

IRELAND: The Archetypal Single Transferable Vote System

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Ever since independence in 1922, the Republic of Ireland has used proportional representation by means of the Single Transferable Vote (STV). When the new Irish state came to adopt an electoral system, the indigenous political elite favoured some version of Proportional Representation (PR) because they believed it intrinsically fair, while the departing British also preferred it to First Past the Post (FPTP) so as to protect the representation of Protestants, who constituted about 5% of the population. The STV electoral system was specified in the current (1937) Constitution, and consequently cannot be amended without a referendum. Members of parliament are elected from districts returning either three, four or five representatives.

The system has consistently delivered a high degree of proportionality, and all parties, large and small, have been accurately represented in relation to their size, with the larger parties only slightly over-represented. For example, Fianna Fáil, the largest party at every election for over 60 years, has won on average 45% of the votes at post-war elections, and 48% of the seats, while the third party, Labour, has won an average of 12% of the votes and 11% of the seats.

As in most other countries, members of parliament are predominantly professional people, with very few working-class MPs. Women are also under-represented, although the figure as of early 1997, 14%, was the highest in the history of the state. The Republic of Ireland cannot be said to be ethnically divided, so the question of representation of ethnic groups does not arise. Moreover, contrary to initial expectations, Protestants have not sought separate political representation but have voted for the mainstream parties.

Voting is straightforward: electors merely indicate their favoured candidate by writing "1" beside that candidate's name on the ballot paper, and can go on to indicate their second, third, etc., choices in the same way. About two-thirds of voters see their first choice candidate elected, and on average around 20% of votes are wasted in the sense of not contributing to the final result.

The house of parliament elected by the people by means of STV, the Dáil, is of critical importance in Ireland's parliamentary system. To gain office, a government needs the support of a majority of members of the Dáil, and a government can be ejected from office if it fails to maintain that support.

Ireland has not experienced problems in the area of stable and effective governments. For many years, single-party government by the largest party, Fianna Fáil, was the norm, interrupted only occasionally by coalitions formed by the other two main

parties. More recently, a decline in Fianna Fáil's strength and the emergence of a number of smaller parties has led to coalition governments becoming the norm. Since 1989 each of the largest five parties, i.e. every party winning more than 2% of the votes at elections, has spent at least two years in government; and governments, once formed, tend to be reasonably durable, lasting on average for about three years. The Dáil's procedures are based on the Westminster model, which enables governments to enact their legislation with little real chance for the opposition to influence legislation.

In terms of accountability, it is relatively easy to throw governments out; at every election from 1973 to 1997 the outgoing government did not manage to be re-elected. Voters do have local representatives: the ratio of members of parliament to population is high (about one for every 20,000 people) and district magnitude is small (at most five representatives for each constituency), so members of parliament are usually well known to their constituents and are active representatives in their area. There is no provision for recall of elected members.

One criticism aimed at STV is that it helps promote intra-party fragmentation, but the Irish parties tend to be relatively cohesive despite the electoral competition among candidates of the same party. In Parliament, it is very rare for party representatives to break ranks from the party line on any issue. The political culture of Ireland is strongly influenced by that of Britain, and the "winner-take-all" attitude that characterizes Westminster-based governmental systems remains strong in Ireland, despite the PR electoral system.

The absence of ethnic cleavages, or any other deep divisions, in Irish society means that the incentives for parties to reach out beyond their own group cannot be tested. It is worth noting, though, that in Northern Ireland, which has deep divisions along ethnic, national and religious dimensions between Protestants and Catholics, and which also uses STV for many elections, most of the main parties draw support entirely from one or other of the two communities and do not see any incentive to try to win support from the other community. Indeed, parties aiming to draw support from both communities generally fare poorly.

The STV electoral system is supported because it is seen as fair, since it delivers proportional representation, and because of the power it gives voters to choose their parliamentary representatives by ranking all candidates in order of their choice, both between parties and within parties. Although most voters vote along party lines, it is not necessary to do so, and a significant number of voters vote along geographical lines; that is, they give their highest preferences to those candidates, regardless of party, from their own local area. Two referendums have been held, both instigated by the then-governing Fianna Fáil party, to replace STV with the British FPTP system. On both occasions the electorate voted to keep STV; the margin of victory was narrow in 1959, but wide in 1968.

Nevertheless, STV is criticised because of the intense competition that it generates between candidates, especially candidates of the same party. More members of parliament of Fianna Fáil, the largest party, are defeated by other Fianna Fáil candidates than by candidates of other parties. Thus a number of members of parliament argue that STV compels them to spend too much time responding to individual and community grievances from their constituents, which is necessary for electoral survival, and prevents them from spending enough time on national political and parliamentary matters, to the detriment of the national interest. It is also argued that an electoral system that weakens the close link between members of parliament and their constituents, and thus removes the electoral incentive to respond to demands for constituency work, might attract higher calibre people into politics.

