuses as much on the abolition of the upper house as on reform' (2001:454).

The Seanad referendum is called

In a surprise move at a Fine Gael Presidential dinner in October 2009, Enda Kenny, then leader of the opposition, argued for the abolition of the Seanad and pledged a referendum on the matter. This proposal was later endorsed by the party and the commitment to hold a referendum on the matter reiterated in: the party's document on political reform 'New Politics' (2010); its 2011 general election manifesto; and finally the programme for government (2011). The main case for abolishing the Seanad in the programme for government was cost saving:

> The political system cannot ask others to change and make sacrifices if is not prepared to do the same. We will significantly reduce the size of the Oireachtas by abolishing the Seanad if the public approve in Constitutional referendum... (2011:18).

The 32nd amendment to the Constitution (proposal to abolish the Seanad) was published on June 5th 2013 and the referendum scheduled for the 4th of October of that year. The campaign in favour of abolition (Yes vote) was led primarily by Fine Gael. Labour, Sinn Fein and the Socialist party also campaigned for a Yes to abolition as did the 'One House' group (See MacCarthaigh & Martin, 2015). The arguments favouring abolition included:

- Ireland has too many politicians for its size;
- It would save money;
- The electoral process to the Seanad is elitist and undemocratic;
- Seanad Eireann is outdated and not reflective of modern Ireland;
- Ireland is the only small unitary European state with a second chamber;
- The historical reasons for the Seanad are no longer relevant; and
- The Seanad didn't do anything to challenge the policies that lead to Ireland's economic crash[3].

Fianna Fail, the Green party and a number of high profile Senators and some newly formed civil society movements such as the 'Democracy Matters' group (see MacCarthaigh & Martin, 2015) called for a No vote in the referendum. None argued for the retention of the Seanad in its current form. Instead a variety of reform options were presented. The arguments against abolition included:

[3] Speech by An Taoiseach Enda Kenny TD at Government announcement of proposals for the Thirty-second Amendment of the Constitution (Abolition of Seanad Éireann) Bill 2013 (Merrionstreet.ie 5th June 2013)

- It would 'wreck' the Constitution as it would require 75 separate amendments and deletion of entire articles[4];
- It would reduce the quality of Irish democracy by strengthening the power of the Government in an already executive dominant political system;
- It would not save money;
- Abolition is not a reform measure; and
- Abolition would reduce the number of independent and minority voices in the Oireachtas.

4. Information on collective opinion during the campaign

Polls and the media

During the campaign, information on collective public opinion was presented regularly through opinion polls on voting intention. A sample of the range of opinion polls and their results is presented in Table 1:

[Insert Table 1 about here]

The polls predicted a win for the government in favour of abolition. None, of which we are aware, showed the No side winning a majority even though the Yes' campaign's lead dwindled closer to polling day. Commentary during the referendum campaign was mixed. Some commentators reflected polls' predictions of a government win in favour of abolition. Writing in the *Irish Times*, Arthur Beesley though acknowledging that Seanad supporters had 'made some inroads', claimed

[4] Open the Seanad don't close it – speech by Michael McDowell SC http://lfsr.ie/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Paper-by-Michael-McDowell-S.C.pdf

that the 'Government is on course to win the referendum' (*Irish Times,* 30 September 2013). Similarly Paul Moran in the *Sunday Independent* argued that '…the Yes side has the finishing line in sight'. He did, however, qualify his statement with reference to the number of undecided voters and possible low turnout (*Sunday Independent*, 29 September 2013).

However, other commentators were more cautious about making predictions from the polls. After the Millward Brown survey results of early September 2013 John Downing writing in the *Irish Independent* noted that the contest would be a 'close-run thing' and that government defeat was a 'very real prospect' (*Irish Independent*, Sept. 2nd 2013). Similarly in mid-September Richard Colwell CEO of RED C Research and Marketing writing in the *Sunday Business Post* argued 'if we were to just look at the Yes and No sides at face value and exclude the undecided voters, it would suggest that the vote should be carried relatively comfortably. History, however, does not suggest this to the case' … and concludes 'the referendum is potentially much closer than the base figures suggest (*Sunday Business Post*, 15 September 2013).

Many observed that turnout would be a key factor in determining the outcome. A month before the referendum, John Downing (2013) wrote 'Kenny knows that if history repeats itself, such a low turnout would give the pro-Seanad grouping a decided advantage' (*Irish Independent*, 2 September 2013). Similarly, an editorial in the *Irish Examiner* on the 5 September also predicted that 'Voter turnout could play a crucial role in the October 4 referendum with a low turnout most likely favouring those campaigning against its abolition'.

Referendum Results

On polling day, the ballot paper asked voters if they approved the proposal to amend the constitution to abolish the Seanad. Turnout was just below 40% (39.17%), 'one of the lowest turnouts in

referendum history' (MacCarthaigh & Martin, 2015: 131). A small majority 51.73% voted against abolition and 48.27% voted in favour.

A post-poll survey carried out by the Irish Referendum Commission explored respondents' reasons for how they voted. The survey was conducted on among a representative sample of 1,013 eligible voters. Among those who voted respondents were asked to provide the reason why they voted yes or no. Reasons included: save money (34%); the Seanad is not needed (26%); and desire to get rid of the Seanad (19%). In contrast those who voted 'No' rejecting abolition, selected: it would grant the Government/Dáil too much control (38%); the Seanad is important (24%); and they wanted to see it reformed not abolished (13%) (Referendum Commission, 2013).

The disparity between the results of the 9 polls mentioned above and the referendum outcome provides provide an opportunity for reflecting on the information environment during campaigns. In reflecting on the discrepancy between the polls and the referendum result, McCarthaigh & Martin (2015) conclude that the low turnout could partly explain why polls were inaccurate. Cunningham (2013) questions the assumption that a higher turnout would have resulted in a different outcome given that turnout is strongly predicted by a person's level of information.

Reflecting on the polls after the referendum, pollsters discussed the following factors that led to a 'No' victory: the role of the televised debates that took place late in the campaign 'long after the pollsters had put away their clipboards or put down their phones' (*Irish Times,* 7 October 2013); poor communications and a 'lacklustre' campaign (*Sunday Independent,* 6 October 2013); anecdotes

on polling card confusion[5] (*Irish Times,* 7 October 2013); and the fact that the 'Yes' vote tends to erode as Irish referendum campaigns progress (*Irish Times,* 7 October 2013).

An additional insight on the discrepancies in the polls, is provided by Graefe (2014). He states that media use of polling, which aims to reflect opinion at a point in time, is incorrectly used to predict outcome. He proposes instead using Cordorcet's Jury Theory to aggregate Vote Expectation Survey results. In contrast to asking respondants to indicate how they 'intend' to vote, vote expectation surveys ask respondents to predict the winning outcome. He references Rothschild and Wolfers (2011), who find that when the vote expectation question and the vote intention question are asked in the same survey, expectations were more accurate than intentions in predicting election winners. They were also more accurate in predicting vote shares and probabilities of victory. Thus according to Graefe, opinion polling on voting intention should not be used as a method for predicting election outcomes (2014). The opinion polls conducted prior to the Seanad referendum asked either voting intention or preference (see Table 1).

In addition, polling data on voting intention does not reflect *how* people are thinking about an issue. Rational and revenge actions may manifest themselves on the day particularly for volatile referendums where the issues do not touch on strongly felt attitudes. Marsh (2013) for example suggests, in his analysis of the results, that a No vote was a kick-back against the government, as might be expected in a second order election. He shows voting intention was stronger among Fine Gael supporters.

[5] Post referendum research supported the various accounts of ballot paper confusion that emerged on the referendum day. (Referendum Commission, 2013).

As a result, we argue, there is a need for additional methodologies to isolate how people are thinking about an issue from intended or actual voting behaviour. We now turn to the study of social perspectives on the issue of Seanad abolition to demonstrate an alternative method for understanding the landscape of collective public opinion.

Data and Methodology

Between 30th September and 3rd October 2013, the week directly before the referendum date, we conducted a study of the subjective perspectives of individuals holding different points of view on the issue of Seanad abolition. In this final week, 35% of voters made their decision with 24% of these deciding yes and 40% deciding to vote No (Referendum Commission, 2013).

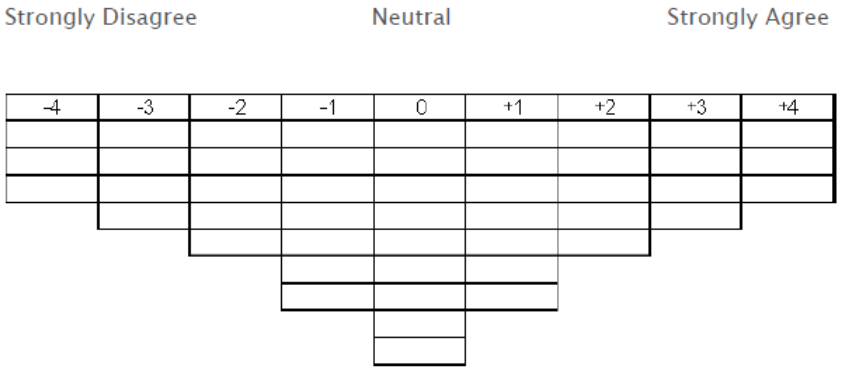
The study was conducted using Q-methodology, a small sample scientific method for the study of subjectivity. Developed by psychologist William Stevenson, it is derived from his Concourse theory, which holds that all subjective understanding of an issue is reflected in the flow of communication on an issue, the 'concourse of communicability' (1953). More specifically, the stream of public opinion on any issue (concourse) is generated by a limited number of main discourses, or ways of looking at any issue. These discourses, or social perspectives, can be identified from public opinion by investigating the subjectivity of diverse stakeholders through a rank ordering of a representative sample of statements.

Key to understanding and making subjectivity 'operant', is Stephenson's definition of opinion, attitudes and belief:

> Redefinition of the terms opinion, attitude, and belief is recommended to fit operational possibilities. Opinions are synthetic self-referent statements which can be composed for a Q-sample; a Q-sort models a person's *attitude of mind* about a situation. Factors are attitudes of mind held in common by many people. Their explanation reaches into latent belief-systems, requiring explanation in psychodynamic tenus. Thus, there may be innumerable opinions, few attitudes of mind, and very few belief-systems. Attitudes of mind are immediate and concern self-psychology; beliefs are early internalizations and concern ego-psychology (Stephenson, 1965:281).

The methodology provides a comprehensive sample of diverse stakeholders with a sample of between 40-60 statements representing the full range of opinion statements on the issue at hand. Participants are asked to rank order the opinion statements in a fixed inverted bell shaped grid (figure 1) according to a condition of instruction. For example, participants may be asked to rank the opinions according to how strongly they agree or disagree with the statement. The process of relatively evaluating the statements makes a person's subjectivity on that issue 'operant'. Each participant's pattern of sorted statements is known as a Q-sort. All of the Q-sorts from the sample of stakeholders are analysed using inverted factor analysis to identify latent structure. Factor loadings indicate how strongly a participant aligns with a particular factor. Interpretation of the factors is guided both by theoretical expectations of the investigator based on his/her knowledge of the issue, as well as the information shared by the participant with the investigator during the q-sorting process. The interpreted factors for the purpose of this study are referred to as 'social perspectives'.

Figure 1: Q-sort grid



Q-method is increasingly being used in environmental policy and social science research (Addams & Proops, 2000). Examples include stakeholder dialogue on biomass energy (Setiawan & Cuppen, 2013), public acceptance of wind farms (Ellis, Barry & Robinson, 2007); Schiphol airport expansion controversy (van Eeten, 2001) and; aviation planning policy in Australia (Kivits & Charles, 2015). It is also the methodological basis for Dryzek and Niemeyer's (2008) work on discursive representation, which promotes the representation of social discourses as can be identified using Q-methodology.

Data

The concourse of opinion was made up of 200 statements from a diverse set of sources over a six month period. The set aimed to be comprehensive of all possible opinion types on the issue. Our data sources included opinion statements from national and local radio interviews, Seanad debates, national and local newspapers, Twitter, blogs, online discussion boards, interviews with stakeholders

and Facebook. We continued the collation until no further differences in statements types were identified.

The full sample on analysis could be categorized into 22 themes representing various values, concepts and representations of the Seanad abolitions issue. Using Fischer's factorial design method (1935), we selected representative statements for pro and negative stances on each theme plus one statement questioning the importance of the question[6]. This design resulted in a set of 43 statements. The categories can be generally described as follows: Statements related to Article 27; Cost; Voice; Difficulty of reform; Centralisation of power; Cronies in government; Don't care; Government motivation; Vandalism; Power grab; Irrelevant; Wider effects; Positive features; Negative features; Proposed content of the bill; equality/democracy; Seanad as a smokescreen; Space for debate; Abolition not the answer; Size of country for two houses; Function of Dail Committees.

We then drew a purposive sample of 50 diverse stakeholders[7] who either represented or had publicly expressed different views on the issue and were invited to participate via email. These were:

a) Senators: People whose interests were at stake
b) Representatives of Fine Gael, the government party that proposed the referendum
c) Those clearly articulating rationales for different views with influence – (Journalists, academics and bloggers)
d) Citizens – convenience sample of those undecided
e) Representatives of parties in opposition
f) Civil society lobby groups promoting reform, and abolition

[6] Statement 24. Appendix A.
[7] Q is a small sample methodology focused on investigating subjectivity. Once perspectives are identified, the study can be repeated with a large sample of participants, without affecting the underlying structure (see Brown, 1980).

22 individuals responded with a minimum of 2 stakeholders representing each of these categories. Due to the campaigning activities of stakeholders during the week of the referendum, only one participant from the government party was available. Nonetheless, the size of the sample is sufficient as it includes a range of diverse stakeholders sufficient to investigate primary coherent perspectives. In contrast to R studies, sample sizes in Q-methodology are normally small ranging from 1 (single person psychological studies under different conditions of instruction) to 30.

The study was conducted using online Q-sorting software[8]. Each individual was asked to sort the set of 43 opinion statements according to the following condition of instruction: "Please rank these statements in order of how strongly you agree with them". Participants were asked to place each opinion on the inverted distribution grid from -4 to +4 (most disagree/most agree) according to the instruction 'Please rank each statement based on how strongly you agree or disagree with that opinion'. Following the sorting process, participants were also invited to provide a short explanation in their own words of their rationale for placing statements at the +4 and -4 positions on the grid. This final survey provided additional contextual information to help interpret the results.

The 23 sorts were factor analysed using the Centroid method. The difference in Q-methodology is the shift of factor analysis from variables to persons (Stephenson, 1953), what he termed 'inverted factor analysis'. The factors were rotated orthogonally (Varimax). Three factors were identified that provided a strong explanation of the data: Keep & Reform the Seanad (P1); Abolish the Seanad (P2); and Mixed (P3).[9] 10 participants loaded on the first factor (Reform), 6 (Abolish) on the second and 2 on the third (Mixed). Four participants were confounded, meaning they loaded across two or more

[8] FlashQ online q-sorting software package
[9] Eigenvalues of 10.22, 2.76 and 1.30 respectively.

factors. Based on Stephenson (1953) and Brown (1980) one assumes invariance in these factors so that they will appear for any set of persons of that kind studied (Stephenson, 1965: 278).

The following set of findings reports the most important opinions for each perspective. Where opinions are quoted their corresponding rank for each perspective is listed in the format (P1, P2, P3) where P refers to the position of the opinion in the q-sort representing that perspective. The ranking of each opinion in the ideal q-sort is known as a factor array. Statements where there is 'consensus' across opposing perspectives are also reported.

Findings

Based on the factor arrays that emerged from participants' ranking of the statements, and the survey responses they provided to explain their sorting process, we interpreted the three perspectives. Those statements which are ranked significantly differently by proponents of a particular factor (in comparison to the other factors) at the $p<.01$ level are listed. These are known as distinguishing statements.

Perspective 1: Keep & Reform the Seanad

The Reform factor sees the Seanad as a necessary element for the functioning of Irish democracy. It is strongly focused on its merits as an institution and its role in protecting democratic values. An examination of the full factor array shows that it wants reform efforts to focus on the mechanics of the Seanad's composition but not on change to its fundamental role.

This is primarily because, proponents of this perspective fear the wider impact on democracy in its absence. The most important concerns in this regard is the unchecked centralisation of power in the

Dáil and a lack of trust in the Dail: 'Our legislation needs more scrutiny not less. No Seanad means no mechanism to delay or amend bills from the Dáil or refer them to the President for consideration by the people - removing important potential breaks in our system (+**4**, -1, -1); Having abolished a whole layer of local democracy and having centralised government decision making in a committee of four, I am afraid I don't trust them yet with more power. I think we should take some back and give the people the power to elect the Seanad (+**4**, -2, +2). A further concern is the threat of closing out voice in debates: "My big worry is that we are choking off voices, closing down an area for debate and free and open debate is the stuff of democracy. Governments like silence. Democracy is noisy" (+**4**, 0, 2)

The distinguishing statements for this perspective suggest that fear of potential threats to democracy in the absence of the Seanad drives a focus on its merits. This is further supported by the strong rejection of the idea that 'Seanad abolition is not threat to our democracy, more an opportunity, ranked by this perspective at -3 (**-3**, 2, -3)'.

Table 2: *Distinguishing statements for the Reform perspective with corresponding rankings for other perspectives.*

Distinguishing statements for Reform	**Perspectives**		
	Reform	*Abolish*	*Mixed*
18. Our legislation needs more scrutiny not less. No Seanad means no mechanism to delay or amend bills from the Dáil or refer them to the President for consideration by the people - removing important potential breaks in our	+4	-1	-1

system.			
Abolishing the Seanad has a number of knock-on effects on the Dáil, Presidency, local government and how legislation is processed. Abolition has to take place in the context of a wider reform of these other institutions. Otherwise, all that abolition will achieve is to strengthen the power of the Executive.	+3	-2	-3
Senators can often bring new and important perspectives to legislation that might otherwise not be heard in the more pressurised Dáil chamber.	+3	0	-1
This is a democracy. We dismantle democracy at our peril.	+3	-1	-1

While Reformists are in favour of keeping and reforming the Seanad, they reject the argument that change is too difficult 'We should abolish the Seanad because change is too difficult' (**-4**, -1, -3); and that Dail committees are more inclusive and better than the Seanad (**-2**, +2, +2).

Social Perspective 2. Abolish the Seanad

This perspective believes that the Seanad is an unnecessary and undemocratic institution and should be abolished. The most strongly felt views are that 'The Seanad represents a very blatant inequality

in its current form' (-1, **+4**, +4), 'Abolition can't be a power-grab because the Seanad has no power (-2, +4, -2) and 'A country of this size and nature does not need a second house' (-3, **+4**, -2).

Adherents to this perspective see the Seanad as dysfunctional and of no benefit. They fully support its abolition. There is little sense that there will be any repercussions from abolition on the wider political system. Any perceived function performed by the Seanad can be executed by the Dáil. Statements referring to the issue of equality are strongly ranked. 'The case is compelling for moving on from the Senate which is undemocratic in its base and has been ineffective over its lifetime' (-2, **+3,** -2); 'Changes to Dáil Committees are more inclusive. That is far more democratic than retaining a second chamber of parliament elected by just 1 per cent of the population' (-2, **+2**, +2); Cronyism and elitism that are synonymous with the upper house has fostered the type of politics that has brought this State to its knees' (-1, **+3**, 0).

The idea of reform is rejected because of the failure of numerous attempts at Seanad reform, 'All reform has proved impossible because the Senate has become a creature of the party political system' (-1, **+2**, **+1)**. Concerns for the systemic effect or the possible loss of independent voice put forward by the Reform perspective, or arguments regarding the power of the Dáil are of less importance to this perspective than the issue of equality and perceived value of the institution.

Table 3: *Distinguishing statements for 'Abolish' perspective with corresponding rankings for other perspectives.*

Distinguishing statements	**Perspectives**		
	Reform	*Abolish*	*Mixed*
Abolition can't be a power-grab because the Seanad has	-2	+4	-2

no power.			
A country of this size and nature (as a unitary, or non-federal state) does not need a second house of parliament.	-3	+4	-2
Cronyism and elitism that are synonymous with the upper house has fostered the type of politics that has brought this State to its knees.	-1	+3	0
The way the party political system operates in relation to the Senate has been dysfunctional and at odds with the original intention for its role.	+1	+3	-1
The case is compelling for moving on from the Senate which is undemocratic in its base and has been ineffective over its lifetime.	-2	+3	-2
Seanad abolition is no threat to our democracy. More an opportunity.	-3	+2	-3

Social Perspective 3: Mixed: Seanad Ineffective but keep until Dáil reformed.

This perspective is a mix of both. It fully agrees with the abolitionists that the Seanad is elistist and ineffective. However, unlike the *Abolish* perspective, proponents do not believe that this implies the need to abolish it. On the contrary, they see the issue, like the reformists, from a systemic perspective in terms of power distribution. Seanad abolition is thus regarded more as a power game by the government. Limiting the unchecked power of the Dáil is the most important reason to maintain the Seanad. But, in contrast to the Reform perspective they state that the Seanad could be abolished when Dáil is reformed.

For example the second highest ranking statement is 'Part of the danger of having only the Dáil is that it gives the government too much power, especially when they have a large majority' (+3, -2, **+4**)**.** However, proponents are not afraid of Dáil reform. Unlike Reformists they do not see Seanad abolition as a dismantling of democracy, which they rank as -1: "This is a democracy. We dismantle democracy at our peril" (+3, -1, **-1**)[10].

Table 4: *Distinguishing statements for 'Mixed' with associated rankings for other perspectives.*

Distinguishing statements	**Perspectives**		
	Reform	*Abolish*	*Mixed*
The focus on Seanad abolition is a deflection from the absence of Dáil reform	0	-4	+4
The way the party political system operates in relation to the Senate has been dysfunctional and at odds with	+1	+3	-1*

[10] F denotes the identified 'factor' corresponding to each interpreted social perspective. F1 = Reform; F2 = Abolish; F3 = Mixed.

the original intention for its role.			
We should proceed slowly with change of our political system	0	0	-3

*Distinguishing at p<.05

Before discussing the findings, the limitations of this study must be noted. As opinion formation was settling in the week up to the Referendum, it was an opportune time to study perspectives. On the other hand, it was also a challenge given 1) the time required to complete the sorting process and 2) most members of government were on the campaign trail. The study notes the lack of government participants who campaigned on the benefits outlined in section 2 although members of the governing party Fine Gael, did participate.

A further challenge, was the need to use online software for the q-sorting process. In a recent study Liston and Chong (2015) demonstrate that individuals more accurately sort statements on paper than online. Although the difference was insignificant for the particular online tool used, further study is ongoing to determine the size of the general effect of online tools.

Discussion

With these limitations in mind, analysis of the factor scores for the three factors provides some interesting insights. While cost was promoted as a key part of the governments' campaign, it did not feature significantly in the full reasoning behind the perspectives identified in this study. The statement: "We just simply cannot afford the Seanad anymore. The money that's saved, no matter what it is, would go to more worthy causes", was ranked negatively on all factors (-4, -1, -2).

Similarly, the statement "The abolition of the Seanad will bring significant savings" was ranked (-3, -2 -4). Other statements, when *ranked relative to each other* were more important for how participants thought about the issue and formed a coherent perspective e.g. equality; the democratic value of the Seanad; and the power of the Dail.

Comparison of the relative importance of certain opinions between the perspectives suggest further insights to the focus and motivating values of each. For example, a clear statement of support for abolition, 'I wouldn't be in favour of reform at all. I'm totally in favour of abolition', was most rejected by the Reform (-4) and Mixed (-4) perspectives, but only weakly positive for the Abolition perspectives (+1). This suggests that proponents of abolition feel strongly about expressing the dysfunction and inequality of the House rather than being motivated by abolition as a concept. Abolition is a way of removing the dysfunction, whereas for the Reform and Mixed, abolition represents a fundamental democratic threat. Emotions and perspectives are anchored on retaining the Seanad, whereas for the Abolitionists, it may be regarded as a logical conclusion from the dysfunction and inequality that dominates this perspective.

Indeed, the opinion relating to equality in the composition of the House does not feature significantly for the Reformists, even though their view is motivated by threats to democracy. The view "The Seanad represents a very blatant inequality at the very heart of our political system. In its current form it should be abolished" is ranked only at -1 whereas it is considered one of the most important issues for both Mixed (+ 4) and Abolitionists (+ 4). A possible reason is the fact that the statement was issued in the context of abolition and thus is a conclusion that Reformists are unlikely to accept. Their preference is to reform its composition. The Mixed perspective feel more strongly about the inequality of the composition of the Seanad than reformists – and are willing to abolish it at a point

when the Dáil ‘If the Dáil ever becomes so effective and democratic that it can carry all roles on its own, then, and only then, should we decide to abolish the Seanad’ (0, -2, +2)

The Mixed perspective takes a more pragmatic and systemic view with a focus on the Dáil. It focuses not on threats to democracy and a positive view of the Seanad, nor on a negative view of the Seanad with a call for abolition, but rather a focus on the need for Dail reform. It positions the Seanad abolition in the wider context of systemic changes that are required before abolition can be considered. It is close to Reformists in that it sees Seanad abolition giving more power to the Dáil but calls more strongly for Dáil reform as opposed to Seanad reform. In addition to the distinguishing statements listed in table 4 above and the view related to equality, the most important opinions for this perspective relate to the Dail: “Parliamentarians are ruthlessly precluded from thinking. Original thought is one of the few things that can get your fired from political office in Ireland” (+1, +2, +3); “Part of the danger of having only the Dáil is that it gives the government too much power, especially when they have a large majority” (3, 2, +4); “Changes being made to Dáil Committees will make the system more open and inclusive. This will include giving outside experts and members of the public a role in the legislative process. That in my view is far more democratic than retaining a second chamber of parliament elected by just 1 per cent of the population” (-2, +2, +2)”. This is a view also supported by the abolitionists.

Despite the significant differences between perspectives, there were statements on which there were similar levels of agreement. For example, as shown in Table 2, all perspectives agreed that the removal of Article 27 from the constitution is unnecessary (+2, +1, +1) and that there is a need for the Seanad to become more relevant and accountable to citizens (+2, +1, +2). Proponents of all perspectives also had a positive response to the statement “The powers of the Seanad - namely to reflect upon and revise legislation - are perfectly appropriate. However, it is the composition that

renders it undesirable" (+2, +1, +1) although this had a specific relevance for the Reform perspective. In addition, cost was not a valid consideration for abolition of the Seanad showing similar ranking at the neutral point of the grid: "No money will be saved by the abolition of the Seanad because the money will be redeployed to Dáil committees" (0, +1, 0).

Conclusion

The findings above highlight Q-method's potential to deepen information on the collective opinion available to citizens during referendums. The three perspectives identified were expressed through the flow of multiple sources of information on the issue of Seanad reform. Q-methodology makes operant this subjectivity and provides deep information on the perspectives not captured through current survey instruments.

There are two main benefits of this knowledge type. First, the data provide deeper insight into the structure of opinion that can be used to inform both communications and dialogue on the issue during a referendum. An understanding of public discourses, as well as the participative method underlying Q-method supports a move towards discursive representation and deliberative democracy as argued by Dryzek & Niemeyer (2008, 2006). As illustrated by one respondent after the sorting process, "[The process] forced me to consider my position even more carefully than I thought I had already. In fact, I discovered I shared some of the views of the retention camp e.g. on the question of why reform wasn't offered as an option." Where people can be selective in their exposure to information, the sorting process requires the individual to engage with and evaluate the views of all on the issue. This results both in exposure and the active engagement of the person in evaluating their relative response moving beyond polarity.

Second, Q-method can inform the design of surveys, where a focus shifts from simple measurement of intention or preference to estimating also the distribution of each social perspectives in the population (Talbott, 2010). It is an outstanding empirical question whether such studies can also assist in predicting more accurately an election/referendum outcomes given the challenges outlined in earlier sections. A fruitful line of research could be combining Graefe's (2014) proposal with predicting an electoral outcome with survey data informed by a study of social perspectives.

Indeed, there are implications for the voting method used in referendums. If there are three perspectives on an issue with clear independent preferences implied, it is reasonable to expect that three options would be included on the ballot paper. This would lead to a logical case for greater use of multi-option referendums, particularly where government preference is for two options. For example, in this study a participant stated, "I vote no to abolition because I cannot vote yes to Reform".

Without doubt, given the impact of polls on political behaviour, there is clear need for development and use of additional methods to understand public opinion. This is an important question, particularly for Ireland, as the number of referendums increases Barrett (2016). The implications of alternative methods are not just for potentially better predicting outcome, but most importantly for informing dialogue and communications during the referendum campaign. This has particular relevance in the case of the upcoming referendum in 2018 on the Repeal of the 8th Amendment of the Irish constitution related to abortion rights. As such, there is both a compelling normative argument as well as an interesting empirical research question for using Q-methodology. Q-methodology holds promise as not only being a method for providing deeper understanding of

collective opinion, but driving new approaches to political representation, public deliberation and voting. Our call is for further research in this field.

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TABLE 5: Opinion Poll results

Polling company/Publication	Date	Abolish (%)	Retain (%)	Reform (%)	No Opinion/undecided/Don't Know (%)	Won't vote (%)
IPSOS MRBI/Irish Times *	26/11/2012	55	22	NA	23	NA
IPSOS MRBI/Irish Times*	4-5/02/2013	58	20	NA	22	NA
IPSOS/MRBI/Irish Times *	10-11/06/2013	55	21	NA	24	NA
IPSOS MRBI/Irish Times*	27-28/09/2017	44	27	NA	21	8
Red C/Paddy Power**	10-12/06/2013	52	34	NA	14	NA
Red C/Paddy Power***	5-7/08/2013	51	37	NA	12	NA
Red C/ Sunday Business Post***	9-11/09/2013	50	35	NA	15	NA
Millward Brown/Sunday Independent*****	3-12/08/2013	39	7	33	21	NA
Millward Brown/Independent News *****	28/09/2013	39	5	29	27	NA

* Poll of a representative sample of 1000 voters aged 18 and over using face to face interviews at 100 locations in all 43 constituencies. Participants were asked how they intend to vote on the Government's proposal to abolish the Seanad.

** 1000 voters (all adults 18+) were polled. Participants were asked 'Thinking about the referendum on October 4th 2013, to vote for a proposed amendment to the Constitution to abolish the Seanad. If this referendum was to be held tomorrow would you vote Yes in favour to abolish the Seanad or No to keep the Seanad?'

***a random sample of over 1003 adults aged 18 and over were interviewed (likely voters aged 18+). The interviews were conducted across the country and the results weighted to the profile of all adults. Participants were asked 'Thinking about the referendum on October 4th 2013, to vote for a proposed amendment to the Constitution to abolish the Seanad. If this referendum was to be held tomorrow would you vote Yes in favour to abolish the Seanad or No to keep the Seanad?'

**** Face to face polls were conducted among a sample of 993 and 998 adults across the country respectively at 66 sampling points. Quota controls were set on gender, age, social class and region to mirror the 18+ population. Participants were asked 'There has been debate recently about the future of the Seanad, which of the following would you most prefer to see happen?'

APPENDIX A

Table 6 Factor Q-sort values for each statement

	Statement	Perspectives (factors)		
		1. Reform	2. Abolish	3. Mixed
1	Seanad abolition would exacerbate the problems of the state since the banking collapse in 2008 at a time when proper scrutiny fresh ideas and the potential for true political reform are most needed.	0	-4	-2
2	Changes being made to Dáil Committees will make the system more open and inclusive. This will include giving outside experts and members of the public a role in the legislative process. That in my view is far more democratic than retaining a second chamber of parliament elected by just 1 per cent of the population.	-2	2	2
3	Article 27 is an unnecessary deletion from the constitution. If the government wanted to abolish the Seanad but still ensure there was a check on the power of the Dáil and keep the role of the people in the legislative process they could have found other creative solutions such as citizen initiatives.	2	1	1
4	The proposed amendment does more than just abolish the Seanad. There are other kinds of collatoral damage there affecting the position of judges Comptroller and Auditor General Office of the President and the position of the people all of whom all of whom lose ground to the gain of the government to the gain of the Dáil.	1	-1	-1
5	A country of this size and nature (as a unitary or non-federal state) does not need a second house of parliament.	-3	4	-2
6	The Seanad is an important counterbalance to the centralised nature of the Irish political system.	1	0	-1
7	The way the party political system operates in relation to the Senate has been dysfunctional and at odds with the original intention for its role.	1	3	-1
8	We should proceed slowly with change of our political system. A lot is happening in this country much too quickly and with not enough time to reflect and debate.	0	0	-3

9	Abolition can't be a power-grab because the Seanad has no power.	-2	4	-2
10	I wouldn't be in favour of reform at all. I'm totally in favour of abolition.	-4	1	-4
11	A watchdog that has only barked twice in 75 years isn't much use.	-2	3	3
12	Seanad abolition is no threat to our democracy. More an opportunity.	-3	2	-3
13	Having abolished a whole layer of local democracy and having centralised government decision making in a committee of four, I am afraid I don't trust them yet with more power. I think we should take some back and give the people the power to elect the Seanad.	4	-2	2
14	The very fact that the government is refusing to even consider reform is reason enough to reject the proposed abolition.	1	0	1
15	Part of the danger of having only the Dáil is that it gives the government too much power, especially when they have a large majority.	3	-2	4
16	There is a pressing need for the role of the Seanad to become more relevant and more accountable to the lives of Irish citizens.	2	1	2
17	This is a democracy. We dismantle democracy at our peril.	3	-1	-1
18	Our legislation needs more scrutiny not less. No Seanad means no mechanism to delay or amend bills from the Dáil or refer them to the President for consideration by the people - removing important potential breaks in our system.	4	-1	-1
19	Abolition of the Seanad is a miserable little act of political vandalism.	2	-3	1
20	Seanad abolition is not reform, it is a filleting of the Constitution that consolidates the problems of the system into one chamber instead of two.	2	-3	0

21	The focus on Seanad abolition is a deflection from the absense of Dáil reform.	0	-4	4
22	Parliamentarians are ruthlessly precluded from thinking. Original thought is one of the few things that can get you fired from political office in Ireland.	1	2	3
23	The powers of the Seanad - namely to reflect upon and revise legislation - are perfectly appropriate. However, it is the composition othat renders it undesirable.	2	1	1
24	The Seanad is a body that does some good, though not a lot, and imposes a cost, though not a lot - not good enough to be worth saving, not bad enough to be worth abolishing. Perhaps it is hardly worth making it the focus of so much political activity.	-1	-1	0
25	No money will be saved by the abolition of the Seanad because the money will be redeployed to Dáil committees.	0	1	0
26	From an economic perspective, the micro intervention of abolishing the Seanad would have long-term macro consequences.	-1	0	0
27	We just simply cannot afford the Seanad anymore. The money that's saved, no matter what it is, would go to more worthy causes.	-4	-1	-2
28	The abolition of the Seanad will bring significant savings.	-3	-2	-4
29	The Government is concealing a power-grab that will also enable it to impeach the President and Supreme Court.	1	-3	1
30	This is the extinction of the Seanad, it is force majeur and a power-grab.	0	-4	2
31	Senators can often bring new and important perspectives to legislation that might otherwise not be heard in the more pressurised Dáil chamber.	3	0	-1
32	The Seanad has been the only arena in Irish politics for dissenting voices, especially on social issues.	0	-3	-4

33	My big worry is that we are choking off voices, closing down an area for debate and free and open debate is the stuff of democracy. Governments like silence. Democracy is noisy.	4	0	2
34	If the Dáil ever becomes so effective and democratic that it can carry all roles on its own, then, and only then, should we decide to abolish the Seanad.	0	-2	2
35	Abolishing the Seanad has a number of knock-on effects on the Dáil, Presidency, local government and how legislation is processed. Abolition has to take place in the context of a wider reform of these other institutions. Otherwise, all that abolition will achieve is to strengthen the power of the Executive.	3	-2	-3
36	All reform has proved impossible because the Senate has become a creature of the party political system.	-1	2	1
37	We should abolish the Seanad because change is too difficult.	-4	-1	-3
38	The Seanad represents a very blatant inequality at the very heart of our political system. In its current form it should be abolished.	-1	4	4
39	The case is compelling for moving on from the Senate which is undemocratic in its base and has been ineffective over its lifetime.	-2	3	-2
40	The Seanad simply duplicates the work of the Dáil, in weaker form.	-2	2	3
41	Cronyism and elitism that are synonymous with the upper house has fostered the type of politics that has brought this State to its knees.	-1	3	0
42	The Bill is badly drafted, highly technical and deliberately confusing.	-1	1	0
43	The Seanad doesn't matter either way. I couldn't care less what happens to it.	-3	0	0