The challenge of reforming a ‘voter-friendly’ electoral system: Debates over the future of Ireland’s single transferable vote

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Introduction

Across the world’s democracies the whiff of electoral reform is in the air. Dieter Nohlen’s famous dictum that large-scale electoral reform occurs ‘only in extraordinary historical circumstances’ (1984: 218) may well still be true given that there have only been a handful of cases of fundamental electoral reform (replacing one electoral system with an entirely new one) among the established democracies at any rate (Katz 2005). But that doesn’t mean that nothing is happening. Large-scale reforms are being discussed and, indeed, attempts at reform are being attempted on an increasingly regular basis – even in the United Kingdom of all places. Furthermore, the instances of smaller changes (even tiny tweaks) to existing electoral systems are definitely on the rise (Jacobs and Leyenaar 2011).

The large and growing literature on electoral reform has revealed two prominent trends. First, over time the changes that have occurred have been in the direction of proportional systems rather than away from them. What this amounts to saying is that once a PR system is established it seems very hard to get rid of it (Colomer 2005). Second, the more recent changes (particularly in the list systems of postwar Europe) have shown a general tendency towards greater ‘personalization’ (i.e. what we refer to as more voter-friendly systems, about which more later) (Renwick and Pilet 2013).

Ireland has not been immune to the debates over possible electoral reform. As we shall see, whereas the earlier debates (1950s and 1960s) were focused on the proportional dimension, by contrast the current debates are focused on the personalization dimension, with much of the running in this debate being elite-driven (prominent politicians and social/media commentators); among the citizenry as a whole there is much more equivocation.

The clamour for electoral reform has been at its loudest in recent years. In the midst of the worst economic crisis in the state’s 90-year history, electoral reform was

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1 The more recent reforms, from the early 1990s onwards, have tended to show a certain fashion for mixed-member systems (particularly, among many of the newer democracies, the mixed-member majoritarian variant) (e.g. Shugart and Wattenberg 2001), but this fashion appears to have abated, if not gone into reverse, in more recent years (although, Russia’s recent return to MMM appears to buck that trend).
catapulted to the top of the agenda of all the parties (mainstream and niche) with all of them including specific proposals for electoral reform in their election manifestos in the 2011 general election. The coalition government voted into office in that election included electoral reform as one of the items for discussion by the Convention on the Constitution (www.constitution.ie) it established at the end of 2012, which – having deliberated on the matter in some detail – recommended that, apart from tweaks to some of its features, the existing electoral system should be retained. That this body, the bulk of whose members were a random selection of ordinary citizens (the remainder being members of parliament), should pass on such a golden opportunity to propose electoral reform says something about how this electoral system is viewed by Irish citizens.

The proponents of reform in Ireland face an uphill struggle: (1) they are seeking to reduce personalization against the trend in most of Europe where personalization is increasing; (2) more to the point they are seeking fundamental electoral reform (i.e. to replace the existing single transferable vote [STV] electoral system with an entirely different electoral system) which, as we see internationally, is very hard to achieve; and (3) they face a problem in trying to sell the idea that electoral reform would provide the solution they say it will, especially given the strong (and strongly expressed) consensus among the political science experts that electoral reform is not the answer.

This paper reviews the Irish debate, showing how for the most part the impetus for electoral reform is coming from the leaderships of the political parties. By contrast, their parliamentary ranks are far less enthusiastic, and mass public opinion on the issue is at best equivocal. A curious feature of the Irish debate is how arguably it is strategically misdirected, at least on the part of the core mainstream parties: the reforms being promoted by the elite could in no way be construed as strengthening their position; if anything they could produce the opposite effect.

The paper makes use of mass survey data (particularly the Irish National Election Study, INES) as well as data tracking the shifts in opinion of members of the Constitutional Convention to explore underlying levels of support for STV in Ireland. The paper is arranged in three parts. We start with a review of Ireland’s history of
using STV, how the country ended up with it and the various debates on electoral reform. Then we review the main arguments made by proponents of reform today, arguments that would appear to set them somewhat at odds with mass opinion (and certainly at odds with academic expert opinion). Our third section focuses on the Constitutional Convention, setting the Irish experience in a wider international context before and examining how opinions shifted over the period it was discussed by Convention members.

Ireland’s STV story – more accident than design

It is not too much of an exaggeration to suggest that the reason why Ireland found itself first using STV was due to a British tendency to experiment with institutional reform on its colonies rather than at home, and the reason why Ireland ended up keeping this system was more down to accident than design (Farrell 2011; Gallagher 2005).

Already in the latter part of the Nineteenth Century Britain tended to stand away from the European crowd in at least one respect, namely its decision not to go down the route of replacing its non-proportional (single member plurality, or SMP) electoral system with some form of PR. Britain had one key advantage over many of its European counterparts – its colonies, which allowed it to experiment with alternative electoral systems without the need to touch the home parliament. To the eyes of British electoral reformers Ireland presented the perfect test bed. From the moment that Irish ‘Home Rule’ appeared on the horizon, repeated references were made in British parliamentary debates to the need for some form of ‘protection’ for the ‘loyal Irish [protestant] minority’ (Hart 1992: 104).

The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, establishing the Irish Free State in the 26 counties of southern Ireland, did not contain any explicit conditions relating to the electoral  

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2 Indeed, arguably this is one reason why STV’s progress was stymied internationally: the fact that British electoral reformers chose not to attend an influential European conference held in Antwerp in 1885 made it somewhat inevitable that d’Hondt should emerge as the most popular variant as Europe’s developing democracies gradually made the switch from non-proportional systems in the first part of the Twentieth Century (Carstairs 1980). Of course, another reason why STV never caught on may simply be down to the feeling that it is a system that pre-dates political parties and therefore one that is not ideally suited to ‘party democracy’ (Farrell and Katz 2014).
system for the new state; however, there was a notion that the rights of the minority Protestant community should somehow be protected, and this was to see the first Irish Constitution of 1922 adopt PR. It should be noted, however, that the 1922 constitution did not explicitly refer to STV; it merely stated that the electoral system shall be ‘proportional representation’. But STV was the intended system. It is clear from the parliamentary debate that legislators were blissfully unaware of the possibility of alternative PR systems (O’Leary 1979). It was not until the new (and current) constitution of 1937 that there was an explicit reference to ‘the single transferable vote’ as the particular form of PR to be used in Ireland.

If STV was introduced into Ireland by accident, as it were, its retention as Ireland’s electoral system has since been debated on a number of occasions in some detail and the decision to retain it has been quite deliberate. Given that STV is now enshrined in the Constitution, the electoral system can only be changed by referendum. In 1959 and again in 1968, there were attempts by Fianna Fáil (until recently Ireland’s predominant political party) to replace STV with SMP. The motivation on each occasion was to increase the party’s chances of forming a single-party, majority government, for, despite the fact that by 1958 Fianna Fáil had been in power for 21 of the previous 27 years, it had only enjoyed an overall majority on four occasions. The party’s founder, Eamonn de Valera, was due to retire soon and there was a fear that without him the party’s chances of ever achieving an overall majority of seats would be greatly reduced. A referendum on electoral reform was called to coincide with the 1959 presidential election, in which de Valera, retiring as prime minister, was the Fianna Fáil candidate. This was seen as a cynical move designed to ensure the easy passage of the referendum bill. In the event, the bill was narrowly defeated (despite de Valera’s easy victory), with 52% voting against. The fact that Fianna Fáil’s proposal was defeated by such a small margin (just 33,667 votes) emboldened the party to have another go in 1968 (Sinnott 2010). This time the proposal was resoundingly defeated, with 61% voting against.

In line with trends in a number of other established democracies, electoral reform re-emerged onto the Irish political agenda during the 1990s, but now there was a distinct shift in focus. Whereas the 1950s and 1960s debates had centred on the proportional consequences of electoral system design, the contemporary debates have featured the
‘personalization’ dimension more prominently (the details of this are discussed in more detail in the next section).

The first salvo in the new debate was as a result of the deliberations of the non-party political Constitution Review Group (CRG) that was established by the government in 1995 and that considered electoral reform as part of its work. Its membership included a prominent political scientist, who subsequently went on record in his support of a shift to MMP (Laver 1998). In its 1996 report, while ultimately cautioning against a precipitate move to large-scale reform, the CRG expressed some sympathy for MMP and list systems as possible alternatives. Barely a year after the publication of this report the government decided to establish a fresh review of the Constitution, this time in the form of an All-Party Committee. Electoral reform was again included in the remit, and like the earlier exercise, yet again the recommendation was status quo: ‘No change to the provisions regarding Dáil elections is necessary or desirable’ (All-Party Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution 2002: 29).

In turn a further process of review was established within only a few years of that report, this time under the auspices of a Joint Committee on the Constitution comprising members from both houses of parliament. Its fourth report, on the Dáil electoral system, published in July 2010,\(^3\) proposed the establishment of a Citizens’ Assembly (modeled on the British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly) to consider the question of electoral reform. In the discussions leading up to this report the Joint Committee had been given evidence from a number of expert witnesses (including some of the current authors) informing the committee membership of the merits of such an approach and it is likely that this may have had some bearing on the proposal.

The work of the Joint Committee coincided with a major policy review by Ireland’s then largest opposition party, Fine Gael whose long-standing leader, Enda Kenny sought to make his mark with significant policy proposals. In late 2009-early 2010 Kenny made a number of speeches on new policy areas that attracted considerable media attention and the ire of some of his frontbench colleagues who were not happy with the leader’s efforts to produce party policy on the fly without input from party

colleagues. Among the policy proposals that Kenny sought to bounce on his colleagues was electoral reform. Like many commentators at the time, Kenny proposed replacing Ireland’s STV electoral system with a variant of the German mixed-member electoral system, his rationale being that this would help to reduce the excessive localism in Irish representative politics.

Electoral reform was one of a number of reform initiatives proposed by Enda Kenny. In the ensuing backlash from his parliamentary colleagues he found himself forced to back track. It is apparent that his advisors were aware of the deliberations of the Joint Committee, which might explain why in Fine Gael’s subsequent New Politics policy document, published in March 2010, a specific proposal for a new electoral system was replaced by one proposing instead the establishment of a Citizens’ Assembly to deliberate on options for electoral reform. The Citizens’ Assembly proposal was retained for the party’s election manifesto in the 2011 general election, a manifesto that included a suite of other constitutional reform proposals.

Within a few months of the launch of Fine Gael’s New Politics document, the Labour Party – soon to become Fine Gael’s coalition partner as a result of the outcome of the 2011 election – also published an ambitious agenda for constitutional reform. Indeed, the Labour Party’s proposals for change were even more ambitious and wide-ranging than Fine Gael’s. At the heart of their proposals was the establishment of a Constitutional Convention to consider root and branch reform of the entire Irish constitution. Like in Fine Gael’s case, these proposals were retained in the party’s election manifesto.

The result of the 2011 general election was the formation of a Fine Gael/Labour coalition government, whose ‘Programme for Government’ sought to marry the

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5 New Government, Better Government: changing a broken system. Labour’s 140 proposals to transform government, politics and the public services (Labour, January 2011). By the time of the election it is safe to say that political and constitutional reform was very high on the agenda of all Irish political parties, without exception (Suiter and Farrell 2011).
sometimes quite disparate manifesto promises of both parties. As regards the parties’ respective proposals relating to citizens’ assemblies and constitutional conventions, the coalition’s compromise resulted in the promise to establish a Constitutional Convention to examine eight specific issues, one of which was the Dáil electoral system.

Before dealing with the deliberations of the Constitutional Convention we need to review the arguments that are made about Ireland’s STV system and why so many are calling for its reform – the function of the next section.

**Why the perceived need for electoral reform in Ireland**

Former US House Speaker Tip O’Neill was surely right in his observation that all politics in local, but in Ireland this is taken to a whole other level. Localism in Irish representative politics is legendary. Irish members of parliament (TDs) nurse their parliamentary constituencies to a degree not seen in other democracies (certainly among the established ones). The primary focus is constituency; all else is secondary.

A 2009 survey of TDs found that on average over half of their time (53%) was spent on constituency work, with just 38% of their time devoted to their parliamentary role. And as regards the latter, as anyone who observes the Dáil will attest, in the chamber most of the time TDs are paying little heed to parliamentary debates; instead they are to be seen huddled over emailing and texting – keeping in touch with their constituency operations. The image of the average TD is less as a legislator and more a social worker.

Another set of evidence of just how much TDs focus on their constituents is provided by Irish National Election Study (INES) data on the election campaigns of Dáil candidates. Using CSES-designed questions probing the amount and forms of contact that voters have with candidates, once again Ireland is off the scale not least in terms of just how many voters have been contacted personally by Dáil candidates (Marsh et al. 2008).

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This excessive localism is seen to be associated with two other features of Irish parliamentary politics. The first is the weak accountability of parliament over government. This is an issue that’s broader than how TDs envisage their representative roles. Ireland’s parliament, by most measures, is judged to be the weakest of all the established European democracies (Döring 2002; Hardiman 2012; MacCarthaigh and Manning 2001). The leaderships of the government parties determine who shall be the Ceann Comhairle (Speaker), who shall chair the committees, and the order of business in the Dáil. Order is maintained by a rigid application of the parliamentary whip – much more rigid than in Westminster (Farrell et al. 2014). This weak Dáil dovetails nicely (from the government’s perspective) with the pre-eminent focus by TDs on their constituencies.

The second issue that is seen to be associated with excessive localism is the quality of individuals elected to the Dáil. The argument – one that is familiar enough in other countries – is that the nature of the office determines the nature of the candidates: local service attracts local servants. Whether Ireland stands out particularly in this regard is hard to determine, but certainly this is a criticism of Ireland politics that is regularly made by political commentators.

This vision of Irish parliamentary politics – one characterized by TDs as social workers, a government not held to account by parliament, and a system that attracts the ‘wrong’ people into office – was judged by many as one of the factors behind Ireland’s current economic crisis. As the argument goes, had the Dáil been more attentive to the mounting evidence of economic doom it might have been possible to prevent the worst of it. We can never know if that is true, but there is little doubt that the nature of parliamentary politics in Ireland is skewed. Few dispute this.

Where there is some dispute, however, is over the factors causing this. We can distinguish three main groups: (1) the leaderships of the political parties and the media elite, (2) TDs and (3) the public at large. The members of the first group are quite clear in the view that the key villain of the piece is Ireland’s STV electoral system. The gist of the argument is that STV encourages excessive competition on the ground between TDs in a constituency as each seeks to outdo the other in how well they service the needs of the constituents. The view is that replacing STV with some
other system would reduce the constituency focus, increase the focus on the Dáil and improve the quality of politicians elected.

This argument gathered quite a head of steam in the lead up to the 2011 general election resulting in the manifestos of all the parties promising electoral reform, and quite a few of them proposing specific alternative electoral systems. Inevitably attention focused on a variant of MMP – not for the first time judged as ‘the best of both worlds’. The suggestion was that a list top-up (regional or national) could be used to fill the Dáil with politicians of calibre who would focus on the bigger national picture and provide a ready pool of government ministers. Efforts by political scientists to point out the weaknesses in these arguments fell on deaf ears (such as in the posts on www.politicalreform.ie), with the usual riposte being that academics are out of touch with political realities.

That the leaderships of all the parties – core and niche – should be so forthright in calling for large-scale electoral reform is very significant: there was little if any party disagreement on the issue; for the most part issues of difference were over minor details in the form of mixed-member system that might be introduced. Ultimately, all wanted the same thing – a new electoral system for Ireland.

This unity of purpose among the Irish party leaderships is somewhat at odds with electoral reform debates in other countries where more usually than not it’s the leaderships of the parties outside government that are doing most of the running. It is also somewhat at odds with the views of the their own parliamentary party members (the TDs) and voters at large – our other two groups of interest.

[Table 1 about here]

As part of the deliberations on electoral reform by the Joint Committee on the Constitution a survey was commissioned of members in 2009 of both houses of the Oireachtas (parliament). This revealed little appetite for electoral reform among TDs. As Table 1 reveals, only 39% of TDs responding to the survey (46% of TDs) favour changing the electoral system, a higher figure than reported in an earlier survey in 1999, but still far short of a majority.
If TDs are for the most part anti-reform, Irish voters are less certain. Among Irish voters there is a strong sense of equivocation on the issue. Certainly voters like the high level of contact they have with their elected representatives. As Table 2 shows, according to the 2011 INES the quality that Irish voters place most importance on in their TD is speaking up for their constituency (72%).

But when we delve a bit deeper, things are a little less straightforward. When asked about the most important qualities of a TD (see Table 3), the features that tend to predominate as among the most important are all policy-related (working on legislation, developing policy and raising awareness of social needs); constituency-oriented features of the role of the TD are seen generally as less important. Similarly, in Figure 1, when voters are asked their views on the statement that local service is a strength of the political system, the views are at best lukewarm, if not against. One interpretation to put on this is that the Irish electorate are confused: there would seem to be some sympathy for not having quite so much local focus by politicians, expect when it comes to your own locale.

There is also a noted ambivalence on the part of Irish voters over whether to replace the STV electoral system (see Figure 2). A significant proportion is strongly attached to the existing system; there are a few in favour of change, but a large proportion is undecided on the issue.8

8 Preliminary multivariate analysis (not reported in this draft paper) to try and single out particular groups that might strongly favour change or retention does not find any striking trends. Party support is not a factor, nor is there any apparent relationship with attitudes to questions on the role of TDs. There is some (significant) relationship with newspaper readership, with Irish Times readers (a proxy for a more elite stratum) most in favour of change and Sun readers against, but these effects are substantively small.
Overall, therefore, such clamour as there may be for Irish electoral reform is very much a top-down phenomenon, coming from the leaderships of the political parties (both core and niche parties) and supported by prominent media commentators. An interesting point is how the motivations for electoral reform among the leaders of the core parties appear so at odds with the dominant theory in electoral reform literature. There the common view is that the established elite should favour electoral reform only for potential strategic dividends. The principal motivation is power maximization. On this perspective the reform is promoted only if the established elite judge it to be in their self-interest (e.g., Benoit 2004). Clearly this fits the 1959 and 1968 moves by Fianna Fáil to replace STV with the British SMP system; it would have been the main beneficiary. But this power maximization perspective simply does not fit the current debates where all attention is solely on the personalization dimension. Put simply, in terms of office-seeking objectives, there is nothing to be gained for those leaders of the core political parties promoting electoral reform. Even in Shugart’s (2001, 2008) institutional framework – where Irish STV’s association with excessive localism would appear to fit his inherent pre-condition – there is still an expectation of the established political elite seeking personal gain from supporting reform. Again it is hard to see how we can fit the current Irish debate into this perspective.

If anything, it might be argued that changing the electoral system could have sub-optimal outcomes for the core parties. This relates to the fact that Ireland has one of the most disciplined parliaments in Europe. As the leading authority on the parliamentary behaviour of TDs has noted: ‘if anything, parliamentary party cohesion is even higher in Ireland than the European average. It is extremely rare for deputies not to vote with the party; the norm is that every TD votes in accordance with the party line on every issue’ (Gallagher: 2010: 202). A recent survey of Irish trends covering the period 1981-2010 finds a grand total of 54 TDs who lost or resigned their party whip, representing a mere 3.3% of TDs elected over this period (Farrell et al. 2014). Theory would suggest that this shouldn’t be the case, quite the contrary. It is hard to envisage a more perfect example of Carey’s ‘competing principals’ (2009); TDs should be torn in two directions by the demands of their party leadership on the one hand and those of their electorates on the other; if anything levels of cohesion
should be approaching US measures. STV should be producing high levels of indiscipline in the Irish Dáil, but it isn’t.

The answer to this puzzle lies in the very fact that TDs focus so much on their constituency work. They treat this as a specific sphere of activity, where the focus is on particularistic and apolitical objectives (fixing drains and fast-tracking passport applications) to service the needs of one set of principals. Meanwhile, in an entirely separate and disconnected sphere a peculiarly Irish form of national party politics is played out in elections largely devoid of policy emphasis (Marsh et al. 2008). In this sphere the role of TDs to act as lobby fodder in the Dáil kowtowing to the line of their party leaderships and turning up and voting on demand.

To work loyally as an agent for the constituency the TD must look after local representative needs and facilitate relations between local citizens and the state authorities. To work loyally as an agent for the party principal, on the other hand, the TD must accept party discipline and obey the whips in the voting lobbies. But precisely because the two spheres are separated, the TD can be expected to face few if any problems in reconciling these roles. Since the policy choices faced in the Dáil lobbies usually pertain to national policies and will not impinge on local preferences, and since the local electorates have not been mobilised around national policies, any mandate received by the local TD is unlikely to have any relevance for these choices. There is nothing to prevent the TD following the party line and thereby gaining advancement. Rather than having two principals in the same sphere, which would be a problem, the TD has instead one principal in each of two spheres. Given enough time and energy, the TD as agent can happily serve both.

This politics of separate spheres would appear to be a Godsend for Irish party managers, particularly when in government. TDs distracted by heavy constituency commitments combined with a weak Dáil ensure the party leaderships a tight hold over the reins of power, a tight hold that could only be threatened by electoral reform. On the face of it, therefore, the Irish political elite appears to be promoting change for ideological reasons, rather than strategic ones (on the former more generally, see

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9 This discussion is based on Farrell et al. (2014).
Bowler et al. 2006; Fournier et al. 2010). Indeed, if anything, the issue seems more about degrees of ignorance over electoral system design on the part of the elite who favour change out of a potential misapprehension about the outcomes of their proposals.

Giving citizens a say – the Irish Constitutional Convention

The Fine Gael and Labour party leaderships may have been gung ho about wishing the replace STV with a mixed-member system, but as we saw above a prime focus of their parties’ manifestos was the proposal that ordinary citizens should have a say in the process of deciding on the whether to change the electoral system. This question was added to a basket of additional items for the Irish Constitutional Convention to consider over its thirteen months of deliberation in 2013-14. (At the time of writing it is now in the process of being wound up.)

The Constitutional Convention (www.constitution.ie) was based on the Citizens’ Assembly model that was trail blazed in British Columbia in 2004. Following deliberative principles, the BCCA’s membership consisted of a representative sample of 160 British Columbia citizens randomly selected. They met roughly monthly over the best part of a year, with much of the work done in small group facilitated discussion. They were tasked with considering whether the province should keep or change its electoral system, and if the latter to what. The same modus operandi was followed by the Dutch (2006) and Ontario (2007) citizens’ assemblies that were also established with a brief to consider electoral reform (for more, see Fournier et al. 2010; Warren and Pearse 2008). The Irish Constitutional Convention (ICC) was similar to these CAs in having a random selection of citizens (66 in this instance) at the heart of the process and small group discussions led by trained facilitators. Where it differed was in including 33 parliamentarians also as members (from both houses of the Irish Oireachtas and the Northern Ireland Assembly) and in having a much longer list of items to consider in addition to the electoral system (for more see Farrell et al. 2014a).  

This ‘mini-public variant’ of constitutional convention is new. While there have been plenty of examples of constitutional conventions that have included citizens as members (Iceland’s been the most recent example), none of these had followed deliberative principles (Farrell 2014; Mendez and Wheatley 2013).
Given that the ICC had such a long agenda this meant that it could not devote nearly as much time to the details of electoral system design that was possible in the CA models. Instead, the discussion was conflated into two weekends of meetings. In the first weekend the discussion focused on how STV operates in Ireland, debates over whether and how it might be reformed, and the range of alternative electoral systems that might be considered if it were to be reformed: non-proportional systems, mixed-member proportional and list. At the end of the weekend the members voted on which of these three might be considered as an alternative for further discussion.

In the second weekend a month later the discussion focused on three sets of options: status quo, amendments to the existing electoral system, or some form of MMP system for Ireland. The final vote at the end of this weekend could hardly have been clearer: only 20% of members favoured replacing STV with some form of MMP system, and clear majorities favoured changes to the existing system – 67% in favour of removing the alphabetical listing of candidates on ballot papers, and even more significantly 86% in favour of increasing the size of Irish constituencies to deal with the issue that of the world’s established democracies Ireland notoriously has among the smallest average district magnitudes (M). An important signal to be read from this vote is that it was ultimately focused more on the proportional dimension than the personalization one: the ICC members wanted to change Ireland’s STV system to weaken the stranglehold of larger parties that results from the low M.

It should be noted that the discussion about the electoral system and its possible reform ranged far more widely than just the details of voting rules (see Farrell et al. 2014a for more). In total the ICC made 10 sets of recommendations relating to wider questions of ‘electoral reform’ more generally (and even beyond):

1. The STV electoral system should be amended to ensure that the smallest constituency size is a 5-seater and to remove the alphabetical order of candidates on the ballot paper
2. The state should establish an Electoral Commission
3. Polling hours/days in should be extended

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11 For details, see https://www.constitution.ie/AttachmentDownload.ashx?mid=fd70670-030f-e311-a203-005056a32ee4
4. There should be greater access to postal voting
5. Accuracy of the electoral register should be improved
6. Measures should be introduced to increase electoral turnout
7. Education programmes should be introduced in schools
8. There should be non-parliamentary ministers in government
9. Members of the Dáil should be required to resign their seats on being appointed to ministerial office
10. Citizen-initiatives should be introduced (both for influencing the parliamentary agenda and for the calling of referendums).

This pretty sweeping interpretation of the ‘electoral reform’ agenda meant that at one and the same time the ICC ended up supporting relatively minor change to the electoral system narrowly defined and pretty extensive change to electoral systems in the broadest sense. As we shall see this has an unhelpful impact on our efforts to track shifts in attitudes on the generic question of electoral reform.

The Convention members were surveyed at the start and finish of each of their weekend meetings, with generally close to two-thirds completing the paper-based surveys on each occasion. Given that this topic was dealt with over two weekends (the only one of the ICC topics to be given so much time), we have four time points of data. The response rates for each of the four waves are listed in Table 4. We’re still in the process of examining the data, but some preliminary findings can be presented at this point.

Figure 3 presents the overall trends in support for the electoral system across all four waves. Dealing just with those favouring electoral reform (because the trends relating to those favouring no change are largely a mirror image), we can see that across the entire period there was a small reduction in the proportions supporting reform. But underlying these general trends there was quite a deal of flux from one wave to the next. Overall, the support for change (at the start and finish of the process) was
greater among citizens than among members: this is consistent with the polling data reported in the previous section. The fact that there was a slight increase in support for reform towards the end of the period might simply reflect the wide-ranging debate about electoral system reforms ranging beyond the confines of voting rules.

We asked a different version of the electoral system question that allowed the members to express their differing levels of support for or against electoral reform and the trends are reported in Figure 4.\(^{12}\) This shows a clearer shift away from support for electoral reform across the three waves covered.\(^{13}\)

**Conclusion (preliminary)**

The Irish case throws up a few issues of note that are worth reflecting on. First, it is a case that confounds rational-choice based theories of electoral reform, for here is an instance of political elite seeking reforms that at best would give them no advantage and at worst would actually weaken their hold on the reins of power. Not for the first time, this case shows up the need for more detailed and complete analyses of the politics of electoral reform, such as the comparative-historical approaches of Rahat (2008) and Renwick (2010).

Another feature of interest about the elite debate is just how ill informed much of it has been. Efforts by the political science community to set out the weaknesses in many of the proposals were pointedly rebuffed: on this issue the expert was seen as a nuisance to be swatted away and ignored, very different from the experience in other contexts where often the academic experts are key figures in the debate (e.g. Farrell and McAllsiter 2006; Rahat 2008).

Third, the ambivalence of mass public opinion on the matter is noteworthy. Of course, it is well known that it is difficult to truly assess public opinion on something

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\(^{12}\) On this occasion there are just three waves. Due to the limited space available for questions in the final wave that question was substituted for a question on MMP.

\(^{13}\) This preliminary analysis has been focused on the aggregate shifts. Many of our respondents opted to reveal their identity, thus allowing us to track underlying shifts at the individual level. These data are still being coded so are not presented here.
as complex as electoral system design: there is a lack of understanding of the details and of the potential for change, and public mood can be fickle on the issue (Bowler and Donovan 2013; Farrell and Gallagher 1999). But in this instance, we might have anticipated a stronger mood for change. Given the depth of the economic crisis, in the 2011 election the electorate was going to look to politics for blame, but the Irish people went further. They didn’t just identify politicians (which they did in punishing the incumbent government in a way that was unthinkable just two years previously), they also identified fault with the political system more generally. Moreover, though they could easily point to economic issues as ‘the most important issue or problem in 2011’, and almost 50% did, 36.3% identified politicians and the political system (INES 2011). This strong sense among Irish citizens that something needed to change in the political system might have been expected to result in strong support for electoral reform, but as we have seen it didn’t.

A fourth observation is about what this case has to say about the potential significance of personalized electoral systems. Just as there appears to be an inherent problem with proposing electoral reforms that move a system away from (rather than towards) proportionality (Colomer 2005), the Irish case might suggest a similar issue over trying to move a system away from personalization. Renwick and Pilet’s analysis (2013) shows a trend in the direction of personalization among most of Europe’s list systems; perhaps this trend may become irreversible.

Ultimately, the Irish case presents an intriguing example of the problems political elite can face trying to move voters away from what is perceived to be a ‘voter-friendly’ electoral systems.

**Bibliography**


Table 1: TDs’ views on electoral reform

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change the electoral system</th>
<th>2009 (%)</th>
<th>1999 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>(71)</td>
<td>(66)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: The 1999 data are from an earlier TD survey*

*Source: TD survey by the Joint Committee on the Constitution, 2009.*


Table 2: The most important qualities of a TD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speak their own mind</td>
<td>62.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speak up for the area they represent</td>
<td>71.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help individual voters sort out their problems</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be loyal to the party they represent</td>
<td>29.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Question: Which qualities are particularly important for TDs to have? (percentage agreeing)*

*Source: INES 2011*

Table 3: The most important aspects of a TD’s work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working on legislation</td>
<td>73.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raising awareness of important social needs and issues</td>
<td>84.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing policy</td>
<td>75.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting as much for the constituency as possible</td>
<td>68.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balancing the different interests of society</td>
<td>68.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representing the individual interests of citizens</td>
<td>65.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Question: How important are the following aspects of a TD’s work? (5-point scale; table reports those saying Of importance of Of Great Importance)*

*Source: INES 2011*

Table 4: Irish Constitutional Convention pre- and post- weekend surveys respondents (electoral system weekends)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Waves</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>Proportion of respondents (%)</th>
<th>Cumulative (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (weekend 1 pre-)</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>25.51</td>
<td>25.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (weekend 1 post-)</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>24.28</td>
<td>49.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (weekend 2 pre-)</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>26.75</td>
<td>76.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (weekend 2 post-)</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>23.46</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1: Local service by TDs is a strength

Source: INES 2011
Figure 2: Should we replace the electoral system?

Source: INES 2011
Figure 3: Evolution of attitudes towards electoral reform among members of the Irish Constitutional Convention

**Question**: ‘[In a referendum] would you vote for or against… to change the Dáil electoral system?’

**Source**: Before and after weekend surveys of Constitutional Convention members
Figure 4: Range of support for/against electoral reform among citizen and politician members

**Electoral System Should be Changed: Citizens**

**Our Electoral System Should be Changed: Politicians**

*Question:* ‘Could you say to what extent you agree or disagree with… Our electoral system should be changed?’

*Source:* Before and after weekend surveys of Constitutional Convention members