CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Independents and the party system
Authors	Weeks, Liam
Publication date	2021-08-01
Original Citation	Weeks, L. (2021) 'Independents and the party system', in Farrell, D. M. and Hardiman, N. (eds.) The Oxford Handbook of Irish Politics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 539-557. doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198823834.013.31
Type of publication	Book chapter
Link to publisher's version	10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198823834.013.31
Rights	© 2021, Oxford University Press. This is a draft of a chapter published in 2021 by Oxford University Press in the book The Oxford Handbook of Irish Politics edited by David M. Farrell and Niamh Hardiman.
Download date	2026-11-01 13:13:57
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/13315

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

The presence of independents in the Irish political system is unusual from a comparative perspective. Sometimes seen as an idiosyncratic phenomenon, they are analysed in terms of their relation to the party system, and categorized in a manner similar to that applied to party families. Why independents do not form parties is analysed from an institutional and behavioural perspective, showing that there are a number of incentives for political entrepreneurs to remain as independents rather than transition to a new party. The nature of support for independents is assessed through a populist lens, considering if independents take the place of populist parties in the electoral marketplace. It is found that independents have more in common with left-wing progressives than right-wing nativists. The final section examines the role of independents in the government formation process, showing that the levels of stability and output are not as low as might be expected.

independents, non-partisan, party system, single transferable vote, populism, minority government

31

Independents and the Party System

Liam Weeks

Rumours of the demise of parties tend to be greatly exaggerated. It is true that in a number of countries once-dominant parties have experienced declining support levels, that the membership figures of most parties have been in freefall, and that the esteem in which they are held by the public has rarely been lower. In spite of this, parties remain central to the functioning of almost all established democracies. While new social movements emerged during the Great Recession to challenge the ruling party establishments, in almost all parliaments new opposition adopted the traditional party model. There were a few exceptions, notably the Citizens' Movement in Iceland, and the various strands of the Pirate Party that emerged in a number of jurisdictions. However, even these radical movements leaned towards a party organization model, perhaps in recognition of Bryce's (1921: 119) claim that 'parties are inevitable'. Ireland is slightly unusual, then, as those who experienced the greatest electoral gains during the recessionary period were independents, non-party politicians outside the party tent. In the 2011 and 2016 Dáil elections, independent candidates attracted the support of between one in eight and one in six voters respectively, an unprecedented level of support at a national election in an established democracy in the post-war era. Fifteen of these independents were elected to the 158-seat Dáil in 2011, the highest number since 1927, and a record twenty-three were elected in 2016. Even with the swing to Sinn Féin and the Greens in 2020, independents still won exactly one-eighth of Dáil seats, twenty in total, a number bettered only at the previous election.

This chapter seeks to explain this unusual phenomenon from a systemic perspective, in particular by treating independents as a by-product of the party system. The following questions are posed: who are these independents, and how can they be analysed in a manner similar to parties? Why do they fail to evolve into parties? Are they Ireland's 'populists'? What is their impact on government and parliament? The chapter begins with an overview of independents, and places their presence in a comparative context. A detailed taxonomy is provided, which

categorizes independents in a manner similar to that applied to party families. Why independents do not form parties is then analysed from an institutional and behavioural perspective, highlighting the lack of new parties as a consequence, echoing the claims of Bowler and Farrell (2017). Given their non-party stance, the populist nature of support for independents is assessed, and it is found that although expressing alienation and disaffection, independents do not attract an anti-immigrant vote akin to European right-wing populists. To conclude, there is an assessment of independents' impact on the political system via a case study of their performance in government.

The Phenomenon of Independents

Very few independents are elected to national parliament in most other democracies. A brief overview of the 106 directly elected legislatures in the 89 free democracies in 2011 found that—excluding the six Pacific island states, where there are no parties—there are no independents in 79 of 100 chambers (Renwick, 2011: 59). In the eighteen EU states that permit independent candidacies at lower house elections, there were just nineteen independents elected at the first set of general elections held in these countries in the 2010s, fifteen of whom sat in the Dáil. This finding is not unique to this decade, as evident from Figure 31.1. Along with the Irish Labour party, independents are the only grouping to have sat in every Dáil since 1922. Support for them has varied considerably over the decades, and a tripartite approach similar to the one Little and Farrell employ to explain the evolution of the Irish party system (Chapter 30) can be adopted for independents. If we take the early decades of democratic consolidation as the first period, there was considerable flux as the roots of party attachments were still in an adolescent stage, affording independents an opportunity to compete electorally with parties. This was not an experience unique to Ireland, as independents often have a presence in newly emergent democracies, such as in the parliaments of central and eastern Europe in the 1990s. The second period was the zenith of the two-and-a-half party system (between the 1950s and 1970s), with independent incumbents either retiring or joining parties, and no independent freshmen taking their place. The more recent third period since the 1980s is where the Irish case deviates from the comparative norm, as independents experienced an electoral resurgence (they suffer the fate of the proverbial dodo in most regimes once democracy and the party system have been consolidated), with the most striking pattern the considerable increase in the number of independent candidacies. This averaged twenty-six in the nineteen elections between 1922 and 1973, doubling to fifty-two in 1977, and since 1997 it has averaged well over a hundred per Dáil election.

The significant presence in the parliament of an established party democracy of genuine non-partisans marks out the Dáil and the Irish party system in general as an outlier.[1] If we wish to place this phenomenon in some kind of international context, the primary comparable examples comprise some local or regional assemblies or regimes with dubious democratic credentials. These include the Canadian territories of Nunavut and the Northwest Territories, where party politics are absent as a consensus style of government prevails (White, 2006). Nebraska in the USA has had a non-partisan state assembly since 1935, as had Minnesota between 1913 and 1974. In a number of European countries, local independent lists prevail (Aars and Ringkjøb, 2005; Reiser and Holtmann, 2008), which comprise non-partisan groups of candidates who do not contest national elections and are not connected with a national party. Other bodies where

independents have proliferated include the British House of Lords, which possibly has more independents than any other parliament in the world (Russell and Sciara, 2009: 40), the Russian Duma (Hale, 2005), and the Ugandan National Assembly, where political party activity was banned between 1986 and 2005 (Carbone, 2003). The only national democratic parliaments with a significant presence of independents lie in the Pacific region, where party politics has not permeated all states (Anckar and Anckar, 2000). This adds to the puzzle of the Irish case, where the significance of independents is not the product of a weak or underdeveloped party system. A common reason cited for this anomaly is the electoral system, the single transferable vote (STV) (see Weeks, 2014). Described by Farrell and McAllister (2006: 154) as one of the most candidate-centred systems, STV works in tandem with a conducive political culture, where localism and personalism are to the fore, to create an environment that facilitates independents. In particular, a premium is placed on the ability of politicians to provide for the local constituency, a task for which a party label is not necessary. One other factor, which has not attracted the academic attention it may warrant, is the ambivalent attitude to parties among the Irish electorate. Since it was first measured in Ireland in the 1970s, the level of attachment to parties has consistently been one of the lowest of any liberal democracy (Marsh, 2006; also Marsh, Chapter 32). From an initial level of 63 per cent in 1978, as few as 27 per cent in 2016 said they felt close to a party. Likewise, Irish voters are disillusioned with the lack of choice offered by parties. When asked if it makes a difference which party is in power, the proportions expressing a negative response in Ireland (49 per cent in 2002 and 39 per cent in 2007) were far higher than in most other jurisdictions (Weeks, 2017: 160).2

[Insert Figure 31.1 about here]

Commented [WL1]: This figure is missing

The Meaning of Independent

In spite of their persistent presence, independents remain a relatively understudied phenomenon, in part because of a perception that they are an idiosyncrasy that defies systematic analysis. This stems from independents lacking a unitary nature comparable to a party; there can be as much difference, if not more, between each individual independent as between parties. The independent label is also not very revealing, failing to illuminate the policies, organization, or ideologies of the candidates wearing such political attire. It is a catch-all uniform that indicates little else other than that the wearer does not belong to a political party (and even this may not be wholly accurate). It is important to rectify this ambiguity by clarifying the meaning of independence, a necessary task to place a seemingly exceptional feature into a comparative context.

One method by which to define independents is their place in parliament. They are neither government nor opposition, instead occupying a form of purgatory between both. It is this analogy that makes independents perhaps comparable to the neutral angels in Dante's Inferno, who were condemned to a life of torment in the Ante-Inferno for refusing to take sides in the war in heaven (Alighieri, 1996).

[Insert Table 31.1 about here]

However, if we examine their behaviour in parliament the label of independence implies neither a position firmly on the fence nor one of true non-partisanship. Rather, in many cases

independents take sides between government and opposition, and not along 50/50 lines as we might imagine if a genuinely independent stance was taken, all things being equal. This is particularly apparent when they support minority administrations, a quite frequent phenomenon in Irish politics (see Table 31.1). Independents propping up a government usually provide fairly disciplined levels of support in parliament, contrary to what we might expect from non-whipped politicians. In contrast, when their votes are not needed in parliament, independents tend to lie firmly on the side of the opposition, perhaps a consequence of a Westminster-style adversarial political system.

Figure 31.2 gives more precise details of such patterns of support, indicating the proportion of times each independent representative voted with the government in every Dáil between 1937 and 2016. Each point (both crosses and squares) corresponds to an independent Teachta Dála (TD), so a score of 100 in 2002 implies that an independent voted with the government 100 per cent of the time over the lifetime of the Dáil elected that year. It is apparent from this figure that independents are fluid players who can change sides as it suits their interests. When independents hold the balance of power in the Dáil, they use such leverage to vote with the government, usually in return for patronage. Summarizing the findings from Figure 31.2, the mean proportion of times that an independent TD supporting a government (denoted by cross points) voted with the said administration was 86 per cent. The equivalent figure for independents whose votes were not needed (denoted by square points) was 23 per cent. For example, when Bertie Ahern, Fianna Fáil's leader, formed a minority coalition with the Progressive Democrats in 1997, the four independents with whom he negotiated individual arrangements provided almost 100 per cent support during the five-year lifetime of the government. In contrast, the three independents in opposition voted with Ahern less than 2 per cent of the time (Weeks, 2017: 246). What this means is that independents are not non-aligned. They are free to take either side between government and opposition, the former when they can extract some political gain, the latter when they cannot, and an anti-establishment position seems the rational option.

[Insert Figure 31.2 about here]

Commented [WL2]: This figure is missing

Another method to analyse independents is as akin to party families. There are three primary characteristics that define such families: a shared historical origin; some form of collaboration; and similar policies (Mair and Mudde, 1998). If we consider independents in terms of these criteria, a number of similarities can be identified among this heterogeneous group of politicians. On this basis, this author previously constructed a taxonomy of independent candidates based on family, organization, structure, and ideology (Weeks, 2009). This is revised and brought up to date from an analysis of contemporary newspapers, primarily The Irish Times and Irish Independent, in Table 31.2, which, using a conceptual/empirical taxonomy (Bailey, 1994: 31–2, 79), identifies six families of independents and seven further subcategories. These groups of independents, although quite distinct to the united and coherent nature of party equivalents, are comparable to families because of their shared origins and like-minded policies. For example, a group of vestigial independents arising from the termination of the Progressive Democrats in 2008 contested the 2011 Dáil election. Although not coordinating with each other, these independents had similar policy platforms and shared a common political background. Further, some of these families of independents have collaborated, including a number of anti-

abortion candidates in 1992 and the Independent Health Alliance in 2002, the latter being a group of independents that mobilized over the condition of the health service.

[Insert Table 31.2 about here]

To expand on the characteristics of each family, vestigial independents (including independent nationalists and independent unionists) cater for the remnants of defunct parties; apostate independents comprise those who have left parties; corporatist independents represent socio-economic interests (independent farmers and independent business candidates); ideological independents' raison d'être primarily revolves around a particular ideology (left-wing independents, independent republicans, and single-issue independents); community independents represent local interests; and quasi-parties comprise independents with their own machines, that is 'personal vehicle' (Lucardie, 2000) movements. These categories have not experienced consistent levels of success since 1922, but have tended to ebb and flow in line with the fortunes of the parties and the salience of the issues they represent. To this extent, Table 31.3 details the numbers of candidates running and elected within each family. Just as the parties of today are different from those present in the 1920s, so too have independents changed. They are a reactionary category, emerging when a particular issue or crisis arises, be it the loss of a local service or the failure of a politician to secure a party candidacy. For example, the vestigial family of independent nationalists and independent unionists emerged in the 1920s to cater for the abandoned supporters of the Irish Parliamentary Party and the Unionist Party. The latter two had dominated politics on the island for much of the previous fifty years, but lacked a presence in the new party system south of the border. Likewise, independent business candidates emerged in the 1920s because there were justified fears over how a group of former revolutionaries, with little or no political experience, would be able to properly manage the finances of a fledgling state. These types of independents disappeared as the new state consolidated itself, but different forms of independents emerged to cater for the issues not represented by the parties. These included left-wing independents, catering for the fragmentation within parties and movements on the left; community independents to reflect the more localist orientation of independent candidates; and single-issue independents, generally campaigning on behalf of interest groups. The rise of the latter two groups in recent decades is quite noticeable, with both tending to highlight an alleged disparity of treatment between their respective constituencies and the capital. In some ways, these independents tap into what can appear as a centre–periphery divide, manifested in a socio-economic gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' in society. Although not a full-blown cleavage in the sense as defined by Lipset and Rokkan (1967), it is a divide very much evident in the rhetoric of voters and politicians from the peripheries. One rural independent in his maiden Dáil speech in 1997 claimed that his region was 'marginalised more than any other … it has the highest rate of unemployment in the country and the lowest income per head of population. One of the main reasons for this is the neglect of the county by all governments and state agencies' (Blaney, 1997).

As the types of independents have evolved, one pattern has been that they mobilize on issues that parties are perceived to be unable to adequately deal with, whether it is the representation of the Protestant community in the 1920s or the provision of adequate health facilities in the early twenty-first century. This seems to indicate some level of strategic rationale behind the

motivations of independent candidates—in contrast to their image in other systems, where independents' minimal chances of electoral success results in those choosing the non-party route being portrayed as irrational, expressive actors (Sifry, 2003). When there was no party for unionists or farmers, independents stepped in to represent these lost communities; likewise, when Fianna Fáil was perceived to have drifted from its republican origins in the 1970s, or when Labour oriented to the centre of the political spectrum in more recent decades. So too when there was no party catering for a particular position on an issue, whether of a national dimension, such as abortion, or a constituency matter, such as the retention of a local hospital. Rather than go down the long and winding path of forming a new party (as is discussed in the next section), it is far easier for those who seek to challenge the party establishment to run as an independent. This suggests that rather than being an entity entirely separate to the party system, independents are a by-product of its evolution, as discussed by Bowler and Farrell (2017).

[Insert Table 31.3 about here]

Why No New Party?

One category of independents referred to in Table 31.2 is quasi-parties, primarily those comprising one-man bands. Historically, there were only a handful of such types contesting Dáil elections, but their number increased considerably in the early 2000s, being especially prominent around the 2016 election, following which an Independent Alliance entered government and a self-styled 'rural alliance' formed on the backbenches, accompanied by Independents 4 Change, a registered party whose members maintained an independent status. Fewer of these groups contested the 2020 election, but a number emerged within the new Dáil to capitalize on the technical advantages accruing to groups with a designated status. A key question concerning these groups is why they do not morph into full-blown parties. New parties emerged in many countries during the Great Recession, and being one of the worst affected economies, Ireland might have expected a similar experience. However, no significant new party emerged in Ireland at the nadir election of 2011, and the new parties that contested the 2016 and 2020 elections lacked a certain element of newness, constituting a breakaway movement (Renua), a reformation of existing parties (AAA–PBP; later Solidarity–PBP), and an alliance of independent TDs (Social Democrats)—for more see Murphy (2016). Instead, as already mentioned, the grouping that experienced the greatest electoral gains during this period was independents, which begs two questions. Are independents Ireland's answer to a new party, and why did they not take the next step in forming a party?

The failure of new parties to emerge is nothing new to the Irish political scene, as their number has historically been below the comparative norm (as discussed by Little and Farrell, Chapter 30). Between 1932 (marking the consolidation of the party system) and 2020, just sixteen new parties entered the Dáil. Ireland has consistently had one of the lowest levels of support for new parties (see Weeks, 2012). One reason for this is because of the presence of independents, who Bowler and Farrell argue 'promise, or threaten, the appearance of a new political party without ever seeming to deliver' (2017: 83). In this way, party system change occurs within the phenomenon of independents, and they mask an underlying volatility. So, while to outsiders the

absence of a new party might suggest a stable party system, the considerable presence of independents suggests otherwise.

Why are independents present ahead of new parties? There is a strong institutionalist dimension, with the rules governing the electoral system and those of candidacy and party formation particularly significant. As already discussed, the candidate-centred nature of STV puts independents at far less of a disadvantage than a party-centred ballot. Political entrepreneurs do not need to form a party to enter the electoral battle, and can instead use their personal appeal to cultivate a vote, which is facilitated by STV.

This incentivization of candidate over party orientation is further reinforced by the rules concerning ballot access. Ireland has been ranked as one of the least cartelized party systems in a comparative analysis that measured ease of access for potential candidates (Abedi, 2004: 93-4). To run as an independent at Dáil elections, candidates are required to supply the signatures of thirty electors from their respective constituency or pay a €500 deposit. Most choose the latter (OSCE, 2016: 6), which is seen as a relatively minimal hurdle to overcome, with Bowler and Farrell concluding that it is now 'very easy for independent candidates to put themselves forward for election' (2017: 94). In addition, if they are elected, there are further incentives to remain independent, rather than forming or joining a party. This includes the availability of a parliamentary activities allowance (which in 2021 was €37,000) to each independent deputy (seen as a de facto leader of one); within parties, this allowance per TD is paid as an aggregated total to the party leader, not individual deputies. Speaking rights are allocated to groups of TDs rather than specifically to parties. Consequently, to gain additional parliamentary privileges, independents need only form 'technical groups' or alliances, and not parties per se. Prior to the 2016 election, there could only be one technical group per Dáil, which had to amount to a majority of non-aligned TDs (including those from a party with fewer than seven seats), and had a minimum size of seven. These requirements were altered as a sop to independents by the minority government formed in May 2016 (on whose support it was dependent); since then there has been no limit to the number of technical groups, the minimum size of which was reduced to five, and which can include the members of any opposition party, regardless of its size.

There are also a range of disincentives that push some away from forming a party. Hug (2001) suggests that new party entry is a strategic decision, and the more obstacles facing potential party entrepreneurs, the less likely they are to forfeit an independent status. Although the preconditions to register as a party are not particularly onerous (the most demanding being to have a membership of 300), state funding is only available to parties on the basis of past electoral performance. This rules out new parties, unless they are formed by incumbent politicians, which Des O'Malley (who in 1985 founded a new party, the Progressive Democrats, as an independent TD) claimed was an 'impediment to the emergence and survival of new parties' (quoted in Weeks, 2012: 36). Even if new parties qualify for state funding, since 2013 they also have to meet the gender quota requirements, which (as discussed by Buckley and Brennan, Chapter 33) stipulate a reduction of funding by half if one gender comprises less than 30 per cent of the party's full slate of candidates. Independents are not affected by this, and historically fewer of them tend to be female than the average party ticket. For example, less than a quarter of the Independent Alliance's twenty-one candidates in 2016 were female.

Another factor driving a reluctance to form a party is their electoral fate. The zenith for most new parliamentary parties in Ireland is their first election. Twelve of the fifteen new parties to enter the Dáil since 1932 failed to surpass their number of seats won first time out.3 The median number of elections contested by these parties is less than four (Weeks, 2012: 24). Most independents are aware that although new parties may start with a big bang, they tend to be on a path of terminal decline. It can be far easier to continue as an independent, in an existence mildly tolerated by parties. Forming a national organization is an entirely different matter, and the failure of such parties usually spells the end of the political career of their founders, a fate that befell Seán MacBride with Clann na Poblachta in the 1940s, Kevin Boland with Aontacht Éireann in the 1970s, and Lucinda Creighton with Renua in 2016. In contrast, remaining as an independent can be a far less challenging task. This was one of the primary reasons why Neil Blaney's Independent Fianna Fáil organization, with three thousand members, never became a full-blown party; instead, Blaney was able to hold onto his seat as an independent from the moment he left Fianna Fáil in 1970 until his death twenty-five years later.

A final factor to consider relates to the nature of independent support. As previous studies have shown, there is little coherency to the vote for independents (Weeks, 2011, 2017; Bowler and Farrell, 2017). Those drawn to these candidates do so for a diverse set of reasons, often contextual to their respective constituencies and the platforms of the independents. Consequently, grouping independent voters together in an aggregate analysis bears little fruit. As Bowler and Farrell note, 'there seems to be little evidence of a strong "issue public" clustering around a particular issue or concern' (2017: 92). This means that independent support is not a natural pool from which a new party could attract votes; there is no obvious platform on which it could mobilize. Further, even if we put aside the policy differences of independent voters, there is no natural constituency leaning towards the independent brand; in Ireland's STV electoral system supporters of independent candidates are little inclined to cast lower preferences for other independents. This was approximately 25 per cent in 2011 and 2016 (Weeks, 2017: 184), less than half the rate of transfer solidarity found between party candidates (Gallagher, 2016). Of additional worry to would-be party entrepreneurs is that the few attitudes uniting independent voters are an orientation to local constituency service and a detachment from parties (Weeks, 2011, 2017; Bowler and Farrell, 2017), hardly factors conducive to the forging of a national party brand.

Are Independents Populists in Sheep's Clothing?

In spite of economic austerity and high levels of immigration, populist parties (especially on the right) in Ireland have not experienced an electoral breakthrough equivalent to their European counterparts. Just as it has already been argued that independents mask changes taking place within the party system, so too they could be masking the emergence of populism. After all, independents are populists par excellence, as their non-partisan stance connotes a fulsome rejection of political parties as a means of representation and political action. This is evident in the language of independent candidates during election campaigns, in their emphasis on the direct link between them and the people, and their hostility to the establishment and party politics. Examples of this in 2020 included 'A man who will speak out, without restriction by any gombeen party', and 'We must bring politics back to the people, to listen to the people, to understand the real concerns of the people' (Kinsella, 2020). Akin to populists, independents

talk of the 'pure people' having their interests undermined by elites. Independents also share the 'thin ideological' nature of populists, which results in them being free, in the absence of a party whip, to take any stance on any issue. One biographer of a dynasty of independents describes their approach to politics as 'populist and intensely local, based on service to the general public—giving the maximum number of people what they want and limiting restrictions, in planning for example, as far as possible' (Hickey, 2015: 174). From a demand perspective, independents tap into the anti-party sentiment that fuelled support for populist movements in other countries. For example, when asked in polls prior to the 2016 Dáil election why they would vote for an independent, 26 per cent of respondents said it was because they do not trust or like the parties, and 16 per cent said it was because such candidates were independent of parties (Irish Times/IPSOS MRBI, 2015).

So, while the presence of independents implies a level of populism within the Irish political system, what form does it take? This can be investigated by considering the relationship between support for independents and populist attitudes, along a left-wing and right-wing dimension. Table 31.4 details how vote levels for independents vary in line with different measures of populism, with the left-wing variables being anti-elitism, alienation, and anti-party sentiment, and the right-wing measures concerning attitudes towards immigration and national identity.4 Significant differences in the level of support for independents according to varying populist attitudes point to independents being an outlet for a populist vote. For example, one in four who are not at all satisfied with democracy voted for an independent in 2016, in contrast to support levels of one in ten among those very satisfied. Considering the two sets of populist measures in Table 31.4, the left-wing variant seems significantly correlated with support for independents, whereas right-wing populism has almost no relationship with an independent vote (it remains within the statistical margin of error for most levels of agreement). Voters expressing high levels of anti-elitism and alienation are much more likely to vote for independents than those with polar opposite attitudes. By contrast, support for independents is not greater among those who believe that ethnic minorities should adapt to Ireland's way of life, that they harm Irish culture, or among those who do not believe that immigrants are good for the Irish economy. Likewise, attitudes towards national identity seem to have little effect.

What this means is that independent voters bear many similarities to supporters of left-wing populist parties, but share none of the nativist attitudes associated with right-wing populist parties. While we should be careful of reading too much into this aggregation of the attitudes of independent voters given their heterogeneous nature, it seems that rather than mask populism, independents complement the variants of party populism present in the Irish party system. Populism is manifested almost exclusively through left-wing parties, with right-wing movements having almost no electoral impact. This pattern is replicated with independents, so it seems that they reflect features present, not absent, in the party system.

[Insert Table 31.4 about here]

The Parties Strike Back?

In opinion polls leading up to the 2014 local elections, support for independents (including 'others') was higher than for any party (Weeks, 2017: 77). This may well prove to have been a zenith for independents, since their vote was unlikely to grow further without triggering an

upheaval in the party (and political) system. As has been discussed, given the lack of a coherent brand, the independent vote is perhaps more prone to swings and fluctuations than support for any party. After a series of flows in their direction (support for independents increased at every Dáil election bar one between 1992 and 2016), it came as no surprise when the aggregate independent vote fell several percentage points in 2020, although this was still higher than some had hoped for given the perceived threats independents pose to party democracy.

This is perhaps the major normative elephant in the room concerning independents: do they undermine parliamentary democracy? Such beliefs were particularly espoused when a minority Fine Gael government was formed in 2016 involving the participation of independents in cabinet for the first time since 1951.5 This was a unique experiment, as the Independent Alliance agreed to support Fine Gael solely on matters related to confidence and supply, seeking to preserve its independence even in cabinet, in contravention of the constitutional doctrine of collective responsibility. This particular case study affords us an opportunity to examine the consequences independents pose for party democracy. The fortunes of the Fine Gael minority government can be compared with the wider Irish experience of minority and majority governments to determine the impact of independents. Specifically, three areas are examined: the output of parliament, its stability, and its longevity; those in defence of parties argue that in their absence, or where there is a strong presence of independents, parliaments are less productive and more unstable, as disciplined parties are needed for functioning parliaments (Wright and Schaffner, 2002).

The first year of the Fine Gael minority administration lent some evidence to this hypothesis, as just twenty-three bills were passed (compared with forty-one in the same period for the previous Dáil), earning parliament the unfortunate moniker of the 'do-nothing' Dáil. However, this may have been due to a teething process, with the Dáil slow to adjust to the so-called 'new politics', as the legislative output increased considerably during the lifetime of the government, rising to forty-one acts in 2017, forty-four in 2018, and fifty-four in 2019. Taking a wider view, and comparing governments between 1982 and 2020, this level of output is consistent with a wider pattern: minority administrations involving independents are not less productive than their majority counterparts, passing almost forty-four bills per year, three more than the latter. To consider other types of legislation, few private members' bills are passed in the Dáil, but there was an expectation this might change following 2016. Consequently, in the first year of the Fine Gael minority government, 100 private members' bills were introduced, a fivefold increase on the mean of twenty-one in the equivalent period in the previous four parliaments. This number doubled to 200 in the second year of the administration's term. In total, twenty-three private member's motions were passed in these first two years of the government's term. To put this in perspective, between 1937 and 2007 just ten opposition motions were passed.

With the opposition being almost twice as large in size as the government, there was a presumption that the government would be defeated a lot more than usual, and consequently be quite unstable. However, although a considerable number of private member's motions that the government opposed were passed (twenty-four), only one government-sponsored motion was defeated in its first two years. Taking the wider view, the ten minority governments between 1937 and 2007 were defeated seventeen times (with very few of these defeats on legislative matters), while the thirteen majority administrations had nine government motions

defeated. So minority governments are slightly less successful in having their way and thwarting that of the opposition, but only marginally. Of course, just because minority governments are rarely defeated does not mean that they necessarily get their own way. In particular, those reliant on independents consult them on a weekly basis, often more so than their own parliamentary parties, and the input of independents can be significant. Indeed, one independent parliamentarian whom Bertie Ahern relied on in his first cabinet (1997–2002) recalled: 'I remember that there was nothing we asked for that they didn't say was OK and I remember thinking that was a bit worrying' (Weeks, 2017: 237).

Finally, it was predicted that this 'new politics' experiment of independents in government would not see out the year, but it managed to last for four years. This should not have been unexpected, because although minority governments in Ireland are shorter (two years and eight months) than their majority counterparts (three years and five months), their duration is a reasonable length of term from a comparative perspective. There is considerable variation, however, with some of these governments lasting less than one year, while others went the full five-year term. Key to the duration of these minority governments was the nature of the contracts between the governments and the independents. Those where the governments negotiated ad hoc support with independents and relied on alternative majorities lasted the shortest, at almost exactly two years (Weeks, 2017: 243). In contrast, those with more formal arrangements (involving independents in cabinet and/or contracts with each) lasted almost twice as long. This indicates a significant institutional dimension to the stability of minority governments that need independents—the stronger the relationship between them, the longer the government lasts.

It is difficult to fully determine the impact of the experiment of independents in cabinet in the 2016–20 government. Some predicted the new politics would lead to independents becoming a more normalized component of the party system; others hoped they would experience the fate of populists in government and implode, leading to a recovery for the parties. Ultimately, neither scenario materialized in 2020. The independents in government who ran for election both lost their seats. Denis Naughten, who had been an independent Minister for Communications, was spared this fate, having resigned from cabinet in 2018. Simple arithmetic (i.e. if the parties need independents) will probably determine whether the Fine Gael minority arrangement with independents proves to be a one-off or a genuine new departure. It will also depend on the reaction of the party system, of whom independents are a by-product, not an entirely separate feature. Independents persist because of the failure of parties to represent, the difficulty in setting up new parties, and a general malaise with parties' performance. So long as this remains, it is difficult to see how independents are not likely to remain a persistent feature of the Irish party system. In what capacity and to what extent is the imponderable.

Bibliography

Aars, J. and H.-E. Ringkjøb (2005). 'Party politicisation reversed? Non-partisan alternatives in Norwegian local politics,' Scandinavian Political Studies, 28: 161–81.

Abedi, A. (2004). Anti-Political Establishment Parties: A Comparative Analysis. London: Routledge.

Alighieri, D. (1996). The Inferno of Dante: A New Verse Translation by Robert Pinsky. London: J. M. Dent.

Anckar, D. and C. Anckar (2000). 'Democracies without parties,' Comparative Political Studies, 33: 225–47.

Bailey, K. D. (1994). Typologies and Taxonomies: An Introduction to Classification Techniques. London: Sage.

Blaney, H. (1997) Dáil debates, 480: 48, 26 June.

Bowler, S. and D. Farrell (2017). 'The lack of party system change in Ireland in 2011'. In A Conservative Revolution? Electoral Change in Twenty-First-Century Ireland, edited by M. Marsh, D. M. Farrell, and G. McElroy, pp. 83–101. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bryce, J. (1921). Modern Democracies. New York: Macmillan.

Carbone, G. M. (2003). 'Political parties in a "no-party democracy."' Party Politics, 9: 485.

Farrell, D. M. and I. McAllister (2006). The Australian Electoral System: Origins, Variations, and Consequences. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press.

Gallagher, M. (1993). Irish Elections 1922–44: Results and Analysis. Dublin: PSAI Press.

Hale, H. E. (2005). Why Not Parties in Russia?: Democracy, Federalism, and the State. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hansen, M. E. (2010). 'The parliamentary behaviour of minor parties and independents in Dáil Éireann,' Irish Political Studies, 25: 643–60.

Hickey, D. (2015). The Healy-Raes. A Twenty-Four Seven Political Legacy. Killarney: Rushy Mountain.

Hug, S. (2001). Altering Party Systems: Strategic Behavior and the Emergence of New Political Parties in Western Democracies. Chicago: University of Michigan Press.

Irish Times/IPSOS MRBI (2015). Poll Report, 15 May. Dublin.

Kinsella, A. (2020) Irish Election Literature, www.irishelectionliterature.com

Lipset, S. M. and S. Rokkan (1967). 'Cleavage structures, party systems, and voter alignments: an introduction.' In Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives, edited by S. M. Lipset and S. Rokkan, pp. 1–64. New York: Free Press.

Lucardie, P. (2000). 'Prophets, purifiers and prolocutors. Toward a theory of the emergence of new parties,' Party Politics, 6: 175–185.

Mair, P, and C. Mudde (1998). 'The party family and its study,' Annual Review of Political Science, 1: 211–29.

Marsh, M. (2006). 'Party identification in Ireland: an insecure anchor for a floating party system', Electoral Studies, 25: 489–508.

Commented [CE3]: AU please add in-text reference to Hansen 2010 or delete here

Commented [WL4R3]: The reference is in the note be Figure 31.2

Murphy, G. (2016). 'The background to the election'. In How Ireland Voted 2016. The Election that Nobody Won, edited by M. Gallagher and M. Marsh, pp. 1–26. Cham: Palgrave.

OSCE (Organisation of Security and Co-operation in Europe) (2016). Ireland. Parliamentary Elections 26 February 2016. OSCE/ODHIR Needs Assessment Mission Report. Warsaw: OSCE.

Reiser, M. and E. Holtmann (eds) (2008). Farewell to the Party Model: Independent Local Lists in East and West European Countries. Nomos: VS Verlag.

Renwick, A. (2011). House of Lords Reform. Newcastle: Political Studies Association.

Russell, M. and M. Sciara (2009). 'Independent Parliamentarians En Masse: The Changing Nature and Role of the 'Crossbenchers' in the House of Lords,' Parliamentary Affairs, 62: 32–52.

Sifry, M. L. (2003). Spoiling for a Fight: Third-Party Politics in America. London: Routledge.

Weeks, L. (2009). 'We don't like (to) party. a typology of independents in Irish political life, 1922–2007,' Irish Political Studies, 24: 1–27.

Weeks, L. (2011). 'Rage against the machine: who is the independent voter?' Irish Political Studies, 26: 19–43.

Weeks, L. (2012). 'The dog that did not bark. why did no new party emerge in 2011? In Radical or Redundant: Minor Parties in Irish Political Life, edited by L. Weeks and A. Clark, pp. 7–26. Stroud: History Press.

Weeks, L. (2014). 'Crashing the party. Does STV help independents?' Party Politics, 20: 604–16.

Weeks, L. (2017). Independents in Irish Party Democracy. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

White, G. (2006). 'Traditional Aboriginal values in a Westminster parliament: the legislative assembly of Nunavut,' The Journal of Legislative Studies, 12: 8–31.

Wright, G. C. and B. F. Schaffner (2002). 'The influence of party: evidence from the state legislatures,' American Political Science Review, 96: 367–79.

Table 31.1: Minority governments in Ireland involving independents, 1948–2016

Year(s)	Party or parties involved	Nature of agreement
1948–51	Fine Gael/Labour/National Labour/Clann na Poblachta/Clann na Talmhan	Six independents form informal group to support government. One independent made minister
1951–4	Fianna Fáil	Five independents support government, but no manifest agreement

1961–5	Fianna Fáil	Two independents support government, with occasional support from two other independents. No manifest agreement
1981–2	Fine Gael/Labour	One independent supports government and three other independents abstain, but no agreement
1982	Fianna Fáil	Two independents support government in return for patronage agreements
1987–9	Fianna Fáil	One independent abstains, one supports government, but no agreement
1989–92	Fianna Fáil/Progressive Democrats	One independent supports government in return for unpublished patronage agreement
1997–2002	Fianna Fáil/Progressive Democrats	Three independents support government in return for unpublished patronage agreements. Another independent signs up in 1998
2007–11	Fianna Fáil/Progressive Democrats/Greens	Three independents support government in return for patronage agreement. One withdraws support in 2008
2016–20	Fine Gael	Independent Alliance (five MPs) agrees to support government on motions of confidence and finance bills. One becomes minister and three junior ministers. Two other independents become ministers. One independent provides external support

Source: Weeks (2017)

Table 31.2: Typology of independents, 1922–2020

1. Vestigial independents
Independent unionists Independent nationalists
2. Corporatist independents
Independent farmers
Independent business

3. Ideological independents
Left-wing independents
Independent republicans
(National) single-issue independents
4. Community independents
5. Apostate independents
6. Quasi-parties

Note: Independent families are highlighted in bold text

Table 31.3: Candidates and seats by independent category

Year	Vestigial Ind.	Ind. Unionist	Ind. Business	Ind. Farmer	Left-wing Ind.	Ind. Republican	Single-Issue Ind.	Community Ind.	Apostate Ind.	Quasi-parties
1922	1–1	4–4*	7–2	–	–	1–1	–	6–2	–	1–0
1923	4–3	10–6*	10–2	3–0	5–1	1–1	1–0	22–1	3–1	5–0
1927(J)	1–1	9–7	5–1	7–1	6–1	2–1	–	16–2	9–2	4–0
1927(S)	1–1	7–7*	3–2	2–2	6–1	1–0	–	7–0	6–0	1–0
1932	8–4	7–5*	4–1	5–2	2–0	–	1–0	4–0	4–2	–
1933	2–2	7–5*	1–1	–	3–1	–	–	–	–	–
1937	1–1	3–2	–	6–1	3–2	7–0	1–0	6–2	9–0	–
1938	1–1	2–2	–	1–1	2–0	–	–	3–2	1–1	–
1943	1–1	3–1	1–0	9–5	7–1	4–0	–	9–1	4–2	5–1
1944	1–1	2–0	–	7–5	2–1	2–1	–	5–1	3–2	2–1
1948	1–1	3–1	–	4–2	–	1–1	–	13–3	6–3	2–1
1951	1–1	3–1	–	3–2	1–0	1–0	–	12–4	7–6	–
1954	1–1	3–1	–	6–1	3–0	2–2	–	9–1	–	2–0
1957	–	3–1	–	1–0	3–2	4–1	–	9–3	2–2	5–0
1961	–	–	–	2–1	1–0	1–0	–	19–2	4–3	1–0
1965	–	–	–	1–1	2–0	1–0	–	14–1	2–0	1–0

1969	1–0	–	–	1–0	3–0	–	–	16–1	5–0	1–0
1973	–	–	–	1–0	1–0	4–0	1–0	5–1	10–1	2–0
1977	–	–	–	–	4–2	3–1	6–0	33–1	6–2	1–0
1981	–	–	–	1–0	6–1	10–1	2–0	21–1	4–1	–
1982(F)	–	–	–	–	8–3	6–1	4–0	33–0	–	1–0
1982(N)	–	–	–	–	5–2	3–1	2–0	32–0	2–0	7–0
1987	–	2–0	–	–	6–1	1–1	16–0	45–0	6–1	11–0
1989	–	–	–	–	8–2	1–1	8–0	30–1	1–0	3–0
1992	–	1–0	–	–	9–2	1–1	25–0	49–1	13–1	5–0
1997	–	–	–	–	9–1	3–1	9–0	68–1	13–3	2–0
2002	–	–	–	–	6–2	3–1	37–2	30–5	16–3	2–0
2007	–	–	–	–	6–1	–	6–0	51–2	11–2	16–0
2011	6–1	–	–	–	10–5	–	74-3	67–2	12–2	35–2
2016	–	–	–	–	10–3	–	11-1	90-7	18-1	35-11

Source: Weeks (2009) and author's own calculations.

Note: the first figure in each cell denotes per category the numbers of candidates and the second figure the numbers of seats won.

*Four candidates were returned unopposed (without an election) to the Dublin University constituency in 1922, and three from 1923 to 1933 inclusive.

Table 31.4: Support for independents (per cent) in Ireland by populist sentiment, 2016

Left-wing populism				
Anti-elitist	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagre
The people, not the politicians, should make our most important policy decisions	20	14	13	11
Most politicians do not care about the people*	26	15	11	10
Most politicians are trustworthy*	11	11	15	26
Politicians are the main problem in Ireland*	23	17	14	9

Most politicians care only about the interests of the rich and powerful*	26	13	11	10
Alienation	Very wide	Quite wide	Not very wide	It hardly exists
How widespread do you think corruption such as bribe-taking is among politicians?*	20	19	11	9
	Very satisfied	Fairly satisfied	Not very satisfied	Not at all satisfie
On the whole are you satisfied with democracy?*	9	13	19	23
Anti-party	Yes	No		
Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular party?*	10	17		
Do you feel yourself a little closer to one of the parties than another?*	11	24		
Right-wing populism				
Anti-immigrant	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagre
Ethnic minorities should adapt to Ireland's way of life	13	16	14	22
Ireland's culture is generally harmed by immigrants	18	16	13	15
Immigrants are generally good for Ireland's economy	14	15	19	8
How important is it:	Very important	Fairly important	Not very important	Not important a
To have been born in Ireland?	17	15	12	16
To have lived in Ireland for most of one's life*	18	18	8	13
To be able to speak Irish	18	14	14	15
To be Roman Catholic	12	12	15	15
To respect Ireland's political institutions and laws	12	20	15	18
To feel Irish	16	13	12	20
To have Irish ancestry	17	14	14	13

Source: INES 2016. * denotes chi-square significance level of <.05

Note: N=871. Figures refer to proportions casting a first preference vote for an independent candidate

Notes

1 By ‘non-partisans’ we mean members of parliament (or TDs) with no ties to parties. This is quite unlike the examples in some parliaments of partisan independents with party affiliations, such as the Liberal Democrat Independents in the Japanese Diet.

2 Unfortunately, the same question was not asked in 2011, 2016, or 2020.

3 This figure does not include Aontú, which contested its first Dáil election in 2020.

4 The data are from 2016 because these questions were not asked in 2020 polls.

5 This does not include the participation of Mary Harney in cabinet as an independent between 2009 and 2011 following the dissolution of her party, the Progressive Democrats.