There is No Alternative: Prospect Theory, the Yes Campaign and Selling the Good Friday Agreement

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ABSTRACT   *This article examines how the non-party 'Yes Campaign' orchestrated the successful passage of the 1998 referendum for the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland. It argues that the Campaign's use of strategies based upon the tenets of prospect theory – focusing on the risks of failure rather than the benefits of success – had numerous impacts throughout the six-week campaign, ultimately resulting in the referendum's passage with enough unionist support to insulate the Agreement from some degree of criticism. The article does this by tracing the Campaign's main themes and the narratives surrounding their use by the Campaign itself, by other pro-agreement individuals and parties and by their reflection in voter choices and rationales for supporting the Agreement. More than 200 documents were analyzed, largely focusing on news accounts, but also including books, journal articles, websites, images and interviews with key players in the Campaign.*

Keywords: prospect theory; Peace Agreement; peace process; referendum; Yes Campaign

Introduction

One of the unusual features of Northern Ireland's Good Friday Peace Agreement was the fact that it was subject to John Major's 'Triple Lock' of approval by local political parties, the British and Irish governments and, lastly, by popular referendum. This last component was incorporated in the decision to hold twin public referendums in Northern Ireland and in the Republic. In Northern Ireland there were many local political parties, national and international politicians, celebrities and other groups jockeying for position in their attempts to influence the vote either for or against ratification. Unique amongst all of these groups was a small non-party Yes Campaign assembled by members of Northern Ireland's NGO community. In a

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crowded field of supporters this group stood out as an innovative and important force in enabling passage of the referendum after a six-week campaign.

An earlier work that I co-authored focuses on the role of prospect theory in informing the strategies of all of the pro-agreement campaigns leading up to the May referendum. In that work we found evidence that many of the pro-agreement parties that actively campaigned used elements of prospect theory to inform their campaign strategies (Hancock *et al.*, 2011). However, only the non-party Yes Campaign appeared to do so with some level of conscious application. This paper is an effort to clarify the extent to which the Yes Campaign sought to actively frame the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) as the only acceptable alternative to a greater loss resulting from voters' rejection of 'a last chance for peace'. In doing so, I will trace how the Campaign's themes reached the voters, followed by an examination of the Campaign's use of prospect theory to inform its efforts and the impact that had upon the passage of the referendum and the agreement's subsequent longevity. Finally, I will address the implications of a prospect theory approach to selling peace agreements and the possible role of civil society organizations in promulgating such an approach.

History of the Yes Campaign

The Northern Irish Troubles has the distinction of being one of the longest-running conflicts in modern history. From its flare-up in the late 1960s to the 1994 cease-fires, more than 3,500 lives were lost and the threat of violence became a way of life for generations of Northern Irish, Catholic and Protestant alike. Like the conflict itself, the peace process has a distinction of longevity in terms of the time required to implement the agreement. From the signing of the agreement on 10 April 1998 to the creation of the latest power sharing executive in May 2007, the agreement was subjected to four suspensions of the Local Assembly, three elections and the shift in majority electoral support from 'moderate' parties to so-called 'extremist' political parties (Hancock, 2008).

The non-party Yes Campaign was formed a few weeks before Good Friday when a number of private citizens met on 17 March, St. Patrick's Day, to discuss the possibility that an agreement would be reached by the governments and political parties. These individuals had come to public life through the long decades of the Troubles, when many in Northern Ireland had decided that the best route to personally work for peace was to step outside of traditional governmental and political roles to address problems directly with individuals on the other side of the communal divide. They included activists, lobbyists, and businesspeople, many of whom had participated in the earlier Initiative '92, chaired by Torkel Opshal (see Opsahl & Pollak, 1993). Although some were skeptical that any agreement might be reached, all agreed that those parties supporting the agreement would have little time to get ready to campaign for it, while those parties that clearly opposed the agreement – and had withdrawn from the negotiations months earlier – would be well-prepared to campaign against it. This group of individuals believed that what was needed was

a unifying voice to rally those who supported the agreement and to convince the voters that it was a milestone that was worth voting for (Oliver, 1998).

From this standing start the campaign was quickly up and running, conducting research, undertaking training, soliciting contributions, organizing support and creating its message. By the time that campaign was launched on 27 April, it had not only received more than £50,000 in donations, it had also received numerous offers of support from media figures and luminaries. The initial plan had been for the Yes Campaign to coordinate the efforts of all of the political parties and to organize a series of events where politicians from across the spectrum would come together to campaign for the passage for the referendum. However, political considerations, namely the unwillingness of most political parties to closely coordinate their activities, meant that the campaign had to settle for informal meetings and coordinating alongside its own activities.

The six-week campaign had its share of ups and downs, with the non-party group hitting a number of high points with slickly designed advertisements and logos – courtesy of advertising firm Saatchi and Saatchi – celebrity endorsements by notables such as Kenneth Branagh and moving testimonials from victims and their relatives, calling on all citizens of Northern Ireland to grasp this chance for peace. However, there were also many low points, including a lack of cohesion on the part of the political parties supporting the agreement, an effective No Campaign led by Ian Paisley and Robert McCartney of the United Kingdom Unionist Party (UKUP) and, most importantly, the negative images generated by the early release of a number of Republican and Loyalist prisoners who were then photographed at 'triumphalist' rallies in support of the agreement.

But through it all the Yes Campaign worked hard to organize a coherent message and to deliver that message to as many outlets as possible. Those involved conducted research in order to hone their message and received advice from Alan Bishop, managing partner at Saatchi and Saatchi, about the most effective way to reach their target audience. In the end, the referendum passed with 71.2 percent yes votes out of an 81 percent turnout, just higher than the number all sides seemed to feel was necessary to show sufficient unionist support for the agreement. While many parties worked tirelessly for the referendum's passage, Cochrane (2005: 58) notes that:

> It would be fair to say that without the efforts made by civil society initiatives and specifically by the independent 'Yes' campaign, the result of the referendum would have been significantly closer and the GFA would have received a significantly smaller mandate, imperiling its very existence.

Prospect Theory and the Themes of Yes

What makes people take a risk and vote yes for an uncertain future? Tversky and Kahneman's (1981) prospect theory focuses on the links between choice framing and decision selection; finding that when the preferred choice was framed as a possible gain, most respondents selected the alternative to minimize risks.

Conversely, when the preferred choice was framed as an alternative to a possible loss, most selected the preferred choice as presenting the best balance of risk to loss (453). This balance between risk aversion and risk seeking behavior is known as the certainty effect; meaning that Kahneman and Tversky (1979: 265) found that, when faced with gains 'people overweight outcomes that are considered certain, relative to outcomes that are merely probable'. Because individuals overvalue losses the certainty effect means that people will engage in more risk to avoid losses viewed as certain than to secure gains viewed as merely probable (Masters, 2004: 705).

Levy (1992) gives an overview of prospect theory which emphasizes that people tend to evaluate gains and losses with regard to a reference point rather than to overall costs or benefits. This means that the promotion of a particular reference point can determine the shaping of relative policy preferences or other choices (Maoz, 1990: 89). Given that the reference point serves as an external process, the conventional notion of framing is conceptualized as an internal process, whereby an individual receives information leading to their decision or choice. The frame is the manner in which the information entering the cognitive and emotional structures of an individual emphasizes one element over another – in effect, attempting to create a reference point. The original conception by Kahneman and Tversky of the *decision frame* refers to an internal conception of the 'acts, outcomes, and contingencies associated with a particular choice' (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981: 453). Boettcher (2004: 333) conceptualizes framing as being composed of three elements: actor perception of alternatives; the outcomes of those alternatives; and the probabilities associated with each possible outcome.

Examinations of prospect theory and the role of framing have typically focused on the impact of framing on select decision-makers in retrospective case situations, as with Bueno de Mesquita *et al.* (2001), Farnham (1992), Masters (2004), McInerney (1992), Maoz (1990) and Fanis (2004). Others have analyzed framing and decision-making in laboratory situations (e.g. Druckman, 2001; Pratto *et al.*, 2006; Gimpel, 2007; Druckman & McDermott, 2008; Larrick *et al.*, 2009; Tourangeau & Cong, 2009). Examinations of agents attempting to set the reference point have largely been focused on the role of the media in framing or agenda setting as it is known in the policy analysis sphere. Other works (Gamson, 1989; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Price *et al.*, 1997; Wolfsfeld, 1997, 2001, 2004; Shinar, 2000; Shah *et al.*, 2002; Spencer, 2004; Druckman & Parkin, 2005) focus on some aspect of the media or media use in setting the frame for debate, analysis or decision-making – or setting the reference point from the view of prospect theory. Additionally, most authors tend to operationalize decision frames through quantitative data analysis, at times employing formal models to define the probabilities of different outcomes as viewed by decision-makers.

Like the prior work focusing on all of the pro-agreement campaigns, this analysis seeks to extend the literature on prospect theory by showing how not only political elites, but the relatively small group leading the non-party Yes Campaign, sought to create reference points to frame the agreement in question as better than the alternative of no agreement by playing on folk conceptions of elements of the certainty

effect to persuade a narrow segment of Northern Ireland's voting population to support the Good Friday Agreement in the 22 May popular referendum. My examination consists of a narrative analysis of over 200 items largely focused on news accounts but also including books, journal articles, websites and images used during the campaign. In addition, I conducted two interviews, one with Quintin Oliver – director of the Yes Campaign – and one with Alan Bishop, then managing partner at Saatchi and Saatchi and a consultant on the Campaign's media strategy.[1] The referendum's narratives were generated both inductively based on Maykut and Morehouse's (1994) constant comparative method, and deductively based upon the 11 themes promulgated by the campaign. These themes were generated after the Campaign's initial consultations in late April by Paul Nolan, the chair of the Campaign's board. Briefly articulated, they were:

1. The politicians have worked hard.
2. They have delivered the best possible deal.
3. The deal is for both Unionists and Nationalists.
4. The agreement is a fresh start.
5. The agreement can bring peace and prosperity.
6. The agreement is a unique opportunity that will not come again.
7. There is no alternative.
8. Yes, there are problems, but the solution is to make it work.
9. It is up to all of us to make it work.
10. We owe it to our children.
11. Get out there and use your vote.

Themes 1 and 2 articulate a positive sense about the agreement based on the fact that the politicians – not normally viewed positively – have worked hard and taken risks to put together a good deal. Further extrapolation of these themes indicates that the campaign recognized that the agreement was far from perfect, noting that voters 'don't have to like it' but that they should recognize that it was 'the best compromise for everyone' (Oliver, 1998: 25).

Themes 3 and 8 focus on the realization that the Good Friday Agreement, or any agreement made between nationalists and unionists, is bound to be a form of compromise that will not satisfy anyone completely. The goal of these two themes is to convince the voters that the agreement merits support not only despite this, but because of it. Some of the narratives of these themes include the fact that there 'never would and never should be a victory for one side' and that 'there is not a single person who does not have a problem with some aspect of the deal', indicating that this level of dissatisfaction is 'what compromise is all about' (Oliver, 1998: 25).

Themes 4 and 5 focus on the positives associated with the agreement, namely that it provides a future that all can aspire to. In theme 4, this translates into the social ideal that the agreement provides new possibilities and that it allows everyone to 'leave the past in the past and to look to the future' (Oliver, 1998: 25). Theme 5 translates this future orientation into a sense that peace will bring prosperity through

goodwill and investments from the EU and the US among others. With the agreement 'people will have the chance to lead decent lives' and the government can begin to address root problems like unemployment (Oliver, 1998: 26). Theme 5, more so than any of the others, reflects the widely vaunted 'peace dividend' that was highly touted by those outside the province but looked upon with some skepticism by those within the province (Darby & Mac Ginty, 2000: 91–92).

Themes 6 and 7 focus the most on the 'negative' message of the costs of voting against the agreement. As such they represent the clearest attempt by Nolan and the Yes Campaign organizers to utilize the strategy recommended by prospect theory, by framing the preferred choice as better than the alternative of walking 'blindly towards the abyss' (Oliver, 1998: 26). The warnings in these two themes are clear, direct and to the point. The narrative of theme 6 warns that the large number of national and international leaders who came together to push for this agreement were a 'unique development in international conflict resolution' and that if the referendum failed, then voters should not expect them to pull it all together again in a short time; that, in fact, it would be 'two generations' before another serious attempt was made. Additionally, theme 7 hammers away at the notion that there was 'simply no alternative' and that no one in the political sphere could outline another way in which peace could be made (Oliver, 1998: 26). This notion of no alternative would be used to hammer relentlessly at the No Campaign organized largely by rejectionist unionist political parties.

In addition to its focus on the agreement as a compromise, theme 8, along with theme 9, highlights the need for everyone to work together in order to make the agreement successful. Theme 8 paints the agreement as a starting point, noting that 'everyone is free to try to improve upon it in the future' and that the agreement represented 'a framework inside which peace can be developed' rather than bringing peace itself. Theme 9 builds upon this notion by indicating that everyone 'has a responsibility to make sure that it does work' and that the choice to make it work or not is up to everyone (Oliver, 1998: 26). This is framed positively in the sense that the agreement will work if everyone chooses to make it work and negatively in the sense that everyone has the power to choose to not make it work. This last is coupled with the warning that such a choice would 'extinguish our last hopes for peace' and asks 'why would anyone want to do that?' (Oliver, 1998: 26).

Theme 10 moves between positive and negative framing by noting that 'for many of us it is too late' because many 'lives are already blighted' but that the children deserve a decent life and that everyone owes it to the children to 'lift the nightmare of conflict' off of their shoulders (Oliver, 1998: 27). This theme, while simple, is powerful and speaks not only to people's deepest hopes, but also to their deepest fears, namely that the failure of the referendum could lead to a return to conflict that would affect future generations. As such, it articulates a message based partly on prospect theory that urges voters not to condemn their children to the same kinds of violence that they lived through.

Finally, theme 11 weaves together some of the earlier themes in a call to action. The narratives here imply that voting, and voting yes, are necessary for

every individual; pointing out that the 'referendum concerns you' and that 'when you use your vote, you are a part of the peace process'. The narratives push at individuals, noting that while one 'may never have voted before' each needs to 'square up to this momentous choice'. Finally the narratives of this theme tie together the positively and negatively framed themes by presenting the choices in stark terms:

> On the one side, a chance of peace, a chance for the children. On the other side, nothing but rejection and despair. (Oliver, 1998: 27)

Taken together these 11 themes articulate a message that is simple, complex, and non-partisan. The simplicity is in the single-minded goal of convincing wavering voters to go out and support the agreement at the ballot box. The complexity is the use of both positive and negative reinforcing messages in an attempt to garner that support. And the message is non-partisan in the sense that it connects with everyday, bread and butter issues rather than constitutional preferences. I start this analysis by tracing how different narrative themes made their way from the Campaign to the voters both directly and indirectly through the other campaigns in order to determine their impacts upon voters. Following this I will return to prospect theory to analyze the extent to which narratives based upon the certainty effect had an impact upon voter behavior as opposed to those narratives that were more positive or aspirational in nature. Finally, I will attempt to draw a few lessons regarding the importance of the use of prospect theory by the Yes Campaign both in terms of the implementation process for the Good Friday Agreement and in reference to the wider arena of referendums linked to peace agreements.

Tracing the Themes of Yes

The main goal of the Yes Campaign as it was originally envisaged was to coordinate a unified pro-agreement campaign among all of the supportive political parties. However, as Oliver notes, two of the largest parties, the Ulster Unionists (UUP) and Sinn Féin decided that they could not join in such an effort. Oliver explains that part of this is understandable because of the fact that even though the politicians had negotiated the agreement, they were not signatories to it; therefore each party felt that they needed to sell their diametrically opposed visions of what the agreement meant to their own constituents. However, Oliver also noted that he considered this choice of action to be 'very dangerous' because:

> [I]n a divided society we tend to listen to our opponents rather than those whom we support and therefore when the other side say this is a stepping-stone to a United Ireland we say, ah hah, if they think it's a stepping-stone to a United Ireland then we don't want it, and vice versa. (Personal interview with Quinton Oliver, 14 January 2010)

Following the withdrawal of the UUP and Sinn Féin the rest of the major parties subsequently declined to officially work together on the campaign. In light of this Oliver notes that they:

> had to recast ourselves as the *non-party* campaign. That said, however, we were of course keen to liaise closely with the political parties, to offer them support and to work to maximise collaboration and joint activities. (Oliver, 1998: 33)

In addition to their goals of collaborating with other pro-agreement campaigns, the, now non-party, Yes Campaign sought to directly affect the perceptions of voters and, in particular, a small number of moderate unionists who would prove key to getting enough yes votes to sustain the agreement. All of the Campaign's efforts were directed at gaining enough yes votes to sustain the agreement whether through direct persuasion of voters or indirect persuasion through influence on the other yes campaigns. The bulk of this section will concentrate on these two avenues of impact on voters; however, I will also delve into the inevitable effect of the Yes Campaign on the No Campaign run by Paisley and McCartney.

From Yes to Yes: Impact on Other Yes Groups

Following its failure to persuade the politicians to form a unified campaign, the Campaign's transition to a non-party coordinator increased collaboration and communication amongst the parties through a number of mechanisms. The first of these was to split the Campaign's daily activities into public activities and political liaison. For the second the Campaign began hosting daily breakfasts at the Europa Hotel – which also provided the venue for several public activities. These meetings were attended by members of the various pro-agreement parties, joined by business-people, trades unionists, members of the voluntary sector, churches and academia. Each morning, the members of the breakfast shared information, discussed the previous day's events, discussed upcoming activities and shared intelligence about the feelings and mood of the voters (Oliver, 1998).

Initially the political parties were suspicious of the event but, as Oliver noted, they came anyway because:

> they didn't want to miss out … so they came cautiously … But over time they appreciated the value of sharing information … and by the end they were positively enthusiastic and they were contributing to joint activities that we were proposing. (Oliver interview)

In addition the Campaign held weekly briefings for all of the pro-agreement political parties. While the Campaign had originally planned for these events to be strategizing sessions, they later turned into in-depth briefings. As Oliver notes, one week the Campaign looked at tactics and the next they brought in Alan Bishop from Saat-

chi and Saatchi to discuss message development. Other sessions examined the nega-
tive politics of Paisley and McCartney and provided research commissioned by the
Campaign.

At first Oliver noted that the parties most in tune with the Campaign's message
were the smaller parties occupying the political center, including Alliance, the
Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, Workers Party and Green Party. However, as
the campaign became more focused on swaying moderate unionist support, the UUP
became more central to the Campaign's efforts. Oliver notes that while other main-
stream nationalist and unionist parties took little part in the Campaign's efforts, the
UUP:

> ended up being very close to us and we had separate meetings with them and
> they liked our analysis and interpretation and thought more of it. (Oliver
> interview)

This was part of a dedicated effort to assist Trimble and the UUP to make their
case to moderate unionists; an important task considering the difficulty that Trimble
had faced in convincing his own party to support the agreement. The Campaign's
research had shown that nationalist support for the agreement would most likely be
overwhelming while unionist support was evenly split between those who would
probably support the agreement and those who would not support it under most
circumstances. Between these two groups were the 'wavering unionist voters who
didn't want to vote "No" but couldn't bring themselves to vote "Yes"'. The
Campaign hired Market Research NI to conduct weekly interviews with a cohort of
30 to 40 undecided unionists in order to be able to adjust their efforts in response to
these individuals' responses and to communicate that information to the other pro-
agreement campaigns in their regular meetings (Oliver, 1998: 3, 71). This research
had shown that undecided unionists were watching both Trimble and Blair, holding
them the most responsible for looking out for unionist concerns and were amenable
to persuasive efforts by them. Oliver notes that the Campaign was in contact with
both leaders, albeit indirectly, stating that they advised Trimble to become more
forthright and to engage in more active campaigning. Additionally, the Campaign
provided information and advice to the Blair government and to the Clinton admin-
istration, 'because they had a great interest and were keen to help quietly' (Oliver
interview). Contacts with the Blair government were at arm's length, with Oliver
stating that 'We never met with him and that was conscious, deliberate because we
didn't want to be seen to be acting on his behalf, which would've damaged our cred-
ibility' (Oliver interview). Contacts with Trimble and the UUP also began through
intermediaries 'who had more credibility' with the UUP, but 'sometimes towards
the end' the Campaign was providing advice directly (Oliver interview).

Numerous press reports corroborate the fact that themes initially generated by the
Yes Campaign found their ways into the statements of other pro-agreement groups,
including the focus that many supporters of the agreement had on winning over
unionist voters. Press reports detailed both Trimble's and Blair's focus on unionist

voters, with the *Irish Times* highlighting the dissatisfaction expressed by the nationalist *Anderson Town News* that this focus meant that 'nationalism to this day is sidelined by the state' (Holmquist, 1998). Specifically Trimble noted as early as 20 April that the yes vote would require a majority of unionist support, figuring that 'If we get a yes vote that is over 70 pc we are fine' (Pauley, 1998a).

Alongside these narratives are others that corroborate the tracing of many of the Yes Campaign's 11 themes to statements and actions by other campaigns. Oliver indicates that they 'did share them' with the others and that those campaigns 'did use them' although at times that use could be overly selective and 'potentially dangerous and confusing for the electorate'. Oliver continues that:

> we had to work behind the scenes to try and get them to take it as a package and to try and moderate their instincts only to appeal to their core voters. (Oliver interview)

It seems clear that because many of the political parties had neither the ability nor the inclination to create their own referendum campaigns from scratch, they were more than willing to take advantage of the expertise, resources and research that was offered to them by the Yes Campaign. Although the Campaign had failed in its goal of creating a unified yes organization, they did succeed to a large extent in harmonizing many of the messages coming from the disparate pro-agreement parties. The extent to which this included the adoption of strategies based upon the certainty effect will be explored below.

From Yes to Voting Yes

The main goal of the Yes Campaign was to persuade voters to pass the referendum on the Good Friday Agreement, and to do so with enough support to insulate the agreement from those opposed to it. As indicated above, that meant that the referendum would have to pass with more than 70 percent of the vote and that voter turnout, especially amongst unionists, would also need to be over 50 percent. Therefore, in addition to its political liaison activities, the Campaign engaged in a wide variety of public activities, including press releases, a large-scale advertising campaign, public events with and without other parties and, on one occasion, a rapid-response 'dial-a-mob' that was called out to provide a supportive background to Tony Blair's visit to Robert McCartney's constituency (Oliver, 1998: 79).

One major activity that the Campaign engaged in was its roll-out, which took place at the Europa Hotel – a Belfast landmark that had been bombed more than any other and whose management were staunch supporters of the Yes Campaign. The hotel itself became central in many of the Campaign's activities, from hosting the daily breakfasts and weekly strategizing sessions to serving as the stage for many of the Campaign's major announcements, such as its ad campaign and the unveiling of a 75ft long 'yes' banner.

One of the most effective elements of the Campaign was Alan Bishop's simple, but eye-catching, series of posters designed around British road signs. These images were in sync with Nolan's theme 7, 'there is no alternative' in that they used the British sign for a 'one-way street' for the agreement and compared it to the British sign for 'no through road' as representing the effects of a no vote. Alan Bishop described the visual campaign as a means to 'characterize the position that society was in at that stage' affirming that they believed that 'Yes was the only way forward' for society and that people needed the contrast between that positive message and the 'negative' message in order to shake people out of their complacency with the status quo (personal interview with Alan Bishop, 20 January 2010). Images derived from Bishop's design were plastered across Northern Ireland, appearing on 500 buses, 10,000 page-sized posters, 200,000 leaflets and 700,000 postcards that were distributed to cafes, clubs, restaurants and to every household in the province (Oliver, 1998: 28).

Another memorable visual for the Campaign was its use of 'Yes' cartoon speech bubbles mounted on sticks, which were used to good effect in garnering media attention and, at times, became the photographic images of the day. Artists, poets, students, and videographers all volunteered, putting together visual messages for the Campaign, many of which garnered positive media attention – a continuing difficulty for the Campaign in a politician-rich environment – and a few of which attracted the attentions of the No Campaign, such as the floating Yes poem on the Lagan river, which was responded to by Nigel Dodds of the No Campaign presenting his own verse to the media (Oliver interview).

However, a more powerful event for the Campaign was the willingness of seven ordinary citizens, all affected by the conflict in serious ways, to come forward at the Campaign's launch and tell both their stories and why they felt that it was imperative to vote yes. These individuals included an environmentalist, a Presbyterian Minister, a dental school student, an immigrant and an underage schoolboy who urged everyone to vote yes for himself and his school colleagues who were still too young to vote (Oliver, 1998: 35).

The effects of prospect theory and the framing of the Yes Campaign's themes will be covered below, but it is worthwhile noting that in a number of news reports including interviews with individuals both before and after the vote, those who were supportive of the agreement often used one of the themes as their own rationale for casting a yes vote. Sample statements include those of seven pro-union lawyers appearing at UUP headquarters to warn that a no vote could 'plunge the province back into years of misery' and of rugby star Trevor Ringland, himself the son of an RUC officer, who indicated that the agreement provided a 'real opportunity to create a better future for our children' (Pauley, 1998b). This sentiment was echoed by some local victims' group leaders, such as Glyn Roberts of Families Against Intimidation and Terror, who urged people to vote for the agreement by stating that 'what we don't want is to have a new generation suffering that same sense of pain and loss', thereby echoing the sentiments of theme 10 on owing a better future to the children (Pauley, 1998c). Another example comes from a 19 May report which

quoted a unionist pensioner as stating that he was voting yes because 'I think it's our last chance for peace' and that, even though he had no grandchildren, his brothers and sisters did and that he was 'doing it for them' (Cochrane, 1998). While one cannot definitively state that the Yes Campaign is the source of these, and other, public statements, it is interesting to note that many in the Campaign's target audience used one or more of the Campaign's explicit themes as the justification for their votes in favor of the referendum.

The articulation of many of the Campaign's 11 themes could be seen throughout statements by other supporting parties, with everyone from David Trimble to Tony Blair and Bill Clinton expressing the themes of there being no alternative and that people should think about their children and their futures when they were in the voting booth. These themes, among others, appeared to have resonance with the public at large, with many of those who indicated that they would support the agreement echoing them, or other themes, as the rationale for their decisions.

The fact that many of these themes may have arisen in parallel tracks within the many pro-agreement campaigns does little to negate the fact that they were first forcefully advocated by the Yes Campaign and were disseminated throughout the pro-agreement community alongside market research that showed their potential effectiveness. As Oliver notes, there was some hesitancy on the part of political actors to point towards the negatives of a no vote, perhaps because of the longer-term requirement for votes by local political actors (Oliver interview). The process tracing in this section, when combined with the analysis below, provides ample evidence that the Yes Campaign was persuasive in encouraging other pro-agreement campaigns to use many, if not all, of the campaign themes.

Overall, it is safe to say that the Yes Campaign played a pivotal role in assisting the passage of the referendum. Their forceful advocacy of the 'no alternative' strategy along with other themes focusing on the future for children and the uniqueness of the agreement, appears to have been persuasive with the Campaign's target audience of undecided unionist voters. In addition to the sense of the Campaign's success outlined by Feargal Cochrane above, Oliver notes that the Campaign's own research confirmed the impact of its themes on average voters:

> We returned a final time to our cohort of undecided voters to discover that exactly half (17) had voted 'Yes' … Interestingly, most had made up their minds in the last week, but some had left it till they were in the polling station. The main reasons stated were 'Peace', 'a future for children' and 'best chance in 30 years'. (Oliver, 1998)[2]

From Yes to No: On the No Campaign

The main opponent to the agreement was the No Campaign spearheaded by Ian Paisley of the Democratic Unionists (DUP) and Robert McCartney of the UKUP.[3] Since both parties had withdrawn from the talks in September 1997, it was largely assumed that they would be ready to swing into action as soon as any agreement was

announced and signed. In response, Oliver noted that although the members of the Yes Campaign did not want to spend their time reacting to the No Campaign, they did engage in a certain amount of opposition research in order to find material 'which might be embarrassing to, or help undermine, the case of the "No" campaigners' (Oliver, 1998: 71). One piece of information that was valuable in terms of undermining Robert McCartney's credibility was a 1996 press release from his office stating that a referendum on constitutional change in the south would 'be a major step towards peace'. Oliver notes that:

> This nugget was to dog McCartney during the Campaign, being used by Ken Maginnis and Seamus Mallon MPs on RTE's *Questions and Answers*, by Lord Alderdice in a BBC *Hearts and Minds* debate, by David Trimble in a follow-up head to head, and by Hoey himself on Radio Ulster. It seemed to undermine McCartney's confidence and put him on the defensive each time it was raised. At first he said, '*I didn't write it. It was issued by my office, but it was not written by me*'. The RTE transcript records 'audience laughter' at this stage. (Oliver, 1998: 73, emphasis original)

However, one of the Yes Campaign's most effective counters to the arguments put forth by the No Campaign was theme 7, focusing on the fact that there was no known alternative to the agreement and that the No Campaign's arguments against the agreement lacked any clear indication of what they were for. This theme was tailor-made for countering the No Campaign and, as will be discussed below, was uncovered through Alan Bishop's prodding to have the market research firm ask undecided individuals what they thought would happen if everyone were to vote no and what their sources of fear were. It rapidly became a part of the talking points of Oliver and other yes supporters, and spread to many of the other supporting groups.

Direct quotes from the Alliance Party, the Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP), the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) and the UUP not only articulated the theme of no alternative, but they did so in a manner designed to attack the No Campaign itself. One unnamed UUP councilor indicated that the 'weakness of the No campaign … is their lack of an alternative to the agreement' (Breen, 1998) and Trimble himself attacked the No Campaign as having nothing to offer 'No alternative. No hope. No achievement' (Ryder, 1998).

Using this theme became such a powerful hammer with which to bash the No Campaign that the campaign itself began to respond to the Yes Campaign directly and to attack it on occasion. Many of the complaints centered on the pro bono work done by Saatchi and Saatchi with accusations that the Yes Campaign was directly linked to the NIO and received funding from it. Although Oliver notes that some of the criticisms were probably muted for fear of libelous action, the No Campaign responded to the 'no alternative' theme in an 8 May 1998 *News Letter* article that the theme was 'pathetic drivel' and that 'a yes vote is for Dublin rule, Gerry Adams in an executive over Northern Ireland and the IRA armed to the teeth' ('"Yes men" under attack', 1998). The No Campaign's animosity towards the Yes Campaign reached such

heights that one newspaper story indicated that Paisley had found a new enemy, that 'a certain Mr Quintin Oliver … was the object of the DUP leader's fury' (Judge, 1998).

This animosity towards the Yes Campaign had several effects, primarily the sense within the No Campaign that they needed to start responding to every action undertaken by the Yes group. One particularly memorable reaction was the No Campaign's response to the floating of verse down the Lagan River. Oliver notes that they were quick to start shooting back at the Yes Campaign because:

> they realized we were going to have resources and ideas and creativity … I remember when we floated the poetry down the river they were horrified so they sent out Nigel Dodds to recite some doggerel beside the river … They should have just ignored us. But they didn't [and their response] gave us some credibility and allowed us then to help frame the agenda. (Oliver interview)

Using Prospect Theory

Now that we have established the impact of the non-party Yes Campaign on the rest of the referendum's players as well as on their target voters and, perhaps, many in the electorate, it is time to return to our central premise regarding the impact of using prospect theory's focus on the costs of the alternative as being a primary driver behind the success of the Campaign's efforts. In a sense one could characterize this approach as negative campaigning, but theoretically it is more than that and what this section will do is to examine the Campaign's balance between the 'positive' themes that focused on the benefits of the Good Friday Agreement and the 'negative' themes that focused on the costs associated with voting against the agreement to show the impact of strategies based on prospect theory as opposed to those strategies based upon other 'sales' techniques.

The focus on the costs of voting no came to the Yes Campaign through its collaboration with Alan Bishop of Saatchi and Saatchi. The first step in this direction was Bishop's advice that the Campaign jettison its use of focus groups for research and instead concentrate on getting in-depth solitary interviews with members of the target audience. In drawing from his industry experience Bishop noted that:

> people are often not willing to reveal themselves in research, particularly in focus groups where they are in front of other people and they are disinclined to reveal fears. (Bishop interview)

More importantly Bishop brought up the idea of asking individuals about their fears of the future and what they thought might happen if the referendum failed to pass (Oliver, 1998). When asked about this supposition, Bishop replied that:

> I just suspected that fear of an unknown future; fear of a slide into anarchy … would be a greater fear than the continuation of the Troubles. Even though the Troubles were very serious, clearly the world continued for most people. And

> I just had a feeling that people's imagination of what could go wrong in the future was likely to be greater than a depiction of what might actually go wrong in the future. (Bishop interview)

This emphasis on the importance of the fear of the unknown is a step toward the certainty effect. In recognizing the existence of this fear Bishop identified an area where the Campaign could set a reference point for their target voters. More importantly, he noted that:

> it was very important that the politicians did not say that there was a plan B. Knowing all the efforts and the great huge political difficulty in putting an agreement together, it meant that there wasn't really a possibility of a different source of agreement being constructed … I thought it was important that the message would get across. In this situation there was no alternative. Therefore, if this agreement was rejected, the alternative was truly unknown. (Bishop interview)

Bishop's focus on the lack of a plan B was then incorporated into theme 7, 'there is no alternative', although the precise mechanism for doing so remains unknown.[4] In discussing the decision to focus on the costs of the alternative, both Quintin Oliver and Alan Bishop stressed that there needed to be a balance between that and the positives associated with the agreement rather than just an overwhelming plethora of negative imagery, which might turn off voters. In discussing the campaign Bishop noted that:

> there were two parts to it. It wasn't a scaremongering campaign … the symbols that were used were very careful and not at all sensationalist. We were just using British road signs to kind of characterize the position that society was in at that stage … a no vote was simply the end of the road … And the fear was what would happen if you contemplated that possibility. (Bishop interview)

Bishop went on to state that the Campaign did not concentrate as much on the positive aspects of the agreement because 'the material benefits of the agreement were being spelt out elsewhere' and that this positive message had been generally known for years and had 'not been enough to stop it' before (Bishop interview).

Oliver concurred, noting that as the overall pro-referendum campaigns hit stumbling blocks, particularly the negative imagery surrounding prisoner releases, there was an increased focus on the costs of not reaching an agreement. In terms of focusing on that alternative he states that it can create a:

> difficulty in campaigning because you do have to have an element of negativity and you can take that too far and it can be harsh negative personalized campaigning and you don't want to do that. You do have to test the negative. What will happen if you vote no? What will happen if we don't make progress?

What will happen if we return to violence? And therefore you have to suggest that be analyzed by those who are undecided because you are making a choice. It's a binary choice, either yes or no. You can't say maybe or unless or only if. You have to say yes or no. If we have to address the consequences of what will happen if you vote no, you may characterize that as negative but in a way it's just giving the voter more information on which to make their choice, and therefore if you can paint the picture that voting no will keep the status quo and that it's bad and damaging to the interests of the voter, then that may be helpful in persuading them to move to yes. (Oliver interview)

Both also indicated that they believed that the focus on the risks of a no vote was an essential part of ensuring that the referendum passed with a high enough margin to give the agreement a fighting chance of success. Bishop's analysis of the situation was that nationalists were likely to vote for any change because it would be an improvement over the status quo. Therefore,

you are focusing on the unionists and therefore for the agreement/referendum to have credibility you have to get about half or a bit more than half of the unionists to support the agreement, to say you have the majority of the unionists … So, you are talking really to quite a relatively small number of people. There are probably about a million voters or so in Northern Ireland, so we are really talking about say 300,000 people, the heart of the unionists who might conceivably change their mind. These are people who are pretty conservative in their outlook and they didn't want to believe that their society could be plunged into an uncertain chaotic future with no political solutions offered. That's where I thought this effort should be focused … People who want to lead the safest and steadiest lives, who are most upset and confused by the prospect of uncertainty. (Bishop interview)

As noted above, one of the most visible signs of the 'no alternative' theme was the Yes/No imagery designed by Bishop and Saatchi and Saatchi. Although it was only one of many images used during the referendum campaign, one can argue that it was easily the most visible symbol of the entire referendum, given its widespread usage on signage, posters, postcards, and traveling around on the backs of several advertising trucks provided free by their owner (Oliver, 1998: 36).

Additionally we can see how the 'no alternative' theme flowed out to the other campaigns supporting passage of the referendum. Some of these statements include those by Mark Durkan, then leader of the SDLP's referendum campaign, who attacked Paisley directly in a 6 May *News Letter* article by stating that 'he and his colleagues are attempting to … lead people back into the trenches' ('Deal opponents have nothing to offer', 1998). Others came from the Alliance Party's leader, John Alderdice, who warned the populace in a 2 May *News Letter* article that 'a "No" vote will certainly mean that there won't be peace' ('Alliance takes on the spin doctors', 1998) and the PUP's Billy Hutchinson, who warned the No Campaign to

'take responsibility' for frightening people with visions of a united Ireland and that they had 'better realise that they are making people very, very nervous and this is making people pull triggers' (McKittrick, 1998).

David Trimble's comments about the costs of voting no grew more pointed the closer the polling date came. In a 17 May comment Trimble admitted that he had reservations about the agreement, but pushed ahead, noting that 'voting no would guarantee a return to violence' (Grice & Prescott, 1998). This is a traceable impact to the assistance provided to Trimble and the UUP by the Yes Campaign. Early news reports had castigated Trimble for failing to engage with the public and actively sell the agreement to his constituents. As detailed above, research commissioned by the Yes Campaign showed that those moderate unionists who were the target swing voters looked to Blair and Trimble to assure them about the agreement and to make the case for it. In the last few weeks of campaigning, news reports noted a 'remark-able' change in Trimble's campaigning style, indicating that he had come out strongly for the agreement and was making hard-hitting attacks on the No Campaign, particularly chastising them for having no viable alternative to the agreement.

Other luminaries that used the 'no alternative' theme included former British Prime Minister John Major, who in a 5 May preview of a speech in Northern Ireland noted that he would 'warn that a rejection of it [the agreement] in the May 22 refer-endum would risk condemning the whole community to a continuation of the miser-ies of the past 30 years' (Deane, 1998). Although Tony Blair chose not to push the costs of voting no as forcefully as others, he did articulate theme 6, that the agree-ment was a unique opportunity that would not come again, in his third and last visit to the province before the voting took place. In a 22 May statement at Hillsborough Castle, Blair implored unionists to vote for the agreement and not to 'squander the best chance in generations for a decent future' (Pauley, 1998d). Additionally US President Bill Clinton and Blair appeared together on a BBC program where they warned that a no vote would 'mean a nightmare future of poverty and conflict', with Clinton stating that people would have a 'very good life if they vote to live it together' but that they would be 'frustrated, distrustful, angry and a little bit left out' if they rejected the deal (Hughes, 1998).

The 'no alternative' theme was so powerful that throughout the implementation process the perception that the agreement was the only way to go was hotly debated by those supportive and those who continued to be opposed to the agreement. Those in favor of the agreement continued to chastise opponents as offering no better alter-natives, with some, such as the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in 2001, John Reid, warning that an alternative to the agreement would only result in a 'stand-off, not a settlement' and that those who thought otherwise were living 'every kid's dream – eat the sweet bits and leave the rest' (McAdam, 2001). The 'no alternative' theme continued to be used throughout the implementation period by agreement supporters whenever it appeared that the institutions were under stress from those who opposed the agreement. This includes a 24 February 2010 editorial in which the *Irish News* chastised dissident republicans as having nothing to offer aside from the gun, the bomb and more violence ('Dissidents have nothing to offer', 2010).

Without overstating the case, it is safe to say that without the calculated use of a strategy based on prospect theory and focusing voters' attentions on the costs of failing to pass the referendum, it would not have passed with enough support amongst unionists to survive the many problems associated with its implementation. The power of focusing attention on the costs has not saved the agreement from any criticism, but it may have helped to keep it from complete failure by being a constant reminder that no matter how difficult and contentious the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement was, it remained far better than the alternative of returning to violence.

Implications

It is difficult to determine how important the theoretical implications of prospect theory as applied to voter behavior are. In one sense the idea that people vote partly based upon their fears is absolutely true and unsurprising. But it is also true, as in the 2008 US Presidential election, that people vote based upon their hopes as well. The key element for our understanding of the role of prospect theory in the Yes Campaign's efforts lies in an understanding of both Northern Irish politics and the divisions often present in societies plagued by identity-driven conflicts.

Experience tells people in conflict-torn societies that defeat can easily be snatched from the jaws of victory, and that, oftentimes, the euphoria that accompanies the announcement of any peace agreement is bound to be short-lived (Couto, 2001: 227). For unionists in Northern Ireland, this meant considering the GFA in the light of the failed Sunningdale agreement, the hated Anglo-Irish Agreement and a series of on-again, off-again paramilitary ceasefires. In these instances an appeal based upon the costs of the alternative may have been the only way to persuade the mildly cynical or merely uncomfortable that the risks of going ahead were less than the risks of staying behind. This approach can be exemplified by the Yes Campaign's choice to avoid the use of common peace symbols and, instead, focus on the Yes/No imagery developed by Alan Bishop. Oliver indicated that although many of the political parties had a preference for positive images, the Campaign 'had a veto on the use of doves for example, because they were so clichéd' that they felt any campaign based on such positive imagery would be seen as saccharine and unbelievable (Oliver interview).

In essence this means that there needs to be a substantially hard-headed and realistic approach to framing and selling a peace agreement. Connected to this approach is the opening that any such referendum campaign gives to civil society organizations such as the Yes Campaign. Societies plagued by civil conflict often give birth to organizations where concerned individuals can play a part in promoting, or opposing, peace efforts. These groups' possible distance from needing direct voter support – unlike political parties – gives them some latitude in their approaches to selling peace, much as it can garner criticism that they are unelected elites. Regardless of one's view on the legitimacy of such efforts, the fact remains that the Yes Campaign enjoyed a little more latitude in pressing their campaign because they did not have to worry about, or invest resources in, running for political office. Their success, like the success of

the referendum itself, is likely to be transplanted to other arenas much as the perceived success of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Committee spawned a new generation of truth commissions throughout post-conflict societies.

The implications of these findings for other post-conflict arenas include lessons about both the sales message that those seeking support for peace agreements could or should follow as well as the advisability of seeking popular support for any agreement made by political elites. Elsewhere, I have been a part of research that has examined both the overall referendum campaigns in favor of the Good Friday Agreement and the sales pitch used to garner support for the failed Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization. We found that many of those supporting the GFA focused on the risks of failure as much or more than the benefits of success, while those supporting the Oslo Accords minimized the risks of failure, instead concentrating on either the endless rewards or the control that their side would have over the implementation of the agreement (Hancock & Weiss, forthcoming; Hancock *et al.*, 2011).

The contrast between these two cases is exacerbated by the fact that not only did Israeli and Palestinian leaders not focus the public's attention on the costs of failure, but that the structure of the Accords only required ratification by the Knesset and the Palestinian National Council, denying the general public the opportunity to have voice in the process and, more importantly, to feel that they personally had some responsibility in ensuring that the agreement succeeded. This last point is quite important, as Oliver notes, because the idea of holding post-agreement referendums is becoming a norm, required to give any agreement democratic legitimacy:

> Because inevitably agreements have to be fleshed out behind closed doors in smaller formats … The failure of the Cypriot one in 2004 was the lack of public participation and warning, people hadn't been briefed and it was just a secret deal done behind closed doors. … sealing it with a public vote afterwards is obviously a fairly strong democratic tool. (Oliver interview)

The implication here is that prospect theory not only provides a valuable tool for persuading undecided voters to support a peace referendum, but that the passage of such a referendum can stiffen the resolve of wavering politicians to continue the hard work of implementation. Given that there appears to be a normalization of holding referendums to ratify peace agreements, such as recent calls by both Israelis and Palestinians for any new agreement, it seems to make sense to give a peace agreement the best possible prospects for success by reminding voters of the costs of failure; and of their role in securing peace by reminding their politicians of this salient fact.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Personal interview conducted via phone with Quinton Oliver on 14 January 2010 and with Alan Bishop on 20 January 2010.
2. This quote appears in the final section of the pre-publication draft of Oliver's book, on page 56. However, it does not appear in the published version.
3. Although the No Campaign was really a loose coalition of anti-agreement unionists from several parties, they did share united offices and their activities were focused and complemented each other (Elliott, 1999: 141).
4. In an interview with the author Oliver notes that his first contact with Bishop came through Paul Nolan, chair of the Campaign and author of the eleven themes and that Bishop had 'instant rapport' with the Campaign in terms of trusting his advice and drawing heavily upon his understanding of how public opinion worked and the difference between 'advertising products and ideas in the political sense'. Oliver also noted that while he could not remember whether the Yes/No imagery devised by Bishop or the 11 themes came first, that Bishop's 'thinking was very influential with us'. When asked if his design for the Yes/No imagery had been derived from the Campaign's themes, Bishop replied that the 'poster design came first' and that it 'may have well been taken into the setting out of the themes' but that he was not aware of or directly involved in any discussions around the themes as he was developing the advertising campaign.

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