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[‘The Puzzle of Non-Party Actors in Party Democracy: Independents in Ireland’](#) (with Nicole Bolleyer). 2009. *Comparative European Politics* 7 (3), 299-324 (September 2009)
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Abstract:

It is an accepted truth that parties are the central political actors in all liberal democracies. This dominance of parties is often considered the logical outcome of rational politicians’ attempts to maximize their utility in terms of votes and policy influence. However, the last twenty years have seen a number of significant Independent (i.e. non-party) actors emerge in more than a few political systems. From an actor-centred point of view, party affiliation can, depending on the particular environment, be rather a liability than an advantage, which has significant implications for the role of non-party actors in face of weakening party democracies.

To demonstrate this point, we deliver an account of the rise of Independents in the Irish political system, opposed to the dominant scholarly perspective that tends to consider Independents as an idiosyncrasy. We show that the choice of organizational independence over party affiliation represents a reaction to incentives inherent in the electoral, parliamentary and governmental stages that can disfavour party as the most efficient vehicle for individual goal attainment. This becomes evident when avoiding the misleading comparison between parties as collective bodies with that of Independents as individuals, instead focussing on the respective strategic positions of the individual MPs.

Keywords:

Candidates; non-party actors, party decline; Ireland; STV; clientelism

Introduction

Politicians have two options when they desire to contest elections: they can run either for a party or as an Independent¹ (i.e. a non-party candidacy).² From a rationalist perspective it is usually argued that politicians choose the option that increases first, their chances of electoral success and second, their ability to influence national policy (Moser 1999: 150). The dominance of parties in modern liberal democracies – or indeed, the claimed necessity of such a dominance according to both Schattschneider (1977: 1) and Aldrich (1995: 3) – has led to the rarely questioned belief that parties as organizational vehicles represent the best means for individual actors to pursue these goals. However, this belief becomes the subject of more critique, as both the decline of the party identification model and the rise of anti-party sentiment leaves established parties increasingly unpopular amongst electorates (Owen and Dennis 1996). The presence, and in some cases, prominence, of Independents can be read as one reaction to this development, which questions the superiority of parties' organizational capacity to ensure citizen representation.

It is tempting to dismiss the re-emergence of Independents as an example of irrational behaviour by both voters and candidates alike, implying that these developments are an aberration, and of little consequence for political theory. However, we counter such assumptions, arguing that the phenomenon of Independents provides a challenge for widely accepted truths in party research, and more specifically, the theory of party democracy. The presence of Independents in a range of systems raises questions about parties' status as the 'naturally' superior organizational choice from the candidates' as well as from the voters' perspective. Prominent examples among established democracies are the US, where Independents have in recent years been elected as Senators, Governors, and members of the House of Representatives (Collet 1999), and Japan, where dissidents from the Liberal Democratic Party are frequently elected as Independents (Reed 2003). Independents have also supported minority governments at the federal and state level in both Canada and Australia (Costar and Curtin 2004), while in Ireland Independents have participated in the formation of a large number of government administrations, as is detailed below.

This observation creates an important awareness that has gained increasing currency in scholarly research: while parties have undoubtedly been the dominant vehicles for representation in the past (especially when focusing on the range of established democracies), they might not be capable of fulfilling this task in the future, which creates an organizational vacuum as well as a

vacuum in terms of legitimacy (Andeweg 2003; Mair 1998; 2005). The tendency towards candidate-centred elections and issue-based voting are clear symptoms of this development (for more on the increased importance of candidates see Wattenberg 1996; Marsh 2007; on the related area of the personal vote see Cain et al 1987; Carey and Shugart 1995). This puts the search for, and the analysis of, alternatives to party representation, and with it party democracy, high on the research agenda, especially when broadening our view to new democracies. The debate around *party decline* and on the role of Independents in it naturally focuses on established western democracies. In new democracies, such as post-communist regimes, party organizations have always been much weaker, thus, party-switching and Independent candidacies are much more frequent (van Biezen 2003; Hale 2005; Mershon and Shvetsova 2007). Party dominance could not be established to the same extent as in the West, and Independent status as alternative choice to party candidacy can threaten *party-building* and *maintenance*. The rationales which lead political entrepreneurs to choose party affiliation over Independent status (or vice versa) are therefore paramount to understand how old democracies change and new democracies can stabilize.

This paper contributes to this discussion by analyzing the incentive structures that favour the strong presence of Independents in Ireland, a system where parties do not always unambiguously maximize candidates' utility. Amongst western democracies, the Irish political system represents the paradigmatic case of a parliamentary system in which party omnipotence has been threatened. Unlike other western states, in Ireland Independents did not fade into the limelight with the consolidation of parties' power in parliament, and along with the Labour party, they are the only political grouping to maintain political representation in the Dáil. In fact, there have been more Independents in the Irish parliament than the combined total elected to the national parliaments of western Europe (Weeks 2003: 221). Ireland is therefore a significant case of how incentive structures can undermine the organizational supremacy of political parties. Consequently, our paper talks more directly to the debate about the changing nature of western party democracies. The theoretical perspective and analytical tools it provides to study an Independent status as an alternative to party membership, however, can be equally made fruitful in a broader context.

Without doubt, the aspects identified in the literature – the personality factor in voting, the impact of the electoral system, the particular character of Independent candidates, and localism (Chubb

1957; Carty 1981: 58–61; Anckar 2000: 262–263) – can help to account for the phenomenon of Independents in general. Consequently, they need to be integrated in any explanatory effort. At the same time, however, the manner in which they are usually presented as singular aspects contributing to a ‘deviant phenomenon’ sidetracks those systematic insights that the phenomenon can offer for comparative research on party democracy and on political parties.

To circumvent this problem, the paper develops a rationalist approach to an Independent status as an organisational alternative to party affiliation. It starts out with a definition of Independents and discusses the literature on party formation and organisation to distil the merits and perils of party membership in the abstract. On this basis, we develop the conceptual tools to analyse the structural incentives to both run as and remain, an Independent, instead of running as a party candidate, and apply these tools to the Irish context. More specifically, we assess the incentives both in favour of, and against, running as an Independent in the electoral, the parliamentary and the governmental arena of the Irish political system as vis-à-vis a potential party candidacy. We conclude with a discussion of the general implications stemming from our findings for the debate on the decline of party democracy.

I. Changing Perspective on Independents: The Merits and Perils of Party Membership

Before analyzing Independents, it is necessary to clarify what defines such a status. Usually, the term ‘Independent’ refers to someone who is neither a member of, nor affiliated with, a political party (see Weeks 2008a). However, ‘Independent’ is often a source of confusion, because it can also be used to measure the extent to which individual MPs follow the directives of an affiliate organisation, be it a political party or an interest group. This explains why there are examples of party politicians who call themselves Independents; in 2005 one maverick party TD (MP) in Ireland went so far as to describe himself as the only true Independent in parliament (*Dáil Debates* 602: 460, 11 May 2005) (at a time there were 14 Independent TDs in the *Dáil*). To clear up any such ambiguity, the working definition of an Independent used throughout this paper is King-Hall’s minimalist version: ‘a person independent of the party machines’ (1952: 54), that is, they are not running on behalf of a party, nor are they subject to parliamentary party discipline if elected³. Accordingly, we understand ‘Independence’ as an organisational alternative to party candidacy.

To identify the conditions under which an Independent status becomes a rational alternative to party candidacy, the merits and perils of the latter form, widely considered a ‘natural choice’ for any political entrepreneur, need to be assessed. While the cooperation between politicians with similar preferences tends to be taken as naturally given (Laver 1999: 25), the literature on party formation tries to identify the incentives for partisan activity amongst politicians who do not share preferences very closely (Aldrich 1995: 30). Assuming that politicians thrive for a long and successful career, hence for the continuous gain of office (Schlesinger 1966), joining parties has several obvious advantages. First, parties can provide for a ‘brand name’ (Key 1966). Given that the voter links certain programmatic aspects to a party label, any candidate profits from this reputation (if it is positive), because it makes both advertising for the politician and the decision for the voter less costly. Second, parties have the resources to provide selective benefits for the activists who support the campaign of single candidates, hence, supporting the mobilization of party members. Third, parties can deliver a core support of voters that are loyal to the party and consequently elect its candidate (Aldrich 1995: 49). However, these arguments refer only to the electoral stage.

In parliament, where decisions are taken by majority rule, being part of the majority party assures the winning of any bill given that its members are disciplined. In this sense, entering a parliamentary party means to win more than a politician could win on his own, thus overcoming the problem of collective action (Aldrich 1995: 35; Cox and McCubbins 1993). In addition, party MPs can use the threat of the party whip to beat off pressure from interest groups. With these organizational advantages in mind, parties are formed to further the interests of their component parts, the individual political actors. So long as the benefits of party membership continue to outweigh the costs, parties are the rational goal for all ambitious politicians (Moser 1999: 150).

This line of reasoning brings in the policy goals of politicians for which they might strive – be it due to intrinsic motivation or for voter-maximizing purposes. While the argument referring to the politicians’ superior resources during the electoral stage are convincing, we argue that the arguments in favour of belonging to a party in parliament are overstated.⁴ Any approach that tries to explain why politicians with distinct preferences join a party and make themselves subject to party discipline needs to ask the question whether a single politician can be sure that his preferences will be incorporated in the party program. While parties can certainly be more or less

hierarchical, it is also certain that in any party a backbench member has only very limited access to policy formulation compared to party leaders (Panebianco 1988; Maor 1998).

Usually an MP's preferences are closer to his own party's program than to the program of other parties. Thus, if his party is in government and implements its program, the contribution to his party's victory can be read as an achievement in terms of policy. What we question, however, is whether this advantage can compensate for individual impact, in particular with reference to the profile of Independents who are interested in the solution of local problems and the acquiring of benefits for a locally defined electorate to ensure re-election. For a politician to join a party in a context in which party discipline is very high and policy influence of private members is low carries the burden of losing the freedom to highlight issues they perceive important, and being forced to defend party policies they do not agree with. They are confronted with a trade-off between being affiliated with the bundle of policies implemented by their leaders (potentially agreeing with most of it) and the capacity to freely push for those demands that are of particular importance for their respective voters. Moreover, they would be restricted in their ability to exploit windows of opportunities to realize crucial preferences, which arise whenever a government lacks sufficient parliamentary support and puts Independents in a particularly strong position.

This brings us to two core problems in the discussion about Independents as organisational alternatives to parties: First, instead of comparing Independents with party candidates, Independents are usually assessed vis-à-vis parties with the analytical categories that are used to evaluate party strategies. The trio of policy, office and votes denotes the three goals that parties are held to pursue simultaneously and which therefore need to be reconciled in the political arena (Strøm 1990). Scholars applying it tend to treat parties as 'strategically unitary' actors, which is useful so long as they compare different parties and the benefits of the strategies available to them respectively, hence, as long as the nature of the actor is kept constant. Problems arise when comparing parties as collective bodies to Independents as individuals: the observation that parties as collective entities are more influential than single Independents is equivalent to the claim that ten Independents working together are more powerful than one alone. To get an insight into the advantages and disadvantages of party structure and resources, we take the position of an ordinary MP embedded in a party as standard and compare it to the position of an Independent without such an affiliation. Only such an actor-centred perspective allows for an unbiased and

more multi-faceted evaluation of the choice for (or against) an Independent status than the literature usually depicts.

Having referred to the limited freedom to push for one's own policy preferences as a disadvantage of party membership, whenever government participation is a necessary precondition for political actors to gain influence, as is the case in many parliamentary systems, the explanation of an Independent status as something other than an idiosyncratic choice remains challenging. Hence, even if the electoral arena opens a window of opportunity for Independents to run successfully, this in itself does not explain why actors might use this window when anticipating powerlessness in the parliamentary arena that is shaped by different factors than the electoral sphere. While it is sometimes held that Independents, as well as their voters, are solely interested in the expression of preferences without seriously attempting to also realise these preferences this is a claim that needs to be examined empirically. To capture potentially countervailing incentives, one needs to assess the electoral, legislative and governmental advantages and disadvantages separately from each other pointing to a second problematic angle.

The two major accounts of party unity, and more fundamentally party emergence, either look exclusively at the incentives created in parliament (see Aldrich 1995, Laver and Shepsle 1998) or assume the electoral incentives to organize and behave in a disciplined manner spill over into the legislature (Bowler 2000: 156). These theoretical approaches do not account for the possibility of countervailing incentives generated by the two contexts, and therefore easily overlook the following: if Independents give up advantages in the electoral stage by joining a party, the gains of party membership at the parliamentary and or/governmental stage need to compensate for such losses. If, in addition, ad hoc coordination in the legislature amongst Independents permits them to keep their particular preferences alongside their quasi-party status, Independents have an advantageous position that party membership would heavily restrict. In this case then, remaining Independent (or even leaving a party to become an Independent in particular circumstances) becomes a reasonable option.

In a nutshell, to adequately assess demands and pay-offs across different phases, the survival of Independents is systematically traced back to the incentive structures that, first, the electoral stage, second, the parliamentary stage and, third, the governmental stage provide. Although they are related to each other, the separate examination of stages is necessary because each stage is related to specific opportunities and risks from the respective perspectives of an

Independent or of a party. In each stage we assess the structural advantages and disadvantages to become and to remain an Independent entrepreneur compared to the status of an individual party member.

II. The Irish Puzzle: Case Selection and Methods

The Irish system provides a crucial test case for an examination of an Independent status as an alternative to party candidacy both in terms of Independents' relevance as compared to other established democracies and in terms of the particular incentive profile for strategic action provided by the political system. While Independents can be found in a range of systems, in Ireland they have been particularly influential, participating in the formation of 40 percent of governments (see Table 1). More fundamentally, the analysis of the Irish system's institutional incentive structure is particularly enlightening in relation to our research question: while the goals of office, policy and votes can conflict in Ireland as in any other democratic system, more importantly, different stages in the process set countervailing incentives for which organizational form – an Independent status or party affiliation – is preferable from an individual actor's point of view. Following the above theoretical discussion, this ambivalence in the overall incentive profile of the Irish system provides a systematic puzzle for rational choice theory because the electoral stage opens a window of opportunity for Independents to run successfully, but in itself does not explain why actors might use this window when anticipating powerlessness in the parliamentary arena that is shaped by different factors than the electoral sphere.

Due to the differences between the three stages, we use different empirical methods to assess the respective incentive structures in favour of, or against, an Independent status in each of them. To understand why Independents decide to run, that is, analysing the electoral stage, data is available from a campaign survey of 845 Independent and party candidates in Ireland at the 2004 local election, which was conducted as part of a broader study on Irish Independents (Weeks 2008a). Although this survey targeted local, rather than general, election candidates, local elections are a suitable base from which to study Independents, because the latter generally have a greater tradition and history of success in local, in contrast to national, elections. This, combined with the greater number of seats on offer, results in a larger pool of candidates to sample. For example, the number of Independent candidates running at general elections has ranged from 9 to 104, while as many as 297 Independents contested the 2004 local elections.

Although there may be a few differences in the incentives facing voters¹ and candidates² at second-order as compared to first-order elections, the findings from this study of local elections are still applicable to general elections. The same party system operates at both local and national level, with the only major differences in the votes accrued by the parties at these elections being that the parties in government tend to receive fewer votes at local elections, at which Independents tend to perform slightly better. The same electoral system operates at both levels, and many of the candidates elected to local councils go on to contest, or at least aspire to contest, a general election. Consequently, the local level represents a lower tier of the national level, rather than a different system. All of these factors imply that a focus on the local level does not introduce a structural bias that prevents us from making conclusions beyond the limitations of this study.

Since the number of Independents entering parliamentary and, moreover, gaining governmental, relevance is very restricted, survey analysis is not a feasible strategy for analysis of the parliamentary and governmental stages. Instead, the incentive structures facing Independents in these two stages are analysed qualitatively. Here we engage in structural analysis, which, complemented by the analysis of core examples enables us to illustrate how, in the *Dáil*, Independent status can, and does, open more windows of opportunities than party membership for private member influence.

III. Independents in Ireland

The following analysis proceeds in two steps: first, we demonstrate the empirical relevance of Independents in Ireland in both electoral terms and for the process of government formation. We then assess the structural advantages and disadvantages of becoming, and remaining as, an Independent, compared to the status of a party member during the electoral, the parliamentary stage and, the governmental stage as interdependent, yet separate, contexts.

Figure 1 details Independents' significant electoral presence in Ireland, focusing on their share of the votes, seats, and the proportion of candidates running as Independents. Their seat

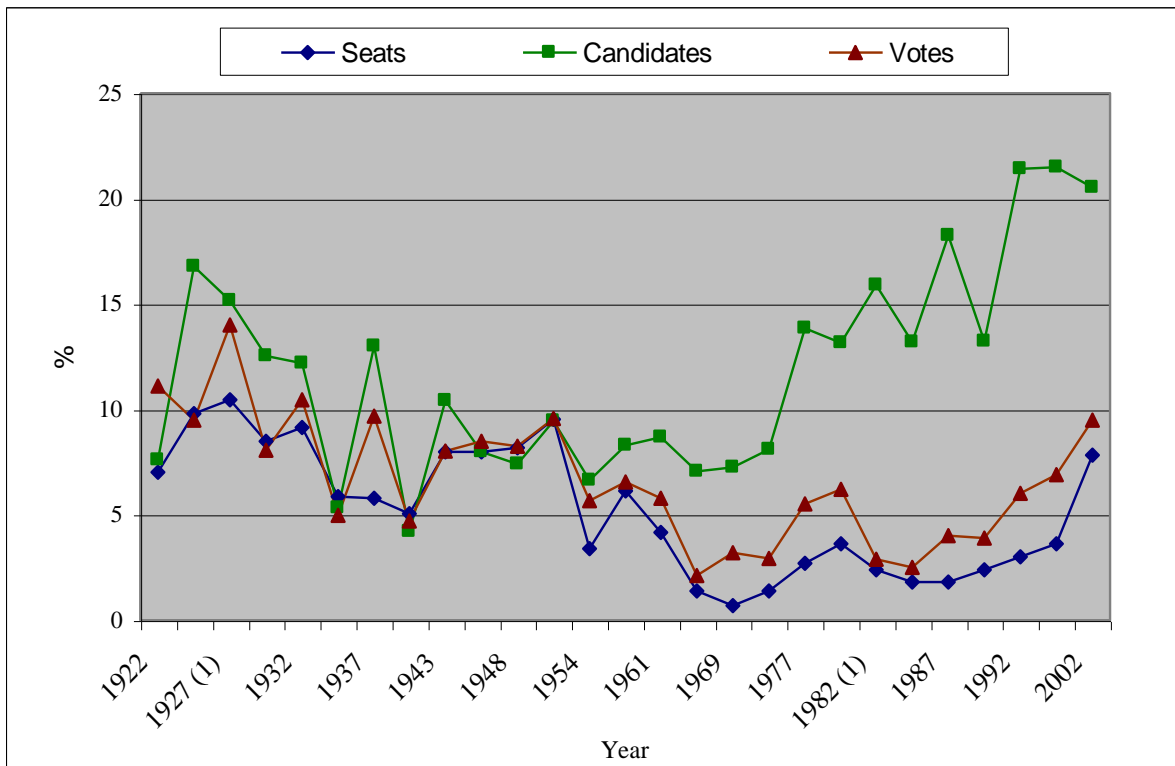
¹ The main difference being that the formation of a government, which usually acts as an incentive to strategic voting, does not arise at second-order elections.

² Many candidates do not contest local elections simply to sit on the council; for some it is a stepping stone to holding a national office. Because local councils do not have much authority, there are few direct incentives for those who wish to wield power and shape policy; however there are indirect incentives for such individuals if they see local elections as a necessary hurdle to clear before contesting national elections.

tally has entered double figures nine times in 28 general elections, a considerable achievement given the relatively small size of the *Dáil* (166 seats since 1977). While Independents have also received a substantial number of votes, the national mean masks the even more significant local presence they have had at constituency level, often winning over 15 percent of the vote, as occurred in 11 of the 42 electoral constituencies in 2002, when they won 13 seats. This result continued a trend of rising support for Independents since the 1980s (albeit which was halted in 2007, when the party system threatened to return to its traditional two-and-a-half party mould⁵), which can be accounted for by a number of factors.

The first may be related to a rising level of disaffection with the parties, as evidenced by the declining numbers expressing an attachment to a party (Weeks 2008a). Another reason is the prominent positions held by Independents in parliament during the 1980s and 1990s, when they managed to extract policy concessions from minority governments dependent upon their support (see below). A final factor is the increased willingness of dissident politicians falling out with their party to run for office (possible a response to an increasingly centralised process of candidate selection within some of the parties (Weeks 2007b)), as 25 percent of votes cast for Independents over the last four general elections went to such candidates (1989—2007 inclusive) (Source: Weeks 2008a).

FIGURE 1. % CANDIDATES RUNNING INDEPENDENT, AND % VOTES AND SEATS WON BY INDEPENDENTS AT IRISH GENERAL ELECTIONS 1922–2007



The winning of a seat has not marked the zenith of Independents’ political careers. Rather than being ostracised in the no-man’s land of non-partisanship in parliament, they have had a considerable impact on the Irish political system, chiefly by their participation in the government formation process. In most cases, the participating TDs received significant rewards for their external support status. For example, a delegation of Independents ‘won’ a cabinet ministry in 1948, while the most common type of reward has been increased levels of patronage for the deputies’ respective home constituency. In 1982 this amounted to the infamous ‘Gregory Deal’, when Tony Gregory, an Independent TD, was promised 150–250 million pounds in pork-barrel projects by a party leader in return for his supporting the latter’s nomination as *Taoiseach* (prime minister) (Joyce and Murtagh 1983: 60–63). This participation in government formation has not been an irregular occurrence, as 40 percent of all administrations have negotiated the support of Independents (see Table 1 below).

TABLE 1. GOVERNMENTS SUPPORTED BY INDEPENDENTS, 1922–2008

Government (<i>Taoiseach</i>)	Parties in government	Years in office
Cosgrave	Cumann na nGaedheal	1927–30
Cosgrave	Cumann na nGaedheal	1930–32
Costello	Fine Gael/Labour/National Labour/ Clann na Poblachta/Clann na Talmhan	1948–51
De Valera	Fianna Fáil	1951–54
Costello	Fine Gael/Labour	1954–57
Lemass	Fianna Fáil	1961–65
Fitzgerald	Fine Gael/Labour	1981–82
Haughey	Fianna Fáil	1982
Haughey	Fianna Fáil	1987–89
Ahern	Fianna Fáil/Progressive Democrats	1997–2002
Ahern	Fianna Fáil/Progressive Democrats/Green Party	2007–

This real-world presence of Independents has not been matched by an equivalent amount of scholarly attention, largely because they have been evaluated as an idiosyncrasy of the Irish political system (see Chubb 1957; Carty 1981: 58–61; Sinnott 1995: 64–5). Usually scholars refer to the traditionally strong personality factor in Irish voting behaviour and the importance of localism (Gallagher 1976: 58). The equally idiosyncratic electoral system, PR-STV, has also been expounded as a significant factor for a number of reasons (see Strøm 1990: 103, Carty 1981: 121, Chubb 1957: 132; Weeks 2007a), which are expanded on in a later section. In contrast to the predominant strategy of treating Independents as idiosyncrasies, the following analysis will assess the structural incentives inviting candidates to run and to remain as Independents across three major stages of the political process.

III.1 Why run as an Independent? The Electoral Stage

As stated above, politicians run on party tickets due to a number of rational-based incentives, which begs the question, why then would ambitious candidates choose to run as Independents? The first explanation one needs to refer to is evidently that they failed to procure a party nomination. If this were the sole reason, there would be little point in studying the ambitions of Independents, since this category is ambitious for a party, not an Independent candidacy. However, only 9 percent of Independent candidates running at the 2004 local elections sought a party nomination (Weeks 2008a). Of course, there may also be other Independents who desired a nomination, but did not seek one because of their limited chances of attaining it. Still, it is

reasonable to assume that the vast majority of Independents adopted this status in preference to a party candidacy. While there may also be a few ‘joker’ candidates in the pack, that is, those who do not mount a serious campaign, and have no chance of winning a seat, an important assumption of this paper is that most candidates seek to maximise their vote, regardless of their chances of victory. For example, an Independent elected in 2002 admitted that he ‘had little or no chance of getting elected...but we knew to do it right would mean I would have to canvass as much as possible’ (Fleming et al. 2003: 84).

To assess what motivated Independents to run for office, respondents were given a number of possible reasons for running, and asked to rank how important each of these were on a scale of 1 to 10 in motivating their decision to run for office (where 1 was ‘not at all important’, and 10 ‘extremely important’). Table 2 below details the importance of these incentives.

Table 2. Importance of incentives in decision to run at electoral stage

Incentive	Not at all Important						Extremely Important				N
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
<i>To win a seat</i>											
Party	5	1	2	1	6	4	7	13	11	50	292
Independents	8	3	1	1	14	5	5	6	5	55	133
Pearson's chi-square= 21.41 (p=0.011)											
<i>Interested in politics</i>											
Party	1	0	2	3	2	4	8	17	14	48	294
Independents	7	1	1	4	8	6	7	7	11	48	143
Pearson's chi-square=18.68 (p=0.03)											
<i>To highlight an important issue</i>											
Party	19	4	5	5	10	8	10	12	6	21	254
Independents	11	2	2	2	7	2	4	11	8	55	133
Pearson's chi-square=54.95 (p=0.000)											
<i>Asked to run by a group/organisation</i>											
Party	46	9	6	3	6	4	6	5	4	10	234
Independents	39	5	3	2	9	3	5	8	5	21	117
Pearson's chi-square=15.64 (p=0.075)											
<i>To represent local area</i>											
Party	3	0	2	1	1	3	5	13	13	58	295
Independents	5	0	1	3	2	1	5	7	7	70	155
Pearson's chi-square=20.49 (p=0.015)											
<i>To continue family representation in political life</i>											
Party	66	4	4	2	4	3	2	4	3	8	250
Independents	64	6	4	0	1	3	4	2	4	13	106
Pearson's chi-square=8.25 (p=0.605)											

Source: 2004 candidate survey (Weeks 2008a).

Note: the figures given in the columns headed 1 to 10 denote the proportions ranking the importance of the respective incentive on a particular score for both party and Independent candidates. For example, 50 percent of party candidates ranked 'to win a seat' a score of 10 on the scale of importance.

A number of interesting patterns are revealed from the survey results. First, Independents are less ambitious than their party candidates, as just under 70 percent said this was an important³ motive in running, in contrast to 81 percent of party candidates, a difference between the two figures that was significant at the p<.001 level. Second, Independents (74 percent) were less likely than party candidates (88 percent) to cite interest in politics as a key factor in their decision to run (at the p<.0001 level), although the score for Independents is still quite a high level in itself.

³ In this, and in all future uses of the term, 'important', unless otherwise stated, refers to scores of seven or greater on the scale of importance.

The ability to highlight any issue is an extremely valuable asset to Independents. In an era of growing disaffection with, and alienation from, politics, often the only time the public are politically engaged is over an issue that affects them personally. Since such issues are ideal means of mobilizing supporters, ambitious candidates can be tempted to veer clear of parties if they must adhere to a central policy that is either opposed to the local electorate's concerns, or prevents the candidate from getting heavily involved in the campaign. For example, an interest group mobilised over the closure of an illegal television mast successfully had its nominee (an Independent candidate) elected in 1997, profiting from the relative silence of the party TDs on the matter, who felt compelled to abide by party policy. The significance of supporting an issue for Independents is further highlighted in Table 2. 55 percent of Independents gave this incentive a score of maximum importance, in contrast to just 21 percent of party candidates who did so (a difference significant at a $p < 0.001$ level). In other words, those most concerned with highlighting an issue were more likely to run as an Independent (58 percent) than as a party candidate (42 percent) ($n=130$), a quite significant finding in itself (at a $p < 0.01$ level).

A similar motivation is being asked to run by a group or organization campaigning for specific issues. When asked to state the importance of this factor as an incentive in their decision to run, significantly more Independents than party candidates rated this important (at a $p < 0.001$ level). Once again, of those giving this incentive the rating of utmost importance, a majority were Independents (52 percent) ($n=48$).⁶ In summary, compared to party candidates, Independents are, somewhat surprisingly, more motivated by substantial policy objectives. For such policy-oriented actors, the incentives parties can, and want to, offer to their backbench MPs are only of limited attractiveness because the power of policy-formulation is monopolized by the national leadership, and organizational loyalty in the parliamentary and governmental stage is primarily paid-off by career advancements, not by policy-influence (Bolleyer forthcoming).

Given the localistic bent of Irish politics, and particularly, Independents, it is not surprising that 89 percent of Independents cited representing their local area as an important factor in their decision to run, equal to the proportion of party candidates who did so. Over 70 percent of Independents ranked this of utmost importance (with the maximum score of 10), in contrast to the lesser equivalent figure of 58 percent of party candidates (a difference significant at the $p < 0.01$ level). The final incentive assesses the importance of political family dynasties. While the notion of a family 'holding onto a seat' may seem something of a paradox in a democracy where it is the

public who have the power of election, there are countless examples of seats being ‘passed on’ from generation to generation, as local electorates remain loyal to a family name. Such candidates may not necessarily run just to retain a seat within their family, but a history of political activity by previous generations stirs up interest and creates an incentive for them to run. It is easier for an Independent to maintain such familial representation, since they do not need to seek a party nomination. Consequently, 23 percent of Independents ranked this an important incentive in running, compared to 16 percent of party candidates (albeit a difference not significant at a $p < .05$ level).

Having looked at the personal incentives of the candidates, it is important to recognise that such motives do not exist in isolation, and are often influenced by the environment within which they operate. Accordingly, an important institutional factor to consider at this stage is the electoral system, which it is widely asserted facilitates Independent success and encourages such candidates to run for office (see Strøm 1990: 103, Carty 1981: 121, Sinnott 1995). The reasons listed include: first, voters rank candidates, not parties, and unlike under the variant of PR-STV used in Malta⁷, and to elect the Australian Senate, candidates are not grouped by party, but only alphabetically by surname.⁸ The nature of the ballot encourages candidate-centred competition (see Katz 1980: 34), which is reinforced by the method of transferring lower preferences to fill seats when not enough candidates have reached the electoral quota, as this encourages candidates to cultivate a personal following to attract lower preferences. Second, this candidate-centred nature lessens the disadvantage of lacking a party label, since any candidate who works hard for his/her constituency has a good chance of winning a seat; ‘he does not *have* to be a party man to do this’ (Chubb 1957: 132). Third, those who fail to secure a party nomination can run as an Independent, and still have a reasonable chance of success as a party dissident⁹ (Mair 1987: 67–69). Fourth, the presence of multi-seat constituencies means that Independents do not need a plurality of votes as in SMP, and in five-seat constituencies, they require (at the most) only 17 percent of first preferences to win a seat. Fifth, the system of transfers can favour non-partisan candidates (such as Independents), because there is an increased likelihood of a party voter, having voted for the candidates of their supported party, casting their immediate preferences for an Independent, rather than a rival party candidate(s) (Weeks 2007a). Finally, PR-STV helps to reinforce the personalism and localism prevalent in Irish political culture that are claimed to be conducive to the success of Independents at elections (Chubb 1957: 132; Gallagher 1976: 62; Carty 1981: 121). This evidence indicates that

a prominent individual with a mobilized organization does not need to join a party if they wish to enter parliament, unlike under List systems or even under other candidate-centred systems, such as SMP.

Returning to the benefits of an Independent candidacy, the advantages are: the ability to focus the entire campaign on any issue, or even one single issue; not having to toe the party policy line; the flexibility to adopt any position on any policy; and the freedom to canvass across the whole constituency, not being restricted to a local bailiwick like candidates of the major parties¹⁰. Independents can do and say what they want on the campaign trail, adopting all sorts of populist doctrines without having to preach responsible politics. In addition, the costs of running for a party are: increased levels of anti-party sentiment amongst the electorate; the undermining of one's credibility as an independent voice; having to defend unpopular party policies (especially those counter to one's own policy ideals); and the increasing centralisation of political parties.

Another advantage of an Independent status has been the transformation of parties, which have been evolving from a mass membership-based organization to a narrow political elite tightly controlled by central headquarters (see Katz and Mair 1995; Mair 1992). Party policy now tends to be decided by party executives, often on the basis of focus group and opinion poll research, rather than by the ordinary members. This change has undermined the role of the ordinary party MP, who has little input into the running, or policy-making decisions, of the party, but is still bound to accept the decisions of the hierarchy. This can result in a distancing of such MPs from the party, and in such an environment, an Independent candidacy can appear tempting as a liberalising move (Sharman 2002: 65).

Besides joining a party, another option at the electoral stage is for Independents to form a new party, but this is not necessarily the rational decision for a number of reasons.⁴ First, candidates who have a record of campaigning as Independents might have their support undermined if they choose to reject their Independent status and don party colours. Second, they might find it much more difficult to operate as part of a national team and be subject to the decisions of a party executive, where previously they were their own person as an Independent. Third, they might find it more difficult to attract votes as a new party, since the electorate find it

⁴ There is no restriction on any individual declaring the formation of a party. However, to form a party that is officially recognized by the authorities, there is a number of criteria to meet. The organization must have either one TD or three local representatives; three hundred paid-up members; a party constitution; and the organization must hold an annual general meeting (source: various Electoral Acts; available @ www.irishstatutebook.ie).

easier to switch to non-partisans than new parties (as shown above), as it is less of a leap of volatility. Finally, the lives of a new party's politicians are usually tied to the life of the party, which can be a problem as so many new parties are flash parties that do not survive and tend to disappear (Pedersen 1982).

As a final option, to counter the negative consequences of a new party label, and yet receive the benefits of pooling one's resources, Independents can form alliances at election time. For example, eight Independent candidates concerned about the state of the Irish health service at the 2002 election (the most important issue at that election (Garry et al (2003)) decided to run under the umbrella title of 'Independent Health Alliance'. This provided some of the benefits procured from forming parties, such as the provision of brand recognition, generating additional turnout in support of all the alliances' candidates, and the establishment of a credible candidacy. Evidently, Independents engage in co-operation that generates equivalent gains to party organization but does not undermine their individual flexibility. To conclude this section, considering the interplay between institutional incentives and motivational factors prevalent at the electoral stage, it is possible for ambitious politicians to maximise their utility by running as an Independent. Clearly, there is life outside the party.

III.2 Why Independents Do Not Join Parties – the Parliamentary Stage

Once elected, the main concern for MPs at the parliamentary stage is that of collective action, that is, having been elected, how do they go about achieving their desired policy preferences? Thinking again of the cost-benefit model, the only benefit Independents can hope to gain by forming or joining a party is the achieving of some of their policy objectives. This was one of the main reasons why parties originally formed in parliament; the individual members realised they could only get their proposed legislation enacted if other members backed them, and they would only do so if their own proposals were supported (see Aldrich 1995; Laver and Shepsle 1998). To overcome this conundrum, deputies agreed to come together in loose coalitions and vote in unison for each other's policies.

In light of such rationale, one needs to then ask why Independents do not join parties after being elected in order to achieve their desired legislation. The first reason is that under majority governments backbench MPs like Independents have little to no influence over a dominant executive, so they would not stand to gain anything from such a move. An Independent TD

echoed this hypothesis in 2006, stating that he enjoyed the same influence as any party backbench TD. ‘The only ones in the *Dáil* that have those extra bits of privilege are those sitting on the government benches’, he said. ‘Other than that we’re all equal.’¹¹ In fact, Independents may stand to lose by joining a party, since their supporters may feel aggrieved that (a) they betrayed an Independent platform on which they were elected, and (b) if it was sacrificed for an uninfluential role on the party backbenches.¹²

The situation is different under minority administrations where parties choose to court the support of Independent TDs, rather than bringing an additional coalition partner into cabinet. For Independents, the incentive is there to support the party or parties just falling short of a majority in return for some type of benefit. However, if the Independents have been elected on a stance of opposition to these parties, such a manoeuvre can pose difficulties. Instead, Independents can achieve the best of both worlds by supporting a minority administration outside of government in return for policy benefits for their constituency, while at the same time retaining their Independent status. For example, every time the two government options of Fianna Fáil (which latterly includes the Progressive Democrats) or the Fine Gael/Labour coalition falls a couple of seats short of a majority (e.g. 1948, 1951, 1954, 1961, 1965, 1981, 1982, 1987, 1997, 2002, 2007) they usually try and attract Independent TDs into their party fold. The latter always reject such manoeuvres (at least initially, although there are a number of instances where Independents joined parties several years after voting them into government), but instead they normally offer to support the government option if they promise to satisfy their shopping list of demands, clearly a recognition of an Independent status being more rewarding than party affiliation. This situation was neatly highlighted in 1997 when a former Fianna Fáil activist won a seat as an Independent. In return for his agreeing to support the minority Fianna Fáil–Progressive Democrat administration, he claimed to have got over 250 million pounds of funding for his rural constituency (Weeks 2008b). If he had been elected as a Fianna Fáil backbench TD or joined the party in parliament, such extensive levels of patronage would not have come his way. In such a situation, life as an Independent was clearly the rational choice.

Another important question is why Independents do not form a ‘party of Independents’ amongst themselves in parliament. The major reason is because of the lack of influence private members outside government have on the policy-making process compared to other systems (Bolleyer 2004). While a new party might bring Independents a higher profile, a more strategic

decision is to form an alliance within parliament, which helps to preserve their Independent identity, while concurrently reaping the minor benefits of their ‘technical alliance’ status. To qualify as a ‘technical group’ in the *Dáil* requires seven members; the main resources accruing from such a status includes additional speaking time in the parliamentary arena, as well as an official office space for the group to meet. This does not entitle them to additional positions on committees or such like, which remain the prerogative of the government. This quasi-party status could be favourable to Independents, because they would not have to compromise on policies favourable to their local constituency, which might be the case if they joined a full party. An example of this was the ‘technical group’ of 11 Independents in the 2002–2007 parliament (which made them larger than four of the seven parties in the *Dáil*) who met once a week to discuss common policy grounds, support each other’s policies, and even appointed a whip to ensure they generally act in unison.

III.3 Why Independents Do Not Join Parties – the Governmental Stage

Unlike most other parliaments to which Independents are elected, they do have a role to play at the governmental stage in Ireland, a consequence of the frequency of minority governments (which is somewhat unusual in a Westminster-style parliamentary model). When a majority government cannot be formed amongst the parties, again one might imagine that the rational step for Independents is to form a new party and enter government. However, for the same reasons outlined in the previous sections, they would not be in favour of such a strategy, because it would result in accusations of unscrupulous behaviour to get into power. In addition, as a new party they would have to devise a policy programme in a short space of time, which would be a difficult task for as diverse a group as Independents. Also, intra-coalitional dynamics tend to be unfavourable because junior parties (which would be the most likely status of a new and therefore rather small party) can face excessive pressure (Bolleyer 2007). The case of the Irish Labour Party proves just such a point, as they have experienced severe electoral punishment several times after periods of participation in government.

Thus, the rational step for Independents is to negotiate a deal with a minority government to receive certain policy benefits in return for their support. There have been numerous examples of such deals between Independents and governments, ranging from the aforementioned ‘Gregory Deal’ of 1982 to the separate deals negotiated by four Independent TDs with the 1997–2002

Fianna Fáil–Progressive Democrat government. The latter is a classic example of the incentive structures facing Independents at the government level.¹³ The initial three Independents who voted the Ahern administration into power in 1997 all had a common link of previous associations with Fianna Fáil, and were christened the Fianna Fáil ‘gene pool’ Independents. Having been elected as Independents in defiance of this party’s strategy, they recognised that joining the party was not a rational option. Because they were primarily localistic in orientation, represented constituencies geographically isolated from each other,¹⁴ and because they had some disparate policy objectives, forming a new party amongst themselves was also not feasible. The Independents therefore perceived the only rational choice for them was to negotiate individual agreements with the government, each of which delivered considerable largesse for their constituencies. They also exerted an influence on policy, as the government chief whip met the Independents once a week to gain their support on proposed legislation. This was not a token gesture of solidarity, as two major policies Independents did not agree with were dropped, one of which was legislation to prevent politicians holding more than one electoral office. In hindsight, one of the Independents regretted not having asked for more, when he said, ‘I remember that there was nothing that we asked for that they didn’t say was ok’ (*The Irish Times*, August 8 2000). The success of Independents’ rational strategies was emphasised when Fianna Fáil backbenchers complained about the excessive influence these Independents had on both local and national policy (*The Irish Times*, November 18 1998).

From this example, it is obvious why Independents do not shed their non-partisan clothes at the government level. The weak position of backbench MPs within a party minimises the benefits to be gained from joining, unless promised a cabinet post, which would be highly unlikely, as it would unsettle morale within the party, and encourage backbenchers themselves to run as Independents. In addition, joining a party also brings costs as Independents could be accused of selling out for political gain. Supporting a government from outside does not taint Independents, as they can portray themselves as an independent watchdog on government actions. In addition, should the government become embroiled in a scandal, the Independents’ position outside the administration insulates them from blame; they are free to criticise the government, while continuing to keep it in power.¹⁵

Conclusions, Theoretical Implications and Future Research on Non-Party Actors

It is rather unlikely that Independents will ever represent an equivalent alternative to parties as the main organizational form in parliamentary life. Nevertheless, the accumulation of power by political parties, mirrored by the decreasing power of backbenchers and ordinary members that has been observed during the last decades (Katz and Mair 1995; 2008) has increased the demand for alternative vehicles and forms of representation. This might be particularly the case with reference to local issues that are closer to the ordinary citizens. In this sense, the relationship between parties and Independents – despite their obvious competitiveness – can be understood as mutually supplementary, since Independents answer to a demand that arises in party democracies dominated by nationalised parties. Moreover, Independents' chance of success seems to be supported from two directions; first, by the relative decline of electoral parties (in contrast to parliamentary ones) (Mair 1994; Katz and Mair 2008), as well as by the increased electoral volatility in the Irish context (Mair and Weeks 2005: 156). These phenomena widely transcend Irish borders, capturing western democracies as a whole (Mair 1997), one major reason why the study of non-party actors is likely to develop into a crucial field of comparative research.¹⁶

In this context, the Irish case can be taken as a blueprint of the deficiencies symptomatic in modern party democracy and therefore offers important substantial insights. To begin with, Independents protect their capacity to have an immediate, individual impact on single policy issues that party members widely give up by conforming to a party program and complying with party discipline in parliament. This interpretation was supported by our analysis of the legislative organization and the position of ordinary party TDs in the *Dáil*. In relation to the intra-organizational tendency of modern parties to concentrate the power of policy-formulation in the national headquarters (Mair 1992; 1997), parties provide less and less of a home for policy-motivated candidates. While career-oriented TDs have a reasonable chance of being paid off for their organizational support once they enter parliament, the kind of pay-off that party offers overall does not imply individual influence over policies. Simultaneously, parties' policy profiles blur, a process 'anticipated' by the two main Irish parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, which have been commonly considered as lacking significant policy differences (Mair and Weeks 2005). In this sense, the Independent route can be seen as an organizational response to competition, in which policy plays less and less a role, and to party organization, which more and more relies on

material incentives to generate organizational support, instead of providing activists the chance to realise their policy preferences.

Further, our findings lead to theoretical insights regarding the analytical tools commonly used for, and the assumptions commonly underlying, party research: comparing parliamentarians' Independent status with party membership from an actor-centred perspective pushes us to refine our understanding of policy influence and policy preferences, which are usually defined in terms of 'government policy' or 'party policy' only. This implicit restriction makes us unable to capture the locally-oriented conception of policy that Independents predominantly exhibit. A greater awareness of this often implicit understanding of policy as party policy becomes all the more important in the face of party decline and the rise of issue-based voting (Dalton and Weldon 2005). The analysis also highlights the pressures party MPs are confronted with being integrated in a collective body. These pressures are easily overlooked when parties are conceptualised as unitary actors that shape parliamentary life. It moreover leads to a biased evaluation when automatically comparing Independents' impact with the impact of whole parties as if they were equivalent actors. The comparison between party MPs and Independents shows that to enter parliament does not already ensure direct policy influence for the single MP even if he is part of a governing party – in particular when the government monopolises agenda-setting to a high degree, as is the case in Ireland.

Thinking of future research, the analysis of the Irish case presented in this paper provides a first step towards understanding the phenomenon of non-party actors in western party democracy. It reveals some of the motivational differences between Independent and partisan candidates, making their respective 'organizational choices' comprehensible. To arrive at a broader picture, future studies need to apply the presented tools cross-nationally, comparing Independent actors in different systemic contexts to understand the impact of the varying incentive structures in the electoral, parliamentary and governmental stages that constitute the political process. Then we can move from the systematic exploration of crucial cases towards an explanatory account of non-party actors. More specifically, a more encompassing analysis of the Irish case demands not only an assessment of the motives to run as an Independent as we have done above, but also a systematic exploration of how Independents use channels of influence in the parliamentary and the governmental stages. Although the structural analysis provided in this paper and the detailed

narratives give valuable insights, they need to be substantiated further in future research, for example, through in-depth interviews with Independents in national parliaments.

Becoming, or indeed, remaining an Independent, is not an irrational act. Implying the logic of Black's calculus of candidacy (1972), the costs of joining a party can be higher than the benefits.¹⁷ While this paper explained the continued presence of Independents in the Irish political system, it has general consequences for systems in which it becomes increasingly difficult to form a majority government. Australia and Canada are two prime examples, where narrow election results have resulted in the main parties looking to Independents for support. Once Independents experience success, the incentives are introduced to maintain this status, and for backbenchers to rebel in favour of the Independent path. With executives increasingly dominant and legislatures increasingly irrelevant, the futility of life of as a backbench MP may result in more politicians considering an Independent status as a rational option. Ironically, were everyone in parliament to think so, Independents would regain power, and inevitably the wheel of party formation would turn again, as coalitions would form to secure policy objectives.

Appendix

To determine why Independents decide to run, a survey of Independent and party candidates was conducted immediately after the 2004 local elections (see Weeks 2008a). Methodologically speaking, the survey is advantageous to older studies in several respects. Rather than replicating Denver and Hand's methods of surveying election agents (1997), Weeks surveyed the candidates themselves. This was largely because the focus of his study was Independent candidates, who tend not to have a full-time election agent, especially at local elections, and it is usually just the candidates themselves who have the best knowledge of their campaign details. A four-page questionnaire with 35 questions was sent by post to each of the 297 Independent candidates, and to 556 of the 1,665 party candidates. Independents received a slightly different version that had an extra five questions pertaining specifically to their Independent status. Since there can be a difference in behaviour between urban and rural candidates, 353 surveys were sent to party candidates for county councils, and 203 for those running in city councils. Ensuring the inclusion of a reasonable number of both city and county candidates was necessary for the controlling of particular effects that might be unique to a particular locale.

The quantity to survey from each party was based on their number of candidates as a proportion of total candidacies in city and county councils. This was done to ensure a reasonable weighting of responses so that one party would be not overly represented in the final dataset. The party respondents were chosen at random from a list of their party's candidates within the two separate forms of councils. Details of the numbers of questionnaires sent and returned according to party affiliation are detailed below in Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution and survey response rate

Party	Surveyed	Respondents	% Response rate
Fianna Fáil	183	95	51.9
Fine Gael	150	94	62.7
Labour	72	48	66.7
PDs	43	26	62.8
Greens	49	24	49.0
Sinn Féin	40	24	60.0
Independent	297	179	60.3
Others	19	14	73.7
<i>Total</i>	853	504	59.1

Source: 2004 candidate survey (Weeks 2008a).

The questionnaire was posted one week after the elections, and was followed up by a reminder postcard three weeks later to those who had not yet returned it. Two weeks later, the questionnaire was re-sent to all respondents yet to reply. This labour-intensive procedure produced a very satisfactory final response rate of 59 percent, which exceeds that achieved by Denver and Hands (1997) (53 percent), and Gilland (2003) (47 percent) in similar studies. The response rate is of particular importance when making inferences from surveys. A low response rate means that there is an increased probability of the sample data being not randomly selected; that is, those who did respond may not be reflective of the random sample originally drawn. Consequently, the random sampling error can increase, resulting in unreliable findings. Such biases are less likely to occur in a candidate survey because of the low levels of heterogeneity amongst same party candidates (as opposed to voters), reducing the variance in the sample. In any case, the reasonable response rates means that unreliable findings are less likely to occur, especially considering the rates being larger to other candidate surveys. Replicating the methodology of Denver and Hands (1997: 322–323), the representativeness of the responses can be checked against a few variables, notably party vote and turnout. As Table 4 below indicates, the figures for the constituencies with respondents are quite similar to the national mean, which indicates that the campaigns covered by the sample survey are very representative of all campaigns.

Table 4. Representativeness of response constituencies

	Fianna Fáil respondents	Fine Gael respondents	Independent respondents
<i>Fianna Fáil vote share</i>	32.1	31.6	30.9
<i>Fine Gael vote share</i>	28.8	29.8	27.4
<i>Independents' vote share</i>	12.1	11.6	15.0
<i>Turnout</i>	59.7	59.4	59.9

Source: 2004 candidate survey (Weeks 2008a).

¹ Throughout this paper the term ‘Independent’ and its concomitant categories are capitalised when referring to Independent politicians. This is done to distinguish between the use of the word ‘independent’ as a general adjective and as a noun signifying a particular political status.

² Provided of course that non-party candidacies (not just personalised party lists) are permitted, which is predominantly the case in countries using candidate-centred electoral systems, examples being single-member plurality (SMP), proportional representation by the single transferable vote (PR-STV), the double-ballot, and the alternative vote (AV).

³ This is the same definition used by Chubb (1957: 132) and Marsh et al (2008: 49).

⁴ This would explain why candidates running for election in the US campaign on a party label (where it is a valued asset), but when elected act far more independently in office.

⁵ This reflected the traditional cyclical performance of Independents, and was also a product of (a) the inability of the raft of Independents elected in 2002 to deliver ‘pork’ for their respective constituencies and (b) the emergence of a credible alternative government in 2007 (see Gallagher 2007: 92).

⁶ Although such a small difference is not significant at a $p < 0.05$ level, the very fact that it is approximately equal to the proportion of party candidates is a practically significant result.

⁷ Malta is the only other country outside Ireland using PR-STV to elect its lower house of parliament.

⁸ Indeed, neither party labels nor symbols were included on the ballot sheet in Ireland until 1963.

⁹ 45 percent of the 45 party TDs who ran Independent at a succeeding election retained their seat (from 1923 to 2002), quite a considerable level of success (Weeks 2008a).

¹⁰ ‘Bailiwick’ refers to a localised portion of a constituency that a candidate is restricted to campaigning in by his/her party, usually done to ensure an even spread of votes amongst the party’s candidates to maximize their seat return.

¹¹ Interview with Independent TD Michael Lowry on ‘The Constituency’, RTÉ Radio 1, December 16 2006.

¹² Only 6 of the 16 Independent TDs who have joined established political parties within parliament since the 1920s have held their seat as a party TD at the succeeding election. This explains why only three Independents crossed over to the party benches in the *Dáil* between 1961 and 2005 (Weeks 2005).

¹³ From a large party’s point of view (such as Fianna Fáil), it is more beneficial to gather the support of Independents, rather than of a small party, since the former do not occupy government ministries and, moreover, usually have less weight than a small party and therefore are likely to demand fewer policy concessions.

¹⁴ Ranging from the extreme north-west (Donegal), to the south-west (Kerry), to the east coast (Wicklow).

¹⁵ Evidence of this was seen in November 2001, when an Independent TD refused to bow to government pressure to apologise for his claims that the Minister for Justice in the 1994-1997 government should be investigated for an abuse of power (*The Irish Times*, November 27 2001).

¹⁶ It has already been the subject of a workshop at the Joint Sessions of the European Consortium of Political Research in 2006.

¹⁷ The calculus states that rational individuals should only run when $pB > C$ (where p = the probability of victory, B = the benefits gained from running, and C = the costs of running).

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