



# The Path to Marriage Equality In Ireland: A Case Study

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## Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Background	1
First Steps to Marriage Equality	3
The Constitutional Convention	4
2013-2014 –Laying Down the Foundations for Marriage Equality Campaign	7
Early 2015—Conflict Arises Between LGBT Organizations	10
March-April—Referendum Campaign Begins and Tensions Come to the Forefront	11
May—Final Stretch	14
Lessons	17
Conclusion	18

From 2004 to 2012, The Atlantic Philanthropies invested more than €63 million to advance human rights in Ireland, including those of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people (LGBT). Atlantic's support helped strengthen and expand the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) and Marriage Equality (and its predecessor), two organizations that laid the groundwork for passage of a civil partnership law in 2010.

In May 2015, following concerted work by GLEN, Marriage Equality, and others, Irish citizens overwhelmingly passed a referendum that provides marriage equality for same-sex couples. That marked the first time any country had approved same-sex marriage through a popular vote. Atlantic did not provide any funding for this campaign.

Atlantic commissioned this case study to tell the story of this landmark achievement as a companion to an earlier case study on the passage of the civil partnership law.



## Introduction

Persuading an electorate to vote to provide rights for a minority is never an easy task. That is particularly true in traditionally conservative countries. But the overwhelming passage of Ireland's May 2015 referendum that provides marriage equality for same-sex couples shows that it can be done.

Perhaps just as important, the lessons from that referendum campaign can inform other advocates who are working to ensure rights for minority groups, whether lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender people (LGBT) or others.

The story of how Ireland became the first country to vote for marriage equality by popular vote is one in which two competing LGBT organizations had to dig deep to overcome long-standing rancor, where unexpected allies provided crucial counsel, and where advocates got a surprising boost from a little-used approach to citizen participation. While Ireland's marriage referendum played out in a specific context, the work of the key campaigners offers learnings that can be applied to other efforts to secure rights for minority groups.

This case study tells the story of how this landmark achievement was won. It also describes the specific tactics that organizers used that helped secure such a convincing victory. The case describes the challenges that the campaign faced, how organizers addressed those struggles, and what key architects believe are the most important take-home lessons for other advocates.

## Background

In 2010, Ireland passed a civil partnership bill that provided some of the most sweeping protections to LGBT couples in the world at the time. It was the culmination of years of work by advocates. The main LGBT group pushing for the civil partnership bill was the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN)<sup>1</sup>, which had worked methodically within the political system to create support across all political parties for the ground-breaking bill.

### Groundbreaking Civil Partnership Bill Prompts Rifts Among LGBT Organizations

From GLEN's perspective, this new law was a huge step forward in gaining equality for the LGBT population. The organization's leaders said they also saw it as a needed first step toward achieving full marriage equality. While the new law provided most of the same benefits and protections to LGBT couples as marriage did for straight couples, it was controversial among some advocates in the LGBT community.

Another LGBT organization—Marriage Equality—had been actively campaigning for full civil marriage for same-sex couples. Marriage Equality and a related predecessor organization (KAL Advocacy Initiative) were formed to support the case of a lesbian couple, Katherine Zappone and Ann Louise Gilligan, who had married in Canada and sought to have their marriage recognized in Ireland. In 2006, Ireland's High Court rejected the couple's arguments. The couple went on to appeal the decision to the Supreme Court, which had not heard the case at the time of the civil partnership bill.

<sup>1</sup> GLEN closed in 2017.



## Different Philosophies on How to Achieve Equality

GLEN was unconvinced about the likelihood of success if it pursued civil marriage through the courts. In GLEN's view, the Irish courts were not typically interventionist, and there was little precedent to suggest that progress could be made quickly. Still, the publicity and discussion around the Zappone-Gilligan case helped to awaken public consciousness of the unfairness that a longtime, committed couple could not have their relationship recognized. It helped to build broad public support for some type of legal recognition of gay and lesbian couples. The couple, who were engaging and articulate, brought human faces to the debate.

For its part, Marriage Equality organizers strongly believed that the civil partnership bill did not represent the position of the vast majority of lesbian and gay communities because it fell short of affording lesbians and gay men the same rights as heterosexual citizens.

Marriage Equality and other organizations like LGBT Noise felt that GLEN was out of step with the wishes of gays and lesbians and that a civil partnership bill was not a required first step toward full equality. Marriage Equality argued that a national campaign was required to bring about civil marriage for same-sex couples in Ireland. Supporting civil partnerships could mean relegating gays and lesbians to a second-class status for years to come. As part of its work, it launched an "Out to Your TD" campaign that encouraged gays and lesbians to meet with and lobby their political representatives for marriage equality.

The organizations had different cultures, as well. GLEN was seen as the more "insider" organization that worked closely with national politicians and made it a point to praise every positive step made by legislators, even in the face of frustrations that the steps could be quite small. Marriage Equality was more of a grass-roots organization, focusing its efforts on mobilizing advocates and working with local politicians, as well as on its legal strategy for the Zappone-Gilligan case. And, as its name indicates, the organization also made clear that it would not support anything less than full marriage equality for the LGBT community.

## Bill Silent on Children of LGBT Couples

One part of the civil partnership bill was especially problematic to Marriage Equality. The bill did not provide provisions for children of same-sex couples, which left them in legal limbo. While GLEN highlighted this as a flaw in the bill it supported the legislation because, from its perspective, the bill provided almost all of the other rights and responsibilities of marriage and LGBT couples urgently needed the protections it offered. GLEN members believed that if they insisted on the provisions for children the bill would not go through. For Marriage Equality, this was unacceptable.

It was a tense and uneasy time for two of the leading LGBT organizations in Ireland.

The intense anger that some LGBT groups felt about the bill became even more evident at the Gay Pride March in June 2009, which happened to take place in Dublin the day after the bill was published. At the end of the parade, the bill was dramatically torn up onstage by an advocacy group. Other activists also voiced their dismay.

"We are not to be insulted and humiliated," Ailbhe Smyth, a longtime lesbian activist and board member of Marriage Equality, told the rally as quoted in *The Irish Times*. "We want marriage for lesbians and gays, our goal is equality."

Looking back, Brian Sheehan, former director of GLEN, said, "There is an argument that a voice out there articulating the case for marriage might have been helpful in pushing the boundaries for what the expectation was [and helping us get to civil partnerships]. But there came a point when it wasn't helpful, when the loud voices put at risk the very achievement of civil partnerships when it was going through Parliament. We knew that legislators were nervous. If Marriage Equality and LGBT Noise had been able to garner more support among politicians, there was a risk that the government would have said this is too much trouble."



For her part, Grainne Healy, board chair of Marriage Equality said, "GLEN would say that they always had marriage equality as a goal, but there was very little evidence of that in the early days. Either they would dismiss marriage equality or dismiss people who were leading the marriage equality campaign."

The fissures between the groups continued as the civil partnership bill came closer to passage. The LGBT groups that opposed the bill continued their public opposition and staged a large rally in front of the Dáil (Parliament) protesting the civil partnership bill, likening it to apartheid.

"The tensions between GLEN and Marriage Equality were very noticeable," said Mark Garrett, a longtime Labour Party high-ranking official who was brought in to help with the marriage equality referendum. "You could see them shudder when you talked about the other organization. You could see their shoulders tense up. They knew that they were roughly on the same side, but they weren't allies. They didn't trust each other to the extent they possibly could. They certainly didn't work together."

Still, despite the tensions among the LGBT groups, the civil partnership bill passed and went into effect on January 1, 2011. Once it did, hundreds of gay and lesbian couples began entering partnerships (for more details on the passage of the civil partnership bill, see ["Civil Partnership and Ireland: How a Minority Achieved a Majority"](#)).

## First Steps to Marriage Equality

After the civil partnership bill was enacted in 2011, GLEN and Marriage Equality continued working—largely on separate tracks—to pave the way for full marriage equality for lesbians and gays in Ireland.

One thing that GLEN and Marriage Equality agreed on was that the only likely way that gays and lesbians would get full marriage rights would be through a referendum voted on by citizens that would change the Irish Constitution. While Marriage Equality had pursued a route to marriage equality through the courts, the Supreme Court had consistently interpreted the constitution to say that marriage was between a man and a woman. By 2012, the Zappone-Gilligan appeal had still not been heard at the Supreme Court.

In addition, Ireland, like the rest of the world, was still recovering from a massive recession, and it was unlikely that legislators would take on the politically difficult issue of gay marriage. If marriage equality was to be attained, it would likely have to happen through a referendum that changed the constitution.

### Shifting the Language Around Gay Civil Partnerships

To prepare the ground for such a referendum, GLEN pursued a number of avenues including tracking and promoting the growing numbers of civil partnerships around Ireland, sending out press releases every six months with statistics about which county in Ireland had had the most gay weddings. Notably, GLEN made it a point to call them weddings and not civil partnerships to set the stage for full marriage equality. Many of the regional newspapers carried those stories. By June 2014, some 1,500 gay and lesbian couples had had a civil partnership ceremony. If an average of 100 people attended those ceremonies, then some 150,000 Irish citizens had firsthand experience with such a commitment, GLEN staff noted. This was out of a population of 4.6 million at the time.

"Each civil partnership was a golden campaign opportunity to set the stage for a referendum," Sheehan said. "People would go and say that was a great wedding. They didn't buy a civil partnership present. They bought a wedding present. That language shift was a crucial one that we needed to achieve."

GLEN also felt it was vital to address the issue of taxation of couples in civil partnership before gay marriage was taken up, which the government had promised to do. Taxation could not be addressed in the civil partnership bill; it had to be dealt with in a separate bill that would be brought by the minister of finance. It was important that gay couples in civil partnerships had exactly the same benefits and burdens tax-wise as straight couples. That bill was passed in July 2011.



"We didn't want the referendum to be about taxation or children or immigration," said Kieran Rose, former chair of GLEN. "It was about giving LGBT people full constitutional equality. If we hadn't gotten the taxation bill through, the opponents of marriage equality would have tried to say things like, 'This is going to cost \$500 million a year in lost tax. We are giving benefits to gay couples that could have been spent on older people.'"

Marriage Equality, meanwhile, continued to press for full marriage equality through a number of actions including continuing its "Out to Your TD" campaign and highlighting the fact that same-sex couples who had civil partnerships still had fewer rights and responsibilities than married heterosexual couples such as – at the time – unequal tax treatment.

Marriage Equality also published a report that listed 169 legal differences between civil marriage and civil partnership. The intent of the report was to belie claims that civil partnership provides same-sex couples with equality in all but name.

## The Constitutional Convention

In 2011, a new coalition government came to power in Ireland, formed by the Labour and Fine Gael parties, which had secured the most support in a recent election. The election had taken place when the country was still reeling from the effects of the recession and had the added embarrassment of needing to be bailed out by the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank, and the European Commission. Much of the focus of the new Programme for Government, which detailed the government's commitments, was on getting the economy back on track.

### New Government Wrestles with Next Steps on Marriage Equality

The two parties debated about whether to include marriage equality in their program. The Labour Party had promised to hold a constitutional referendum as the path for marriage equality for gay and lesbian couples. But the more conservative party (Fine Gael), headed by Enda Kenny, was not prepared to go that far. While Kenny had supported civil partnerships, he was by nature a cautious politician. Instead, the two parties promised to establish a Constitutional Convention—made up of ordinary citizens and politicians—to make recommendations on six issues including marriage equality.

At that time, Constitutional Conventions were a relatively new and untested method of getting citizen involvement on policy issues. David Farrell, a professor of politics at University College Dublin, had witnessed these citizen assemblies in Canada and the Netherlands. When he moved from England back to Ireland in 2009 after being away for two decades, he thought that citizen assemblies might be a useful means to productively channel the anger that many Irish citizens felt over the financial meltdown. He worked with other Irish political scientists to promote the virtues of citizen-centered approaches to political reform, publishing opinion pieces in newspapers and appearing on radio and television discussions.

### A New Approach to Citizen Engagement Shows Promise

The Atlantic Philanthropies leadership in Ireland heard about these assemblies or conventions and approached Farrell with an offer to fund a pilot effort. Farrell and a team of academics set up "We the Citizens," which tested the approach in seven towns around Ireland concluding with Ireland's first national citizens' assembly in June 2011. Farrell's team found a remarkable level of enthusiasm and engagement, with up to 150 citizens in a small town showing up for an evening of discussing critical issues. Surveys of participants at the beginning and end of the national citizens' assembly indicated that these citizen assemblies were a promising approach for fostering citizen engagement.

"We were able to show that the experiment worked," Farrell said. "Citizens were prepared to change their minds and embrace issues that included quite difficult policy decisions. They felt more satisfied with democracy and more empowered."



### Skepticism About Ireland's Constitutional Convention

The whole notion of the "We the Citizens" project was to show the viability of this approach to government, Farrell said. When the government announced its plan to hold a Constitutional Convention, Farrell and his colleagues presented their research findings to senior government officials and all the political parties' leaders in a series of face to face meetings. The "We the Citizens" model became the template for the Constitutional Convention and many on its academic team went on to support the work of the convention, Farrell and others noted in a June 5, 2015, piece in *The Washington Post*.

The leaders of "We the Citizens" persuasively argued that they had established a solid methodology and process for running such assemblies. As such, they were able to influence key components of the convention. Among those was that two-thirds (66) of the participants were citizens selected at random to participate in a series of weekend gatherings to learn about and make recommendations on a particular topic.

Those recommendations would go to the government, which would then decide on whether to move them forward. Farrell felt that it was vital that the citizens be truly randomly chosen, rather than picked to represent a particular demographic or point of view in order for the process to allow citizens to deliberate with an open mind. The other one-third of participants were politicians. Farrell and his colleagues also recommended that the convention start with less controversial issues before tackling marriage equality, which was the most significant issue the Convention would take on.

While Farrell had seen for himself the transformative nature of these citizen assemblies, others on the Irish political scene who supported marriage equality were skeptical. Noel Whelan, a lawyer and columnist who would come to play a pivotal role in the referendum, was one such observer.

"I have long been of the view that this Government's proposed constitutional convention is a sham," Whelan wrote in a July 7, 2012, column in *The Irish Times*. "It will be the purgatory into which a selection of constitutional issues will be parked before being further delayed or diverted when they return to the parliamentary process. It is no coincidence that gay marriage is among those issues."

As it turned out, the Constitutional Convention was a critical catalyst for the eventual successful marriage referendum. It also brought together the two main LGBT organizations, which for the first time, collaborated closely on their presentations.

### Young Adults' Stories of Their Parents May Have Been Pivotal Factor

The Constitutional Convention began meeting in early 2013. The discussion on marriage equality was the third meeting and set for the weekend of April 13-14, 2013. By the end of the weekend, members of the Convention would vote in favor or against recommending to the government that it put marriage equality to a referendum. The Constitutional Convention was a crucial moment in the now decades-long campaign for gay marriage. If the citizens and politicians voted against holding the referendum, it would be an enormous setback for gay marriage in Ireland. If they voted for it, their affirmation would create a push that would be difficult for the government to ignore.

Each Constitutional Convention followed the same format. Convention members arrived on a Friday evening and heard expert testimony from all sides of an issue all day Saturday and Sunday morning. They then made their recommendations about noon on Sunday in time for the main news shows on Irish media.

The organizers of the Convention on marriage equality sought out impartial experts such as constitutional lawyers and child psychologists to provide testimony on the potential impacts of gay marriage in Ireland. Organizers allotted equal time for those for and against holding a referendum to present their positions.

Given the limited time allocated, leaders of GLEN, Marriage Equality, and the Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL) decided that they should share their allotment and present a coordinated and unified message. For Marriage Equality organizers, it was crucial that children of gay parents testify. As noted earlier one of the big gaps in the civil partnership bill was that it had not addressed the legal status of such children. At the time of the Convention, that omission still had not been dealt with in legislation.



As part its outreach work, Marriage Equality had trained two poised, articulate young adults who both had lesbian mothers. Their heartfelt testimony at the Convention was, by many accounts, the turning point for many members.

Clare O'Connell and Conor Prendergast spoke articulately about the real impact on their lives when their parents did not have the right to legally marry. Conor, who was engaged to a woman, said his parents, who had been together for 32 years, deserved the same recognition of their relationship as he would have. When he finished his testimony, attendees erupted in a loud round of applause.

"People in the Convention needed to see what it is like to be a child in a lesbian or gay household," Smyth said. "This is why gay marriage really matters. It was very important to bring the human dimension to the table."

Conor was followed by the No side, which were represented by the Council for Marriage and the Family of the Irish Bishops' Conference and an affiliated group. While the Yes sides presentation had emphasized both the head and heart argument, the No side just focused on the head—legalistic arguments—even though they knew that the young adults would be speaking, Farrell said. That was probably a mistake, he said, since legal opinions do not tend to move people as much as personal stories. It was a mistake that the No side would continue to make as the later referendum campaign unfolded.

### **An Overwhelming Vote in Favor**

When it came time for the members of the Constitutional Convention to vote, even the Yes side was shocked by the scale of the vote in favor. Some 79 percent of the members voted in favor of recommending that marriage equality be put on the ballot. According to David Farrell, this strong endorsement was a pivotal moment in the campaign.

"It is safe to say that we would never have had a referendum on marriage equality but for the fact that the Labour Party forced it on to the agenda of the Constitutional Convention," Farrell said.

Kieran Rose, former chair of GLEN, said that the Convention vote was important in other ways as well.

"This was like a mini-referendum," he said. "Winning over people from rural areas, older people [who participated in the Constitutional Convention]—it was like a microcosm of the Irish population. I think it boosted the confidence of elected representatives and political parties that a referendum could be won. It showed you could build a majority and win people who weren't immediately aware or supportive."

### **LGBT Organizations Take Steps to Work Together More Formally**

LGBT leaders and their allies were elated by the strong show of support from the Convention. They also learned some important things that they would make use of in the referendum campaign. Among them was that the idea of fairness, which the organizations used in their presentation, resonated with the Convention members. From that time on, the messaging for the referendum focused on fairness, rather than marriage equality. They also saw how important personal stories were to winning over citizens who might not be initially inclined to support gay marriage.

"The Constitutional Convention was hugely important," said Bride Rosney, an advisor to the marriage equality referendum and formerly special advisor to Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland. "It allowed GLEN and Marriage Equality to rehearse their arguments in a smaller, more contained arena."

In addition, GLEN and Marriage Equality leaders had a positive experience of working together.

"The Citizens' Convention was the coming together of Marriage Equality, GLEN, and the ICCL," said Smyth, a board member of Marriage Equality and the leader who had denounced civil partnerships at Gay Pride just a few years back. "The experience of the three organizations working together began to break down some of the resistance and animosity between Marriage Equality and GLEN. Having the ICCL there helped, as well. A third party always changes the dynamics in a partnership."



Healy said that about a week after the convention she rang Brian Sheehan and Mark Kelly, head of the ICCL, and suggested that they meet to see if they could keep working together.

"I had never run a referendum campaign but I knew that there were a couple things about them that were crucial," Healy said. "You needed a single unifying body and a single unifying message."

Sheehan and Kelly felt the same way. The representatives of three organizations began meeting regularly.

## 2013-2014—Laying Down the Foundations for Marriage Equality Campaign

For the next year and a half, the organizations worked on laying the groundwork for the referendum campaign. The most immediate tasks were to secure a formal commitment to hold the referendum—including a referendum date—and to enact legislative reform around the outstanding issues of children of LGBT parents.

It was not a sure thing that the government would hold a marriage referendum simply because the Constitutional Convention recommended it. The senior coalition partner's leader, Prime Minister Enda Kenny, was a cautious politician whose instincts were to avoid something as controversial as gay marriage, noted Noel Whelan.

"The recommendation of the Constitutional Convention could have gone nowhere and most of the recommendations did go nowhere," Whelan said. "The one on gay marriage was the most dramatic recommendation of the Convention. The government could have said 'let's explore it further, let's have a commission.' That could slow it down. Kenny would have been well able to duck and dive if not for the fact that their Labour partners in government insisted on holding a referendum and LGBT groups pushed for it, too."

In November 2013, the government announced that a referendum would be held in 2015.

At about the same time, legislators also announced a Children and Family Relationships Bill, and GLEN, Marriage Equality, and the ICCL provided submissions that helped inform the bill. The bill addressed a number of issues that affected family law including those of children of lesbian and gay parents. Marriage equality advocates felt strongly that the legislation must be enacted before the referendum campaign so that arguments from the No side about children would not distract from the message of equality. As it turned out the bill, which had some though not all the provisions LGBT advocates hoped for, was not enacted until shortly before the referendum was held.

### A Galvanizing Television Appearance

In these early days of organizing, an appearance by drag artist and gay rights activist Rory O'Neill on one of the country's most popular television shows, *The Saturday Night Show*, and a later appearance at The Abbey Theatre sparked intense feelings among both those in the gay community and those opposed to gay rights.

According to *Ireland Says Yes: The Inside Story of How the Vote for Marriage Equality Was Won*, written by Healy, Sheehan and Whelan, on the television show, O'Neill described how it felt to be gay in Ireland and said that despite progress, some people in the public eye were sometimes hurtful about gays. When asked to provide names, a somewhat hesitant O'Neill mentioned newspaper columnists and the Iona Institute, which had publicly opposed gay marriage. In describing homophobia, he said that everyone was a bit homophobic in the same way that everyone was a bit racist and that came from not knowing or understanding much about difference.

The segment caused a furor among those named who sued the network for libel. The network promptly settled and removed the clips, which in turn led to protests by the LGBT community. In this initial organizing period, some LGBT advocates worried that proponents of the marriage referendum might alienate fair-minded people with the way they framed the issue. Whelan wrote a column for *The Irish*



*Times* a few weeks after the television appearance in January 2014 that warned about shutting down opposing views to marriage equality, which could undermine the prospects for passage of the referendum.

"Having watched the progress of referendum debates for three decades and participated in some of them...I have found that the single thing most likely to make Irish people suspicious of any proposal is a sense that they are not being given the opportunity to truly debate it," Whelan wrote.

Three weeks later, when O'Neill was at the Abbey Theatre, he delivered a raw and vulnerable speech about how it feels to be a gay person in Ireland and about the internalized homophobia that he often experienced. One of the key points he made was how difficult it is to have "nice people, respectable people, smart people" feel like it was acceptable to have a debate about what rights you deserve. The speech was captured on video and quickly went viral, garnering more than 200,000 views in two days.

O'Neill's speech had an electrifying effect on the LGBT community and their allies, according to *Ireland Says Yes*. It was one of many examples of events that occurred outside of a carefully planned campaign that at least indirectly impacted the work. That is, while the chief organizers were laying the groundwork for the hoped for successful referendum, sometimes other events or decisions by people outside the campaign would also send ripples or more that would affect the larger work. Whelan's circumspection too would influence the campaign's tone. He would later become a key member of the campaign's leadership.

### **A Caution About Previous Referendums**

In the autumn of 2014, GLEN, Marriage Equality, and the ICCL began working in earnest to set up the infrastructure that would be needed for a referendum campaign in 2015. The group formalized the work among the three organizations by setting up a steering committee. The steering committee comprised leaders of the three groups, along with senior staff.

In September 2014, GLEN asked Whelan, a veteran of several referendum campaigns—both successful and unsuccessful—to come and speak with them about his experiences. At the time, opinion polls suggested early support for the marriage referendum. Whelan and the LGBT leaders worried that marriage equality supporters could take a win for granted and become complacent. Whelan's biggest concern was that LGBT groups would talk only to those who were already convinced and ignore those in the middle. He also worried that activists would create an atmosphere that was so negative that most of the electorate would sit out the campaign. Many referendums in Ireland had failed after bitter and divisive campaigns.

"What we had sensed in previous campaigns was that people's support is easily displaced by concerns and fears," Whelan said.

Whelan's concerns matched those of the leaders of the key organizations overseeing the campaign. They did not want to run a referendum campaign that could alienate a large group of potential supporters. But the message they sought to convey did not crystallize until the leaders of the three key organizations went to hear pitches from five firms for the design and look of the campaign. One concept immediately stood out. It was Yes Equality: The Campaign for Civil Marriage Equality. The name, which was designed in bright and cheerful colors, perfectly conveyed the message that the organizers wanted to get across. This was a campaign about fairness for all. It was not about "those other people" but would create a unifying goal that all of Ireland could aspire to.

"We have a lot of referendums in Ireland, and there is a catch cry, 'if you don't know, vote no,'" Rosney said. "The campaign immediately addressed that. One of the first things was with the name Yes Equality. It's trying to be positive and is focused on equality. It doesn't tell you that this is a referendum around gays and lesbians. It could be around equality of finances. That was very significant and clever and deliberate thinking."

That autumn, the organizers also started holding meetings for organizations within the LGBT community that would become especially important as the campaign geared up in the spring of the next year. Starting to liaise with local groups around Ireland was crucial, both to apprise them of the broad-based national strategy and to get their input on local issues. It was the beginning of the development of a nationwide canvassing effort that would become a critical part of the work in the coming months.



### Register to Vote Campaign—Focusing on Young Adults

The organizations also began implementing a plan to use an annual Register to Vote drive in November to help jump-start the campaign by reminding voters about the upcoming referendum, and—critically—registering as many young people as they could who polls showed were strong supporters of marriage equality. Research had showed that nearly all those under age 30 supported marriage equality. The focus would especially be on those under 25—a group that traditionally had low turnouts for votes. A concerted effort to register this crucial group could help in two ways: Generate excitement about the upcoming referendum, and begin to build an infrastructure of support that the campaign desperately needed.

“There were very few members in GLEN or Marriage Equality to tap into when the campaign started,” said Mark Garrett, a Labour Party official. “My assumption that they were member-based organizations didn’t prove to be the case.”

However, the organizations did have contacts, including Marriage Equality’s long-standing work with the Union of Students and BeLonG To, an LGBT youth group. The campaign used those contacts and others to start mobilizing an enthusiastic group of LGBT activists and allies.

Early estimates showed that about 30 percent of Ireland’s voters would vote yes for marriage equality, 20-30 percent would probably vote no and about 50 percent were undecided, Healy said. If the campaign could lock in the 30 percent who were supportive, they could then focus their attention on the undecided voters.

The Register to Vote Campaign launched on November 3, 2014, and, in a decision that would be indicative of the campaign strategists’ thinking, took place not in Dublin, but in Cork, a city a few hours away, and was kicked off by a young, disability rights campaigner. She was also joined by a well-known member of the All-Ireland hurling championship team, according to *Ireland Says Yes*. Hurling is a wildly popular sport in Ireland with games regularly attracting tens of thousands of spectators. Again and again, the campaign would look for ways to demonstrate mainstream support for marriage equality.

The Register to Vote window was short—just a few weeks—but with the concerted efforts of a number of newly energized groups some 60,000 new voters were on the register by the time the registration period closed, according to Farrell. The success of the Register to Vote campaign was like another pilot project where Marriage Equality and GLEN could test and hone their arguments—and keep testing the waters of working together.

“After the Register to Vote campaign, which was a huge success, we knew we had to work closer together,” Sheehan said. “The difficulty was how to do it.”

There were still tensions between Marriage Equality and GLEN, partly because of jockeying for position and partly due to fundamental disagreements about the best strategy to win the referendum. According to Sheehan, Marriage Equality was pushing for a referendum date as soon as possible. GLEN wanted to wait until the legislation concerning children was enacted. GLEN also felt it was important to carry out research about how best to focus the campaign. Sheehan said their instinct was to focus on the “movable middle” rather than those who were already likely to vote yes.

Marriage Equality, meanwhile, had been organizing meetings with LGBT groups and allies across the country for more than two years to ask about the issues that were most important to them and get their input on the referendum. According to Healy, in those meetings there was some residual resentment about GLEN from the civil partnership days and anger that GLEN was not seen to be in discussion with the LGBT community itself. She said that it was important to make sure that GLEN was seen as part of the marriage equality movement. By the autumn of 2014, more and more groups were becoming involved and excited about the campaign. They were champing at the bit to start organizing.

“By November 2014, there was a clear anxiety that we needed to launch the campaign and get going around the country,” Healy said.



### Seeking—and Failing—to Find a Campaign Director

Grainne Healy and Brian Sheehan, who were providing much of the leadership for the campaign, knew that they needed to find someone with experience to run it. But by the end of 2014, they had no luck. At the time, the referendum was expected to be held on May 8, 2015. The days were slipping by quickly.

“We may know everything about marriage, but we know nothing about running a referendum campaign,” Sheehan noted.

### Early 2015—Conflict Arises Between LGBT Organizations

In early January 2015, staff from the three organizations gathered for a meeting that was facilitated by Garrett, a seasoned political operative who had worked as chief of staff for the head of the Labour Party. Garrett laid out the challenges of carrying out a referendum campaign, particularly when none of the leaders had ever run one. With no experienced political hand available to take on the role and an urgency growing to set the referendum campaign in motion, Sheehan and Healy agreed to jointly run the campaign—with the backing of the ICCL—at least for a time.

“We couldn’t run two parallel campaigns [GLEN’s and Marriage Equality’s],” Sheehan said. “We said we would go with the model of jointly running it for six weeks and see what happens. It wasn’t easy. We had different styles of working.”

Among the tensions, Sheehan and Healy and staff from their organizations disagreed on strategy, on which staff members from their organizations should be put in charge of crucial tasks, and still felt a lingering distrust toward one another.

“Those first six weeks were the most difficult I ever spent at GLEN,” Sheehan said. “I thought how easy it would be to muck this up. If we lost because we didn’t perform right, it would be an unmitigated disaster.”

“The plan was greeted with wariness,” Smyth added. “We had to get past the tugging at each other organizationally. That didn’t disappear for another couple of months. There was a lot of tension around the table. We are not good in this country at putting the tensions out there and spelling them out.”

The earlier steering group became the Yes Equality Executive Group that oversaw governance, funding, and staff. It included Kieran Rose from GLEN, Smyth from Marriage Equality, and Mark Kelly from ICCL as well as Sheehan and Healy. The Executive Group was a bit of a safety net (and valve) as a place to work out issues when they became difficult, Smyth said.

Volunteers from other organizations served on a campaign advisory group and communications advisory group that Garrett co-chaired. These groups began meeting weekly.

In these early weeks, while GLEN and Marriage Equality were trying to gain their footing in managing the campaign, some external challenges arose, as well. A series of broadcast debates in January between the Yes and No sides of the referendum was “a bit of a disaster” for the marriage equality side, said Rose. He said that the Yes side either lost or their arguments did not come across in the positive way the campaign wanted.

“The No side were articulate in the media, we had a growing sense of people engaged in the issue that were looking for something to do and there was a momentum building in the people coming out,” Sheehan said. “We also needed to start raising money. We didn’t have any, and we needed to be out there to do that.”

In mid-January, Minister of Health Leo Varadkar came out as gay, the highest-ranking politician to do so. According to Healy, Varadkar’s coming out effectively caused the starting gun of the referendum to go off. A month later, Enda Kenny, announced that the official polling day for the referendum would be May 22, two weeks later than what was originally planned.

All of these factors led to a decision to officially launch the campaign on March 9.



## March-April—Referendum Campaign Begins and Tensions Come to the Forefront

The launch attracted more than 300 people including those from across Irish society and political parties. With its official launch, Yes Equality had made itself the public face of the marriage referendum campaign. But behind the face, difficulties were still churning that had to be addressed. On March 10, one day after the public launch, Garrett presented a memo outlining serious challenges in the campaign. The memo was blunt.

Among its points, “The current tone and pace of the campaign is being interpreted by many as taking victory for granted. The campaign does not look or feel like one that is only 73 days or 10 weeks away from its conclusion. All of our experience and the campaign research shows that this is a campaign that should be won but could be very easily lost. There is a very large element of soft support for the referendum which could melt away during the white heat and confusion of a contentious campaign.”

The memo also noted that the current decision-making structures were more evident of three separate organizations that were cooperating than a single campaign with a single purpose.

The memo made several recommendations. Among them:

- Accept that it will not be possible to find a campaign director and make the decision to give that responsibility to Grainne Healy and Brian Sheehan.
- Expand the Yes Equality executive committee to 10 or 12 members to include a broader group of committed organizations that have experiences with national campaigns.
- Dissolve the two advisory committees to simplify the structure and use those resources through the expanded executive committee or as advisors to senior campaign staff.
- Begin meeting more frequently. The Yes Equality executive committee should meet at least every other day and for the final six weeks, daily.

“A lot of nuts and bolts issues hadn’t been clarified,” Garrett said. “How do you get posters up, when are you allowed to campaign? It was clear to me these types of decisions were new to them. More importantly, they didn’t have a unified decision-making structure. After a year of talking, no one was in charge. What I remember quite clearly was a lot of jockeying for position internally, which was taking up a lot of energy that should be focused externally.”

While key organizers were aware of, and even helped with the drafting of Garrett’s memo, it was still a bracing wake-up call for the campaign.

“Brian and Grainne turned a corner with Mark’s memo,” Rosney said, who served as an advisor to the campaign. “Everything he put in the memo was accepted without questioning because he was current with the government.”

Sheehan and Healy said that they made a purposeful decision to get along moving forward.

“It is possible for groups who are apparently strategically opposed or fight with each other over strategy to, when the time comes, bury their differences and work toward a single goal,” Healy said. “I’m not saying it wasn’t difficult or challenging. It was. We had to have very straight and direct conversations with each other. If Brian or I heard about something indirectly [that bothered either of us], we were committed to picking up the phone or just speaking directly to each other about it.”

### An Experienced Political Insider Joins the Campaign

Garrett’s memo was not the only turning point in the campaign. Noel Whelan, the longtime political insider who had been acting as an informal advisor to the campaign, was becoming increasingly involved—and concerned—that the campaign could not take a positive result for granted. He was especially worried that the campaign might be overlooking the persuadable “million in the middle.” At his wife’s prodding, Whelan decided to volunteer for the campaign. He soon became an essential leader in the work.



"I would say one of the most essential ingredients in the campaign was Noel," Sheehan said. "The win wouldn't have happened without him. Our challenge was to develop a strategy that honed both what GLEN and Marriage Equality knew. We came at it very differently. Marriage Equality could reach out to the public and the LGBT community in a way that we couldn't. Noel in effect merged our assets with a clear strategic view about how the referendum should play out. When Noel came in, we had a clear chance of winning the referendum."

Smyth added: "It would be hard to overestimate Noel's role. He knew how campaigns worked and how Ireland worked. I can't imagine that the campaign would have been as successful without him."

Whelan, a heterosexual who had long been supportive of gay rights but had not taken an activist role before, played a moderating role between Sheehan and Healy and the staff from the two organizations, Sheehan noted. As Sheehan put it, Whelan put manners on everyone—they did not want to clash when he was there.

From Whelan's perspective, when he began working on the campaign, many of the key elements were already in place including smart leadership. But he emphasized that all successful referendum campaigns must have three components: clarity, content, and chronology. Clarity requires deep thought and good market research. That is, why are people in favor or against a referendum? What arguments appeal to them? Content meant having the right messages that resonated with voters and chronology referred to setting out a clear series of steps to take in the run up to the vote.

The next step was to set down their strategic plan into a one-page campaign plan, which Healy drafted. The Executive Committee approved the memo after making an addition suggested by Kelly of the ICCL: that the campaign would robustly challenge any misleading information from the No side.

That one-pager laid out three phases of the campaign: **(1) starting conversations**, which would encourage people to engage others in conversations about the referendum and reasons to vote yes. This phase would run from April 4 to May 4; **(2) full engagement**, which would be a highly visible nationwide canvassing operation, national and local media debate, and countrywide bus tour, and run May 5-22; and **(3) closing argument and final get out the vote effort**, which would focus on a key message to frame the closing arguments around why to vote yes. This phase would be in the last week of the campaign up to the vote on May 22.

Garrett said that this phase marked a key turning point for the campaign.

"The clarity in the decision-making became very strong," Garrett said. "With the triumvirate of Grainne, Brian, and Noel as well as Cathy Madden [who managed political communications] it became a very effective group. They began to have lots of meetings with NGOs and coordinating campaigns. People were informed and they used the feedback effectively and were able to work together well."

### **I'm Voting Yes, Ask Me Why**

A central element of the memo was a plan to focus the campaign on the "million in the middle"—mostly older, undecided voters. These voters may be leaning toward voting yes but probably needed some outreach and connection with reasons why they should pull the lever in favor or even vote. In his first official day with the campaign, Whelan seized on another campaign worker's mention of the slogan of the Scottish campaign for independence: "I'm Voting Yes, Ask Me Why." It hit exactly the tone that the Yes Equality campaign wanted—inviting, rather than lecturing. It provided a way to engage undecided voters in real, heartfelt conversations, rather than political sloganeering.

The campaign also decided to do something unusual in Irish referendums and carry out door-to-door canvassing. The campaign began deploying volunteers to knock on doors across the country, particularly focusing on communities outside of Dublin where many of the undecided voters likely resided.

"The 'I'm Voting Yes, Ask Me Why' approach made for campaign conversations that were open and nonjudgmental," Smyth said. "You ask me what I'm going to do and I'll tell you and it's up to you to make up



your mind what to do. We were not telling people what to do, which was a direct counter to the anti-same-sex-marriage campaign. They said this is a bad thing to do for children and society. Our approach was a direct counter to that kind of dogmatic and perceived intolerance from the No side."

While the Yes campaign trained the volunteer canvassers to consistently stay with a positive message, it was not always easy to go out night after night. Canvassers still faced hostile and even vitriolic reactions by some people when they knocked on doors. At times, it was the straight canvassers who seemed particularly stung by negative responses. In response, the Yes Campaign offered counselling to canvassers who had been affected by negative reactions.

### **Basing Messages on Research**

Campaign organizers also based their approach and messaging on research, both their own and that of previous referendum campaigns both in the US and Ireland. That research showed that initiating conversations and telling stories was the most effective approach. A series of focus groups, meanwhile, revealed insights that the campaign incorporated. For example, a focus group of middle-aged men who were "soft" Yes voters revealed that they were susceptible to the suggestion from the No side that civil partnership should be adequate for gay and lesbian couples. That finding provided more urgency to articulate why marriage was important to the gay and lesbian community.

Finally, research showed another important insight that the campaign took on board. Voters who were soft on the issue could be persuaded by people like themselves including parents, neighbors, and those their age.

"The fact that there were many voices promoting the referendum was important," Garrett said. "This wasn't for gay people. This was for people's sons and daughters and brothers and sisters and friends and neighbors."

### **Fundraising**

By early March, the Yes Equality campaign had done little fundraising, something that had to be urgently addressed once the campaign officially kicked off.

"Fundraising was considered a topic that everyone assumed that someone else was doing," Garrett said. "Government Minister and Fine Gael director of referendum campaign Simon Coveney asked them why they weren't fundraising. He said, 'I don't understand why you don't have half a million in the bank.' That really galvanized the campaign to start asking for money."

At the time, the campaign had just €30,000 in the bank. Once they started asking for funds, though, campaign staff and volunteers found people eager to contribute. Campaign organizers used direct outreach and online crowdfunding efforts as well as fundraising events. One tried and true fundraising technique they found especially useful was to have Healy and Sheehan sign thank-you notes as soon as they received a donation. That often brought in more donations from the same supporters. The campaign also started selling merchandise at a pop-up shop at the centrally located St. Stephen's Green in Dublin. It sold T-shirts, tote bags, jackets, badges, and posters. This proved to not only be a helpful fundraiser but also an important way to spread Yes Equality's message.

"Because this was a youth-oriented campaign, having lots of merchandise that took off was helpful," Smyth said. "That was unexpected. It wasn't so much that it made money but that it gave the campaign tremendous visibility. People were saying 'I can't wait for the new sweatshirts.'"

### **The No Side Makes a Misstep**

While the Yes side was gearing up its campaign, the No side was active, as well. The Yes Equality campaign monitored media coverage of the No side daily and sent out messages to counter their arguments to campaign partners. The No side officially launched its campaign on April 17 and soon began blanketing Dublin and other parts of the country with posters as well as an active online presence. Spokespersons were regularly on the airwaves and in newspapers, two of whom were gay men. Their arguments often focused



on same-sex parenting and implied that children would be worse off if gay marriage became legal. It was a contention that the Yes campaign vehemently disagreed with, but also worried could spark doubts in uncertain voters.

That worry never fully abated. But then the No campaign made a serious misstep. It put out a widely circulated poster that showed a man and a woman and a smiling baby with the line “Children deserve a mother and a father.” That poster quickly created a backlash, including among people who had been raised in single-parent households. Some of this group had previously been disengaged in the campaign but now found reason to pay attention and participate.

“The No side had a lot of posters of the nuclear family, which arguably backfired,” Farrell said. “The backfiring was just how much it enraged the working-class community. There certainly seems to be evidence that certain constituencies were aggrieved by the No campaign and might have voted when they wouldn’t have” without the poster campaign.

### **Bus Tour Around Ireland**

In April—one month before the referendum vote—a long-planned bus tour around the country began. The brainchild of Moninne Griffith, director of Marriage Equality, the purpose was to mobilize voters and to get positive coverage in the local newspapers and radio stations. It also provided a focal point for local leaders to come out and show support for the referendum. The bus tour was hugely aided by some 70 Yes Equality organizations around the country providing support by knocking on doors, leafleting, and putting up posters. These groups were in addition to sectoral groups that formed such as trade unionists, lawyers, doctors, teachers, and businesses for Yes Equality.

“At first, we thought we would have a well-known LGBT person or celebrity who would go along on some of the bus outings but it was clear very quickly that what local people wanted was other local people saying why they were voting yes,” Healy said.

Local figures also provided a hook for media in those towns to do stories. The bus itself, rolling into small towns, often garnered a lot of attention. Setting up the tour was logistically challenging and took months to organize. At times, participants faced the same unkind and ugly reception that some of the canvassers had. Despite that, organizers still felt the bus tour, which reached some of the country’s smallest towns, was a critical vehicle for reaching people in the last few weeks of the campaign. In four weeks, the bus stopped at 80 locations across Ireland.

## **May—Final Stretch**

### **A Surprisingly Forceful Denouncement of the Referendum by Catholic Bishops**

In early May, as the campaign entered its final sprint, organizers were surprised on Saturday, May 2, to see on the nationwide television network that the archbishop of Armagh, the ecclesiastical head of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, had written a message to be read at all Catholic churches that weekend. In it, he called for Catholics to reflect and pray about the referendum and that “to interfere with the traditional definition of marriage was not a simple or trivial matter.”

The archbishop, Eamon Martin, and other Catholic leaders had consistently and publicly spoken out against the marriage referendum. But this letter was different and potentially more worrisome. It could reach Catholics at a crucial time in the run up to the referendum and influence their decision.

“The force of the Catholic bishops’ opposition took me by surprise,” Sheehan said. “It was much more forceful than I would have imagined. They were clever enough not to ask people to vote yes or no because they would have had to register [as a campaign organization], but they asked people to consider their vote carefully. They are brilliant media manipulators, and they released it so it would get on the 6 p.m. news on a Saturday evening so would dominate the airwaves for the next few days.”



As the Yes Equality organizers scrambled to respond, it was the straight allies who were the most furious while the gay advocates were more able to take this latest event in their stride.

"Noel [Whelan] and Cathy [Madden, who worked on the communications team] were outraged," Sheehan said. "We wouldn't let them punch back. We said the Catholic Church are entitled to their opinions, we disagree and would like to debate. If we attacked the Church we would be attacking my mother's faith. She would accept that we criticize the hierarchy but not the faith."

Yes Equality issued a brief response saying that while it respected the rights of the Catholic church hierarchy to express its views, it was disappointed with the archbishop's refusal to come and have a discussion with the Yes Campaign. Healy also went to the RTE studios the following Monday and invited the archbishop to discuss the marriage referendum with her. As Yes Equality expected, the archbishop did not take up the offer, which served to showcase the Catholic Church's unwillingness to enter into debate on the issue. The next two Sundays, Catholic bishops continued to voice their opposition to the referendum.

In response, Yes Equality highlighted statements from priests and other religious figures who supported the referendum. The campaign also had help from unexpected quarters. As in other moments throughout the methodically planned campaign, these were unplanned by Yes Equality organizers but proved to be quite useful.

In this instance, some well-known and devout Catholics came out in support of the marriage referendum. One was Tom Curran, the Fine Gael general secretary, who has a gay son and, without alerting the campaign, wrote a piece in the *Irish Independent* on April 9. In it, he said he was a card-carrying, practicing Catholic who attended Mass every Sunday and practiced his faith daily. He asked all people of faith to consider and vote yes on the referendum.

An even bigger public splash was made when a longtime and popular television reporter Ursula Halligan disclosed for the first time publicly that she is a lesbian. Writing about her struggle for years to come to terms with her sexuality, Halligan's heartfelt and vulnerable piece in *The Irish Times* sparked a widespread and sympathetic reaction. Her words seemed to particularly resonate with older readers, many of whom were Catholic.

While Yes Equality was concerned about the effect of the Catholic Church's stance on the marriage referendum, the church did not hold the same sway over public opinion as it had in the past. The child-sex-abuse scandals were still fresh in many people's minds, and some of those in their 50s and 60s who were in positions of power still felt resentment over the church's adamant opposition to divorce and abortion rights.

### **A Sprint to the Finish**

The last three weeks leading up to the vote, a series of media debates preoccupied the Yes Equality leadership. These debates, which took place on some of the most watched and listened to media outlets in Ireland, could influence the undecided or soft yes voters one way or another. One particularly worrisome part of these debates and other messaging was that the No side was continually bringing up issues around how children would fare under gay marriage. This was a debate that the Yes side did not want to wade into, even though advocates felt that all the research was on their side. As they had in the past, however, they deployed representatives from leading children's organizations to talk about why marriage equality was good for children.

Additionally, after a series of internal debates about how best to respond to the No side, Yes Equality leaders looked to the one-page strategy they had agreed on back in March: Respond forcefully to misleading information while keeping to their positive tone. They held a press conference on May 15 to rebut the accusations made by the No side about the danger gay marriage posed for children.

Their spokespersons included a leading children's rights advocate who pointed to research that showed no evidence that gay and lesbian parents harmed their children. From the perspective of Yes Equality, it was an important moment and turning point in the campaign. The next day, the campaign received



some long-awaited and welcome news: A new poll showed 70 percent favoring the referendum and 30 against it. While previous polls had also shown lopsided support for the referendum, these poll results were reassuring, particularly after a difficult couple of weeks.

That day the campaign also launched its national canvass, which would be the last concerted push to fan out volunteers across the country. While the polling information looked good, it was important to turn out the supporters of the referendum. The carefully planned “get out the vote” operation was launched. In addition to volunteer canvassers, it included newspaper ads, videos, posters, press conferences, and continual use of social media including Twitter and Facebook.

In line with its approach from the start, the campaign made its “closing argument” a positive one, and focused its messaging on stories. The final message was that gay men and lesbians are part of everyone’s community.

In the closing days, some of the country’s most well-known politicians made public statements in favor of the referendum including Mary McAleese, former president of Ireland, who has a gay son, and Enda Kenny, the prime minister who was formerly reluctant to wade into the issue. Both their statements and others provided a sense of legitimacy and reassurance to voters about casting a Yes vote.

### The Vote

On voting day, Friday, May 22, the campaign was in touch with canvassers and others throughout the country. Campaign staff were prepared with a series of messages tailored to maximize the turnout. Starting the day before the vote and continuing on voting day one of the most striking uses of social media was Irish citizens who were living abroad and coming home to vote tweeted about it with the hashtag #hometovote. These tweets, accompanied by smiling photos of people traveling back to Ireland, soon numbered in the thousands and cheered supporters and may have motivated those already home to go out and vote. It quickly became clear that the turnout throughout Ireland was large and positive for the Yes vote.

The following day, with the votes tallied, the organizers of Yes Equality could finally exhale. The final tally was Yes 62 percent and No 38 percent. It was a resounding victory.

David Farrell, the political scientist who helped advise the Constitutional Convention, worked with a small team of political scientists to carry out follow-up research on the referendum. His findings were striking. The concerted mobilization efforts of Yes Equality paid off. There was a 60.5 percent turnout of voters, a 20-year record in Irish referendums. Similarly, the dogged canvassing seemed to have made a difference as well. Some 26 percent of respondents questioned said that they had been approached by canvassers from either side. Of those, 87 percent were approached by the Yes campaign and 36 percent by the No campaign. The analysis showed the canvassing didn’t change people’s minds but it had a strong impact on voter turnout.<sup>2</sup> Those approached by the No campaign were no more likely to vote No and those by the Yes campaign no more likely to vote Yes but those approached by the No side were less likely to come to the polls and those approached by the Yes side significantly more likely to vote.

For Yes Equality organizers, all of the groundwork they had laid for years before the referendum, and the careful, positive campaign they ran were equally important in the final result.

“We had to have a huge belief that we could win and a huge determination to win,” said Rose, former chair of GLEN and member of the Yes Equality executive committee. “It was a phenomenal transition in a country where gay men were criminalized until 1993 to full marriage equality by referendum in 2015.”

Mark Garrett added: “I think the country felt proud of itself in a way it hadn’t for a long time. The country almost didn’t realize how much it meant until it had been done. There was a sense of pride that we had achieved something significant.”

<sup>2</sup> Elkink JA, Farrell DM, Reidy T, Suiter J. “Understanding the 2015 marriage referendum in Ireland: context, campaign, and conservative Ireland,” *Irish Political Studies* (2016).



## Lessons

The following learnings may be useful to other organizations seeking to secure rights for a minority group whether or not they must use the route of a referendum.

- **Get consensus within the minority group first on the importance of the issue.** An important precursor to the marriage referendum work was reaching out to LGBT groups for about two years to talk about the issue and make sure that they were on board. Marriage equality was not the most pressing issue for some gays and lesbians and it was critical to invite them into the discussion, get their input, and talk about why the national LGBT leadership believed it was a vital milestone to achieve.
- **Lay the public policy groundwork carefully before pursuing a major policy change like gay marriage.** GLEN and Marriage Equality worked for more than 10 years often quietly and behind the scenes to line up support among the public, local politicians, and political parties for advancements in LGBT rights. They did not spring a huge societal change like asking for gay marriage suddenly—it came only after years of laborious work and slow but steady progress.
- **Make use of research to better understand the values and beliefs of people whose support must be gained.** Yes Equality organizers emphasized the vital importance of spending money on research at the beginning of any campaign to develop a solid understanding of what motivates people to support a cause. In Ireland, research showed that people's deeply established values often came down to a sense of fairness. Campaign organizers used that information and made fairness the centerpiece of their messages.
- **Create a coherent strategy.** A campaign cannot truly begin until organizers have developed a clear strategy that is backed by research and focuses on how to secure long-term, sustainable change and not just winning immediate victories. The Yes Equality's one-page strategy was a distillation of months and even years of thought and experience. Everyone on the campaign leadership used that strategy as their focal point throughout the crucial two-month run up to the vote.
- **How you win is just as important as what you win.** Don't set out to defeat anyone but bring people over to your side. The tone and attitude of a campaign is critically important. In Ireland, the marriage equality campaign did not target the No voters, it targeted the "movable middle," who represented a large portion of the voting public. Campaigners were careful that if someone disagreed with them, they responded as respectfully as possible and tried to never go on the attack. This approach is crucial because ultimately winning a change in legal status may not go as far as advocates would hope without bringing civil society along to support it. In other countries, the LGBT population has secured rights, such as the right to gay marriage in South African since 2006, or strong protections in Montenegro but the population still faces severe discrimination.
- **Bring in people with specific skills who may come from outside of the minority community seeking change.** While the LGBT leaders had worked toward securing gay marriage for years and were deeply knowledgeable about that issue, they had no experience in running a referendum or general election campaign. Universally, they acknowledged the importance of bringing on board seasoned political operatives from outside their community who had a deep understanding of and experience with running these campaigns. Without such experience, the LGBT organizations are not sure they would have won the referendum.
- **Don't underestimate the opposition.** The Yes Equality campaign was taken by surprise by the orchestrated and steady opposition from the Catholic Church. It is equally important to engage with their arguments in a way that will help, not hurt, the cause. The marriage equality campaign did this by avoiding getting into negative attacks while at the same time responding to misinformation in a way that gave voters something positive to pull the lever for.



- **Find a simple message that will resonate with people.** After a number of iterations, the campaign focused on the simple Yes Equality because it connoted a message of fairness and positivity. During the actual campaigning period when posters could be put up around the country, the leaders were again careful about the message they chose. It simply stated, "Vote Yes" with reasons why such as "because marriage matters" and "for a more equal Ireland." The campaign rejected an earlier poster that said, "It's time." The organizers felt strongly that they couldn't tell people that it was time; they had to ask them.
- **Put human stories at the center of any campaign for change.** A crucial learning from the marriage equality referendum was the power of stories from LGBT people and others including often their parents. It was those stories, in which people talked about the pain of not being able to marry their longtime partner, or see their son or daughter enjoy the benefits of marriage they had had, that often seemed to break through to people who had been undecided.
- **Authentic local voices must be heard.** When seeking to reach voters far away from Dublin, the Yes Equality campaign was careful to find people from the local areas to speak about why they supported marriage equality rather than import in spokespeople who were not known locally. People like stories but they also like them to be told in a language that they understand in a way that is relevant to them by people they know.
- **Invest in voter mobilization.** The Yes Equality campaign mobilized voters in a number of ways: a register-to-vote campaign, door-to-door canvassing, and strategic use of social media. All of those tactics bore fruit, according to an independent analysis. Actively going out and seeking support through a number of approaches is a critical step in setting the stage for a potential victory.
- **Don't forget about fundraising.** Philanthropic foundations do not typically fund political campaigns so it is important to look to other sources, including individual donors, selling merchandise, etc. Taking the time to do simple things, like write thank-you notes signed by the leaders of a campaign can go a long way in securing ongoing support.

## Conclusion

The Yes Equality campaign secured a resounding, first-of-its-kind victory when the marriage equality referendum overwhelmingly passed in Ireland on May 22, 2015. The leaders of the campaign achieved this in part by making an active decision to set their past differences aside, looking to outside expertise to fill in gaps in their knowledge, and by insisting on a calm, positive tone throughout. While some of the circumstances of this successful campaign were unique to Ireland, many of the approaches and tactics the organizers took are relevant and can provide useful insights to others seeking progressive change for minority groups.



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## Additional Resources

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