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Commentary

Does Social Media Use Matter? A Case Study of the 2018 Irish Abortion Referendum

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Abstract
The role of social media at electoral events is much speculated upon. Wide-ranging effects, and often critical evaluations, are attributed to commentary, discussions, and advertising on Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, and many other platforms. But the specific effects of these social media during campaigns, especially referendum campaigns, remain under-studied. This thematic issue is a very valuable contribution for precisely this reason. Using the 2018 abortion referendum in Ireland as an illustrative case, this commentary argues for greater research on social media at referendum campaigns, more critical evaluation of the claims and counterclaims about social media effects, often aired widely without substantive evidence, and, finally, for robust, coordinated cross-national regulation of all digital platforms in line with global democratic norms.

Keywords
abortion; campaign regulation; referendum; referendum campaign; social media

Issue
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1. Introduction

In this commentary, we discuss the impact of social media on referendum campaigns, drawing specifically from the 2018 abortion referendum when the Republic of Ireland (hereafter Ireland) voted to repeal the country's near-total ban on abortion.

Social media use at electoral events was a global concern by 2018. The Cambridge Analytica scandal broke in late 2015, and social media manipulation had been highlighted in the Brexit referendum vote and the election of Donald Trump as president of the US in 2016. There was heightened sensitivity to the potentially corrosive political impacts of social media, and early research had ascribed some of the deep challenges to democracy to social media use (Tucker et al., 2017). These challenges can take many forms: polarisation of opinion (Marozzo & Bessi, 2018), microtargeting of political ads (Tromble et al., 2019; Zarouali et al., 2022), and the creation of echo chambers (Garimella et al., 2018). All of these concerns have been investigated, often during election campaigns, and some evidence of social media effects was identified. But the field is divided; Margetts (2018, p. 120) has argued that "the pathologies that they [social media] introduce are not terminal, but rather, chronic and under-researched, requiring careful study and long-term management," and Dommett and Temple (2018, p. 202) concluded that there "are significant areas of ambiguity" in understanding the implications of these trends.

The Irish vote on abortion in 2018 is useful to study in this regard; it attracted global media attention and shattered the final vestiges of Ireland's reputation as a conservative Catholic state. A referendum in 1983 had inserted a prohibition on abortion into the constitution, while the vote in 2018 repealed this restriction, and liberal abortion legislation was enacted. The vote was also the focus of global interest by international campaigners

on abortion rights, especially on the anti-abortion side, with US pro-life groups active in the campaign and in the preceding citizens' assembly. An intense campaign played out both on mainstream media and on social media. At an early stage in the campaign, the role of social media platforms became a major bone of contention with claims and counter-claims of online manipulation, misinformation and interference by international actors in the debate (Leahy, 2018). A series of voluntary withdrawals by the social media platforms from political advertising alleviated some concerns, but social media use remained a central aspect of the campaign.

Using data from the exit poll conducted by the public broadcaster (RTÉ) and Irish universities (for access to the data file, see Elkink et al., 2018), we demonstrate that social media platforms were used widely by all voter cohorts throughout the campaign but that some of the preconceived ideas about which side was benefiting from social media use were misguided and not supported by the data. Perhaps most importantly, a large majority of voters had made up their minds about how they would vote long before the campaign; as a result, the numbers open to persuasion were quite limited, no matter how effective the online campaigns were. Our central argument is that there are major gaps in scholarly knowledge about how referendum campaigns have changed with the advent of greater social media use. And while some research has suggested the enormous reach and impact of social media, much more evidence, specific to referendums, is needed to support these early conclusions. Indeed, social media use at referendums has been rather less considered than other electoral events, in part because referendums are relatively rare political occurrences. Renwick et al. (2020, p. 521) identified "accuracy, balance, accessibility and relevance" as the four dimensions of high-quality information at referendum campaigns, and social media manipulation has the potential to erode each of these. Social media campaigns were controversial and called into question misperceptions and disinformation in the 2022 defeated referendum on Chile's new constitution (Suiter et al., 2022). But the absence of regular large-scale studies of referendums means that there are sizable gaps in the understanding of how social media affects all of the four dimensions of information.

2. 2018 Referendum to Repeal the Constitutional Prohibition on Abortion

The 2018 Irish abortion referendum provides a useful illustrative case to reflect on some of the central questions of how social media affects the behaviours and attitudes of voters (for a general outline of voter behaviour, see Elkink et al., 2020). In Ireland, abortion referendum campaigns have a reputation for being deeply acrimonious and polarising. The 1983 referendum to introduce a constitutional prohibition on abortion was described as "an incessant campaign of unparalleled divisiveness, bitterness and rancour" (O'Carroll, 1991, p. 55). Four further referendums on abortion in 1992 and 2002 did little to change the underlying dynamics. By the early 21st century, pro-life activists were accused of importing US pro-life tactics and distributing material with images of late-term foetuses and the Holocaust alongside the names and details of public representatives (Walsh & McEnroe, 2013). The roots of the 2018 campaign can be traced to November 2012 when *The Irish Times* reported that a woman (Savita Halappanavar) had died in a hospital arising from miscarriage complications that were directly connected to the restrictive abortion regime. Public outrage was initially expressed on social media, and the case was reported by the international press. The pro-choice movement was galvanised into an intense and sustained crusade to liberalise abortion provision, but the deeply entrenched and well-funded anti-choice groups also mobilised their extensive networks into action for what became a six-year campaign. The government initially introduced very limited legislation, but in the aftermath of the 2016 general election, steps were taken to address abortion provision substantively. A national citizens' assembly recommended a referendum to repeal the constitutional prohibition and significant liberalisation, and this was endorsed by an all-party parliamentary committee. The official campaign began in March 2018 and lasted two months.

The 2018 referendum became the first Irish abortion referendum of the digital age. Both sides entered the digital fray with gusto and were very active on social media (Leahy, 2018). The "Yes" (pro-choice) side focused on women's stories, such as @TwoWomenTravel, which used Twitter to document the experience of women travelling to the UK for an abortion. The anti-abortion campaign ("No") focused on the idea that the proposed changes would result in "extreme abortion on demand." It also touched on nativist tendencies and suggested that the new system would be "too British" (Statham & Ringrow, 2022). However, on social media, it refrained from the use of graphic images of foetuses that did appear in some campaign literature. Concerns from the pro-choice side that anti-abortion advertising might be funded from outside the country were aired in the media and partly arose from the recruitment of a US anti-abortion speaker as one of the witnesses for the anti-abortion side in the preceding citizens' assembly. Further, the absence of regulations governing online political advertising and a generally moderate wider regulation framework (Reidy & Suiter, 2015) contributed to widespread anxiety among political elites that the campaign could be vulnerable to potential (foreign) interference and deep incivility.

In any event, several of the major social media companies decided to voluntarily withdraw political advertising from their platforms during the campaign. No doubt, global concerns about social media manipulation and domestic sensitivity to potential interference in the abortion referendum aligned and influenced the decisions.

Facebook announced, on May 8, 2018, that it would only accept ads from organisations based in the Republic of Ireland. Google followed suit and banned all political ads on May 9, citing fears that overseas organisations were targeting voters. The ban also applied to YouTube. Twitter had not allowed referendum ads from the very start of the campaign. This brings us to the first important point in this commentary: Many states, including those that regularly hold referendums, are unprepared for campaigns in a hybrid media environment. There are major gaps in the legal frameworks that govern political campaigns, and anomalous situations prevail where mainstream media are heavily regulated while digital media face almost no control. There is an urgent need for coordinated action on the regulation of the digital space. The Irish case highlights the particular need for this to be coordinated across states: The abortion referendum attracted many campaigners from outside the state, and digital platforms do not have national territorial distribution and access boundaries. Regulatory action must explicitly engage with these challenging realities.

The voluntary withdrawals did not mean that social media use was eliminated from the campaign, there was political advertising in the first week and widespread reports that ads continued to appear despite the moves by platforms to limit them (Gallagher, 2018). Furthermore, the abortion debate was a 40-year one in Ireland and paid advertising had been appearing on platforms for several years before the referendum was called. And campaign groups and voters could still debate and discuss all of the issues online. The second observation we make is that assumptions about the effectiveness and impacts of social media must be interrogated and challenged. The pro-choice side of the campaign strongly welcomed the political advertising bans and restrictions announced by the social media platforms at the start of the campaign, citing evidence of anti-abortion groups in the UK, US, and Canada purchasing ads. And the anti-abortion campaign was strongly opposed arguing that it was "shutting down a free and fair debate" (O'Brien & Kelly, 2018). Clearly, the "No" campaign felt that it had an edge in the online campaign. But these positions display a misunderstanding of which voter groups were open to persuasion and what tools were most effective at persuading them.

The RTÉ–Universities exit poll included data on the consumption of mainstream media (radio, TV, newspapers) and digital media (social media, online news) and reveals some interesting differences among voter cohorts. Table 1 shows that voters who used digital media during the abortion referendum campaign were distinctive and different to those that did not use online sources. In contrast to campaign narratives that the "No" campaign was effective on online platforms, the evidence shows people who used digital media of all forms were noticeably more likely to vote "Yes," and this result is statistically significant, including when controlling for age. Among those that never browsed online for news, the "Yes" vote was 47%, but it increased to 73% for those that browsed online on one or more days and reached 80% among those that browsed online every day. A similar pattern is evident in relation to social media use. Among those that never used social media, 53% voted "Yes." The average was 72% for those that browsed one or more days per week, and it rose to 82% for those using social media every day. Controlling for age, social media use was significant for the "Yes" side. We can also see that, on average, more respondents listened to the radio news and watched TV news than each of the other three media. This is consistent with Blassnig et al. (2023), who found that citizens tended to rely more on traditional news media to find information on referendums. And trust also matters; further data from the exit poll showed that social media were the least trusted of all media while television news was the most trusted. And lastly, "Yes" voters were noticeably more trustful of social media and digital news sources.

The message from this finding is that both campaigns were misguided in some of their assumptions and social media expectations. And following on from this, we must make a plea for a more comprehensive and sustained analysis of campaign activity and voting patterns at referendums.

Ultimately, the proposal to remove the constitutional ban on abortion was supported with an overwhelming "Yes" vote of 66% in favour, on a turnout of 64%. There was majority support for the proposal in all but one constituency. Most voters reported that they had made up their minds on how to vote within a considerable period, and 75% of people reported that they always knew how

Table 1. Media consumption.

Never	Watch TV news	Read a newspaper	Listen to radio news	Use social media	Browse online news websites and apps
Voted "Yes"	79.3%	75.2%	85.2%	53.4%	47.4%
Voted "No"	20.7%	24.8%	14.8%	46.6%	52.6%
Seven days a week	Watch TV news	Read a newspaper	Listen to radio news	Use social media	Browse online news websites and apps
Voted "Yes"	64.3%	64.8%	66.3%	81.5%	79.9%
Voted "No"	35.7%	35.2%	33.7%	18.5%	20.1%

Source: Elkink et al. (2018), (column percentages).

they would vote. Some important events, such as the death of the woman in a hospital in 2012, the citizens' assembly, and the parliamentary committee, were cited by 11% of respondents as influencing opinion in the period before the vote. While just 12% reported that they decided how to vote during the campaign (Elkink et al., 2020). This tells us that the campaigners were always going to face an uphill battle at the referendum since most voters had already decided how they would vote (Reidy, 2021). Social media, no matter how effective the digital ads and online conversations, were always only going to reach very narrow groups of voters. But referendum questions span an enormous variety of constitutional and policy topics, and much wider and deeper research is needed to assess campaign effects at different types of referendums.

The evidence from the 2018 abortion referendum is that digital media users (online news and social media) were more liberal, including when age is controlled for. But on this deep cleavage issue, most voters had made up their minds before the campaign started, so the potential for social media to alter opinions was very limited from the outset. Only a small number of voters were available to persuade. And when we look at these voters, we find that the vast majority leaned towards "Yes" during the campaign. And this is very much the case for social media users who skewed heavily towards a "Yes" vote and not "No," as had been apocalyptically speculated at times during the campaign. In fact, only those who never used social media skewed "No."

3. Conclusion

The 2018 abortion referendum provides important insights that should stimulate further research and reflection. In this case, social media did not matter all that much. It must be acknowledged that the potential impact of social media is variable at referendums. We need to conduct campaign studies across multiple contexts and on a variety of issues to understand the circumstances when social media is likely to be influential and when it is not. Given this variability, regulatory frameworks that are clear, comprehensive, and adaptive need to be urgently implemented. Social media companies should not decide the electoral decisions and events where digital advertising and other forms of communication will be allowed, or not. And we must challenge all assumptions about social media and the likely impacts that it can have. At the abortion referendum, the "No" campaign was deeply opposed to the restriction of its digital imprint, but the evidence showed that voters leaning towards that side were least likely to be found on digital platforms.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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