

# 'Quiet revolution' leads to abortion rights win in Ireland

May 26 2018, by Gregory Katz, Renata Brito And Leo Enright

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A woman from the "Yes" campaign reacts after the final result was announced, after the Irish referendum on the 8th Amendment of the Irish Constitution at Dublin Castle, in Dublin, Ireland, Saturday May 26, 2018. The prime minister of Ireland says the passage of a referendum paving the way for legalized abortions is a historic day for his country and a great act of democracy. (AP Photo/Peter Morrison)

In the end, it wasn't even close.

Irish voters—young and old, male and female, farming types and city-bred folk—endorsed expunging an [abortion](#) ban from their largely Catholic country's constitution by a two-to-one margin, referendum results compiled Saturday showed.

The decisive outcome of the landmark referendum held Friday exceeded expectations and was cast as a historic victory for [women's](#) rights. Polls had given the pro-repeal "yes" side a small lead, but suggested the contest would be close.

Since 1983, the now-repealed Eighth Amendment had forced women seeking to terminate pregnancies to go abroad for abortions, bear children conceived through rape or incest or take illegal measures at home.

As the final tally was announced showing over 66 percent of voters supported lifting the ban, crowds in the ancient courtyard of Dublin Castle began chanting "Savita! Savita!" in honor of Savita Halappanavar, a 31-year-old dentist who died of sepsis during a protracted miscarriage after being denied an abortion at a Galway hospital in 2012.

With exit polls showing a win for abortion rights campaigners, Prime Minister Leo Varadkar called the apparent victory the "culmination of a quiet revolution." Later, he hailed the momentous outcome as a victory for Ireland's future.



People from the "Yes" campaign react as the results of the votes begin to come in, after the Irish referendum on the 8th Amendment of the Irish Constitution at the RDS count centre, in Dublin, Ireland, Saturday May 26, 2018. A leading anti-abortion group says Ireland's historic abortion referendum has resulted in a "tragedy of historic proportions" in a statement that all but admits defeat, as two exit polls predict an overwhelming victory for those seeking to overturn the country's strict ban on terminations. (AP Photo/Peter Morrison)

"I said in recent days that this was a once in a generation vote. Today I believe we have voted for the next generation," said Varadkar, who is Ireland's first openly gay leader as well as its first prime minister from an ethnic minority group.

The next battleground is likely to be Ireland's parliament, where the

government led by Varadkar hopes to capitalize on the fresh momentum and enact legislation spelling out the conditions under which abortions will be legal for the first time by the end of this year.

The plan is to allow abortions during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy and in special cases after the first trimester, likely ending the trail of Irish women who go elsewhere mostly to neighboring Britain—by the thousands each year for abortions they can't get at home.

"Under the Eighth Amendment, the only thing we could say to women in this country was 'Take a flight or take a boat,'" Health Minister Simon Harris told Irish broadcaster RTE. "And now the country is saying, 'No, take our hands, we want to support you.'"



A woman from the "Yes" campaign reacts as the results of the votes begin to come in, after the Irish referendum on the 8th Amendment of the Irish Constitution at Dublin Castle, in Dublin, Ireland, Saturday May 26, 2018. The first official results for Ireland's landmark abortion referendum have begun to come in, indicating a landslide win for abortion rights campaigners is likely in diverse constituencies across the country. (AP Photo/Peter Morrison)

Some called for the new abortion legislation to be named, "Savita's law." Her father, Andanappa Yalagi, said he has "no words" to express his gratitude for Ireland's "yes" vote.

"We've got justice for Savita," he told the Hindustan Times. "What happened to her will not happen to any other family."

It is not yet clear how hard the soundly defeated "no" forces will fight for restrictive laws in parliament in light of the overwhelming appetite for reform.

Opponents of the repeal movement conceded defeat Saturday morning after [exit polls](#) from the night before suggested they had no hope of victory.



An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar embraces Senator Ivana Bacik on arrival at Dublin Castle in Dublin, Ireland, Saturday May 26, 2018, for the results of the referendum on the 8th Amendment of the Irish Constitution which prohibits abortions unless a mother's life is in danger. (Brian Lawless/PA via AP)

John McGuirk, spokesman for the Save the 8th group, told RTE that many Irish citizens would not recognize the country in which they were waking up. The group said on its website that the referendum was a "tragedy of historic proportions," but McGuirk said the vote must still be respected.

"You can still passionately believe that the decision of the people is wrong, as I happen to do, and accept it," he said.

The final tally showed that just over 66 percent of voters who cast valid ballots wanted the Eighth Amendment abolished. Exit polls indicated that both men and women strongly opposed the abortion ban, and that opposition to it was strong in rural areas, not just cosmopolitan Dublin.

The support for lifting the ban highlights the liberalization of traditionally Catholic Ireland, marking the diminishing influence of the Church hierarchy and a desire to align Irish secular laws with the other countries of Europe.



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First it was same-sex marriage, approved here in 2015, and now it will be the consignment to history of the Eighth Amendment, which banned nearly all abortions and turned women seeking them into pariahs.

"This is a monumental day for women in Ireland," Orla O'Connor, co-director of the Together for Yes group, said. "This is about women taking their rightful place in Irish society, finally."

The vote is a "rejection of an Ireland that treated women as second-class citizens," she said, adding: "This is about women's equality and this day



brings massive change, monumental change for women in Ireland, and there is no going back."

The mood was jubilant at Dublin's Intercontinental Hotel, where supporters of the Together For Yes group spent hours watching the vote tally come in from the country's 40 districts. In the end, 39 voted for repeal.



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Some supporters had tears of joy running down their cheeks, and many women hugged each other. Cheers erupted every time partial results were shown on two big screens transmitting the latest television news.

When the final count was announced at Dublin Castle, more than 1,000 people were gathered outside singing, chanting and toasting each other with champagne despite an intermittent light rain.

They cheered when leaders of the "yes" campaign surfaced and they cheered for the prime minister when he arrived. For many, the victory was vindication after years of opposing the abortion ban, which required Irish authorities to defend the lives of a woman and a fetus as equals under the law from the moment of conception.

In practical terms, the amendment outlawed all abortions until 2014, when terminations in rare cases when a woman's life was at risk started being allowed.



A man carries a ballot box as counting of votes begins in the Irish referendum on the 8th Amendment of the Irish Constitution, in Dublin, Ireland, Saturday, May 26, 2018. Official counting began Saturday in Ireland's historic abortion rights referendum, with two exit polls predicting an overwhelming victory for those seeking to end the country's strict ban. (AP Photo/Peter Morrison)

Irish Minister for Children and Youth Affairs Katherine Zappone said she was deeply moved by the vote.

"I'm especially grateful to the women of Ireland who came forward to provide their personal testimony about the hard times that they endured, the stress and the trauma that they experienced because of the Eighth Amendment," she said.

The vote in the Republic of Ireland may increase pressure on Northern

Ireland to follow suit. When abortion becomes legal in the Republic of Ireland, it will become the only part of Britain and Ireland to ban the procedure.

There were roars of approval Saturday when two women leaders of the Sinn Fein party raised a sign that read, "The North is next."



A man walks past a mural showing Savita Halappanavar, a 31-year-old Indian dentist who had sought and been denied an abortion before she died after a miscarriage in a Galway hospital, with the word YES over it, in Dublin, Ireland, on the day of a referendum on the 8th amendment of the constitution. The referendum on whether to repeal the country's strict anti-abortion law is being seen by anti-abortion activists as a last-ditch stand against what they view as a European norm of abortion-on-demand, while for pro-abortion rights advocates, it is a fundamental moment for declaring an Irish woman's right to choose. (Niall Carson/PA via AP)

Abortions approved by doctors are allowed in the rest of Britain until the

24th week of pregnancy, but not in Northern Ireland, where the procedure is limited to cases when a woman's life is at risk.

Ireland's [prime minister](#) noted that Saturday's win for legalizing abortion could not right past wrongs, but could prevent future ones.

"The wrenching pain of decades of mistreatment of Irish women cannot be un-lived," Varadkar, who backed repeal, said. "However, today we have ensured that it does not have to be lived again."



Ireland's Prime Minister Leo Varadkar, foreground, arrives at Dublin Castle for the results of the referendum on the 8th Amendment of the Irish Constitution which prohibits abortions unless a mother's life is in danger, in Dublin, Ireland, Saturday May 26, 2018. Abortion rights activists proclaimed victory for Irish women Saturday as referendum results indicated voters in largely Roman Catholic Ireland overwhelmingly backed repealing a 1983 constitutional ban on abortions. (AP Photo/Peter Morrison)

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