

Irish Electoral Reform: Three Myths and a Proposal

David M. Farrell, UCD

David.Farrell@ucd.ie

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The scent of political crisis is in the air, three-month Dáil vacation notwithstanding. The economy is in free fall; the private and public sectors are virtually at civil war with each other; the consistent message from the public opinion polls is of a populace that has long lost faith with the government of the day; the chattering classes (personified by the *Irish Times* 'Renewing the Republic' series; but also witnessed on Twitter or in daily postings on blogs such as politicalreform.ie or Irisheconomy.ie) are in revolt. Meanwhile, the gathering storm of public sector cuts and their impact on society's most vulnerable presage even more serious times to come. In short, times are bad and they're about to get worse.

It is not surprising, therefore, that there should be calls for political reform; indeed, few objective observers of the political terrain in this country deny that things can simply remain as they are; most of us would contend that things have now gone too far for that. To coin a phrase that political science borrowed from biology, Ireland is now at a point of 'political disequilibrium', when a moment of crisis brings a coalition of views together pushing for fundamental change, for a complete overhaul of our political institutions. Certainly, such a coalition is evident in the higher echelons of our political elite. For instance, the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Constitution, chaired so ably by Fianna Fáil's Seán Ardagh, is due to issue its latest report in the next few weeks, which is likely to support the case for political reform. The two main opposition parties – feted to form the next coalition government – have placed large scale political reform at the top of their political agendas: Fine Gael proposes a citizens' assembly to review the electoral system with its outcome and a raft of other proposals for political reform to be put to the people in a blunderbuss referendum on 'Constitution Day' one-year into the life of the next government; Labour proposes a complete overhaul of the Constitution in time for the 1916

centenary.

Somewhere in the midst of all this there are a number of prominent individuals who have alighted on our electoral system as the key target for reform – leading political lights such as: the minister for Transport, Noel Dempsey; former Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald; former key political figures Gemma Hussey, Des O’Malley and John Rogers; and respected commentators like Dan O’Brien of the *Irish Times*. It seems that virtually every day we find an article in some newspaper or other, calling for the replacement of the single transferable vote (STV) system with another electoral system – more normally than not the system of choice being the German mixed-member system. The most recent proponent, in an *Irish Times* article on July 6 2010, is former university head, Ed Walsh, who proposes list PR for Ireland. He is quite forthright in the view that STV has had its day. As he put it:

The STV (single transferable vote) electoral system, favoured in the English-speaking world when adopted by the first Dáil, is still retained, even though abandoned across the globe by every other democracy with the exception of Malta. Almost all the states of post-second World War Europe, and the new democracies of central Europe, have abandoned 19th-century parliamentary structures in favour of systems more fitting to these times. None has opted for the Irish system.

Skirting, for the moment at any rate, over the unfortunate factual inaccuracies about electoral systems in this extract (and that the article is replete with), Dr Walsh’s analysis provides a useful taster of the nature of the argument that is being made, an argument that this paper seeks to show is, simply, wrong-headed.¹

The essence of the case being made is that STV promotes a politics of excessive localism, with TDs devoting far too much time to nursing their constituencies to the neglect of their parliamentary duties, with the wrong kind of people being attracted to politics, and with a politics of short-termism in which the government is never called properly to account. STV is credited with the blame due to the emphasis it places on individual candidates and their constituency activities. Remove this element of electoral system design and apparently the political system will be fixed. All very nice and simple – or is it? Is electoral reform the solution that

¹ Here I express a point of view that is shared by many of my colleagues in Irish political science.

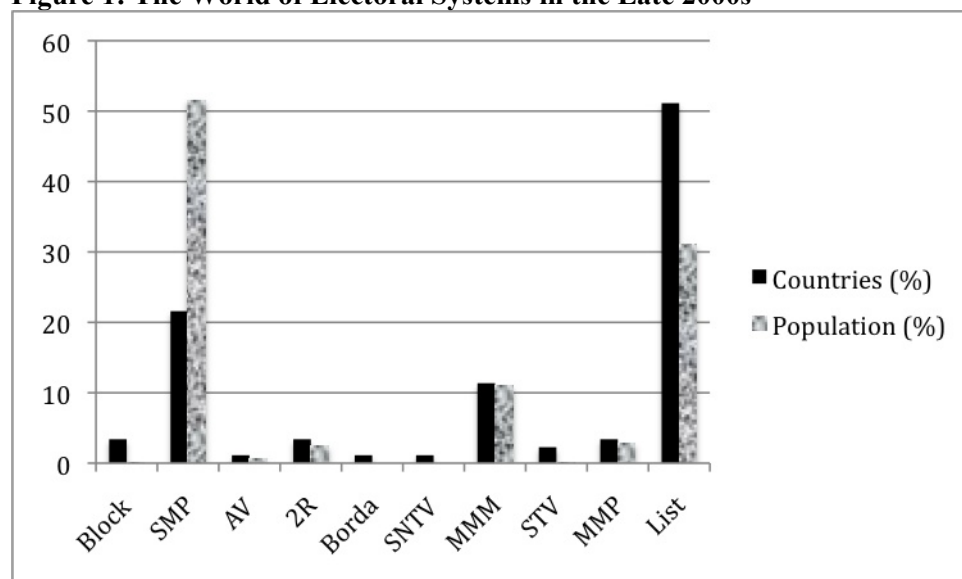
its supporters make out?

This brief paper seeks to demonstrate some of the shortcomings of the arguments propounded by the supporters of electoral reform for Ireland, and it does so by examining three key myths that are often made (or, at least inferred).

Myth 1: Ireland has a ‘unique’ electoral system

Of course it is true that STV is a rare and exotic electoral system only used in Ireland and Malta for electing their lower house of parliament.² As Figure 1 demonstrates, the tiniest fraction of the world’s citizens elect their representatives using this electoral system, making STV one of the rarest electoral systems on the planet (after Borda and SNTV, and by one measure also AV – the system that may be adopted by the UK next year).

Figure 1: The World of Electoral Systems in the Late 2000s



Notes: AV: Alternative Vote; MMM: Mixed-Member Majoritarian; MMP: Mixed-Member Proportional; SMP: Single Member Plurality; SNTV: Single Non-Transferable Vote; STV: Single Transferable Vote; 2R: Two-round.

Source: Farrell (2010)

But in order to properly assess the degree to which Ireland really is out on a

² Although, were we to cast the net a bit wider and include upper house elections, or sub-national elections, the list of cases would start to mount quite significantly to include: the Australian federation, each of the Australian states, Scottish local elections, Massachusetts – to say nothing about debates over its possible adoption in parts of Canada, and various US states, among other areas. For that matter, STV could well be reconsidered for New Zealand in its forthcoming referendum on further electoral reform (for lower house elections).

limb in using this electoral system, we need to understand more about how STV compares with other electoral systems, for the fact is that actually the way we elect our politicians is not all that different from how large numbers of other countries elect theirs. Electoral systems vary in two main respects (Farrell 2010; Gallagher and Mitchell 2008):

- Over how *proportional* they are: that is over the degree to which the percentage of votes that a party attracts in an election is matched by the percentage of seats it wins in parliament; and
- Over how *open* they are: that is over the amount of choice voters have in determining the electoral fate of individual candidates.

Figure 2: Mapping electoral systems on two dimensions

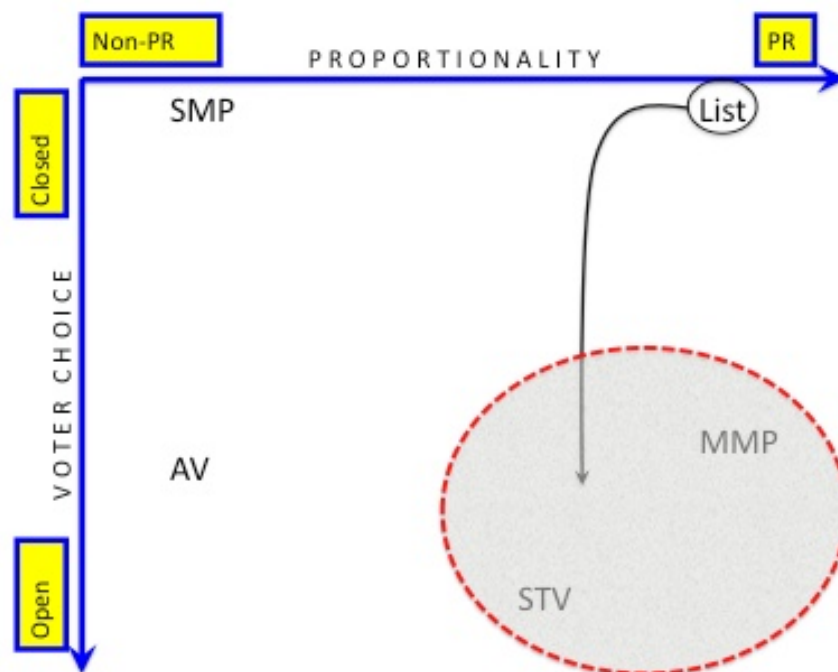


Figure 2 illustrates where STV lies on these two dimensions, showing it to be a reasonably proportional electoral system that provides a lot of electoral choice to voters. It is the latter dimension that is the key focus of criticism of STV in contemporary Irish debate. This is where STV is seen to stand out as different from other electoral systems like the closed list PR systems of Spain or South Africa, where

voters can only vote for party lists with the rank order of the candidates being determined in advance by the parties.

But we need to allow for the fact that nothing is ever entirely black or white; there are always differences of degree. Take the case of voters in Finland or Denmark (both countries using list PR systems) who vote for individual candidates on their party lists, or in Luxembourg or Switzerland (also list PR systems) who can opt to vote for all candidates from all parties in the constituency. Or look at the situation in a host of other list PR cases across the length and breadth of the European mainland where voters can opt to express ‘preference votes’ which can affect the electoral fate of individual candidates (Farrell 2010; Karvonen 2010). Indeed, this is a right that is being extended to more and more voters as growing numbers of list PR countries, responding to criticisms that politicians are out of touch with their voters, seek to make their electoral systems more ‘open’ (Renwick 2010).

In short, while STV is undoubtedly a rarely used electoral system, many of its features – including those features that are specifically related to the behaviour of individual politicians (Farrell and Scully 2007) – are actually not that unique. As the dotted circle in Figure 2 illustrates, there are other electoral systems that lie close to STV on the dimension of voter choice.

Myth 2: Electoral reform works

Dr Walsh is not alone in arguing that there is a trend towards electoral reform becoming more common across the world. We all know of some significant example or other: New Zealand’s adoption of the German (MMP) system in the early 1990s; Italy’s various electoral reforms in recent years; debates in Canada; the impending referendum for a new electoral system for Britain. The actual state of play is presented in Table 1. Over the past twenty years, there have been 56 cases of electoral reform – on the face of it, a pretty impressive record of change. In virtually half of these case (23 countries) the decision was to adopt a German-style mixed-member system, the very system that many commentators want for Ireland – seen by some as an electoral system that offers ‘the best of both worlds’ (Shugart and Wattenberg 2001). On the basis of this evidence, there seems to be good reason why some would argue in favour of electoral reform for Ireland: if other countries have gone down this route then

clearly this augurs well for its success in Ireland too.

Table 1: Direction of Electoral System Changes, 1989-2009

Old System	New System				
	<i>Majority</i>	<i>MMM</i>	<i>MMP</i>	<i>List PR</i>	<i>SNTV</i>
<i>Majority</i>	Bermuda Fiji Mongolia Montserrat PNG	Armenia Kazakhstan Kyrgyzstan Lithuania Macedonia Monaco Palestine Philippines Russia Sudan Tajikistan Thailand Tunisia Ukraine	Albania Lesotho New Zealand	Algeria Cambodia DR Congo Iraq Latvia Liberia Moldova Nepal Rwanda Sierra Leone South Africa	Afghanistan Jordan
<i>MMM</i>	Azerbaijan Kyrgyzstan			Albania Bulgaria Croatia Italy ^a Macedonia Montenegro Russia Serbia Timor Leste Ukraine	
<i>List PR</i>	Liberia	Italy Bulgaria	Bolivia Venezuela		
<i>SNTV</i>		Japan Taiwan		Colombia	
<i>STV</i>				Estonia	

^a Bonus-adjusted List PR

Source: Reynolds (2010)

But when we delve a bit deeper, things are not quite as straightforward as they seem. In the first instance, we should qualify the supposed popularity of mixed-member systems in two respects. First, not all the countries that adopted this electoral system have kept it: 12 countries have since abandoned mixed-member systems the bulk of them opting instead for list PR (including such prominent cases as Italy, Russia and Ukraine). Second, very few of the countries that adopted a mixed-member system actually opted for the German version, which is known as mixed-member proportional (or MMP): in fact, there are just five cases – Albania, Bolivia, Lesotho, New Zealand and Venezuela. In all other cases, the decision was made to adopt the

mixed-member majoritarian (MMM) variant of this electoral system: i.e. a version that is even less proportional than STV.

Another detail in Table 1 that is worth bearing in mind is that of these 56 countries, just three are established democracies – Italy, Japan and New Zealand. It's one thing for a new and developing democracy to experiment with different electoral systems before its institutions have bedded down and become 'sticky' and resistant to change; it's quite another to pull this off in a long-established democracy. The fact is that there have actually been very few cases of full-scale electoral reform among the world's established democracies. All three of the changes occurred in an eighteen month period in the early 1990s and their record of success is, at best, mixed: Italy has since gone back to list PR; New Zealand's citizens face another referendum in the next year which could result in the abandonment of MMP. Only in Japan does the new electoral system appear secure, yet of the three countries, this is the reform that is seen to have had least success in sorting out the problems that had caused it in the first place.

In short, the evidence in support of the case that electoral reform works simply doesn't stack up.

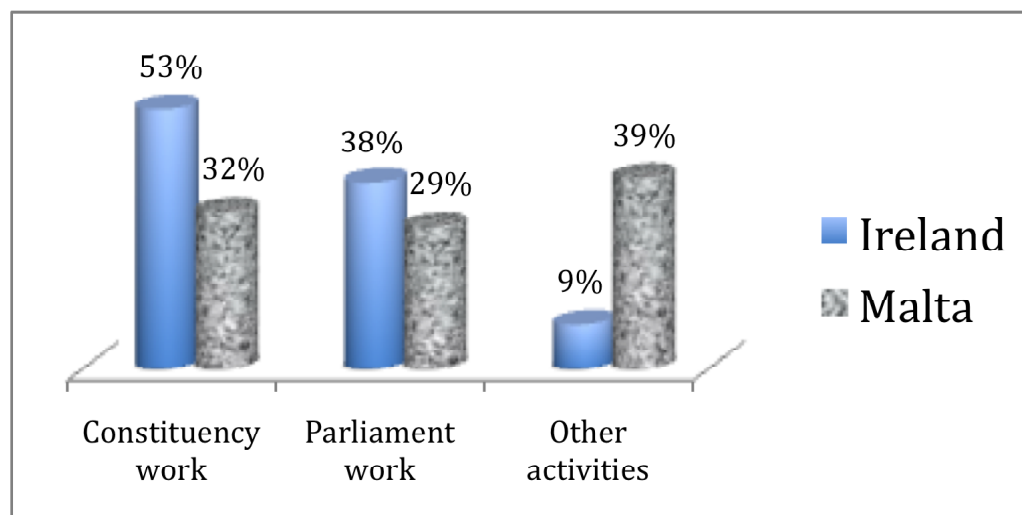
Myth 3: A new electoral system would change Irish politics

At the heart of the debate over Ireland's electoral system is the belief that STV is to blame for why we have the politicians we have and why they do the (constituency) things that they do. Nobody disputes that TDs have a strong constituency emphasis, that what comes first, second and third in the list of priorities of the average TD is the need to nurse their constituency. The fact of the matter, however, is that this emphasis is quite particular to Ireland, and far less so to the single transferable vote electoral system. Figure 3 provides a good illustration of this, reporting on the results of a survey carried out recently on Irish and Maltese members of parliament.³ Even though both countries use the same electoral system, TDs devote a far greater proportion of their time to constituency-based work (53%) than to any other activity,

³ The Dáil survey was implemented by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Constitution in late 2009-early 2010 with an average response rate of 74 TDs. Precisely the same questionnaire was used in a survey of Maltese MPs carried out at the same time by Mr Hermann Schiavone, with an average response rate of 41 MPs. For further details, see Joint Committee on the Constitution (2010).

whereas by contrast, Maltese MPs have a far more even balance in their various political activities. Similarly, survey evidence from Australia – which uses STV to elect its national upper house (Senate) and also for electing parliamentarians across many of its constituent states – points to far lower proportions of constituency-related activities there too (Farrell and McAllister 2006).

Figure 3: STV and politicians' workloads: an Irish-Maltese comparison



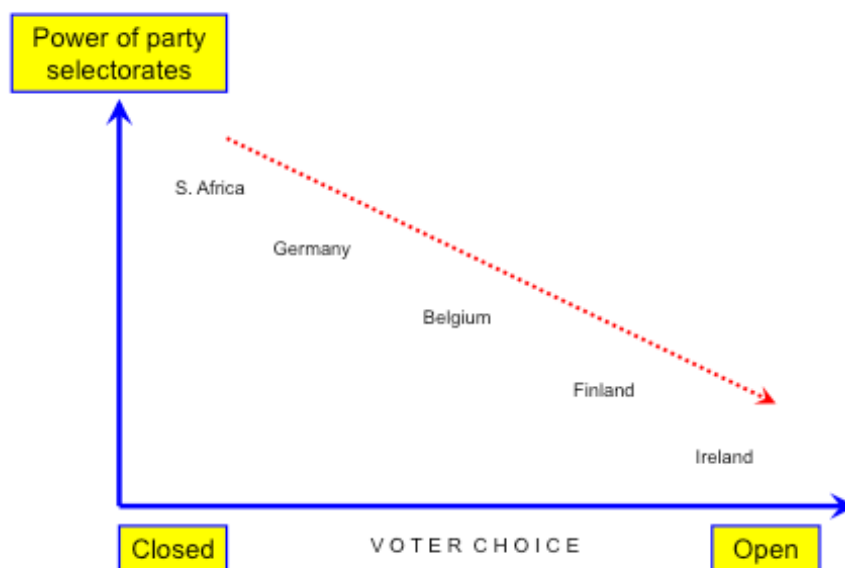
Sources: 2010 surveys of Irish and Maltese MPs carried out by the Oireachats Joint Committee on the Constitution (Ireland) and Mr Hermann Schiavone (Malta)

Do we really think that a shift to a new electoral system would change things? I am not so sure that it would. The first thing that we'd have to consider is what electoral system to adopt in place of STV. Realistically, we have two options: list PR or (German) MMP. Before we could decide on the list PR option, we would need to sort out whether we want to opt for a 'closed' or 'open' variant or an option somewhere in the middle of those two extremes. As Figure 2 indicates, open list system (such as used in Finland, Denmark, Switzerland or Luxembourg) would do little to change things: we would merely be replacing one 'open' electoral system with another. Servicing the needs of the constituency would remain the priority for any self-respecting TD. The alternative option of a closed list system (such as used in Israel, Spain or South Africa) wouldn't do much better, and Figure 4 indicates why.

The issue to take account of it is which reference group does a politician have to refer to. The current reference group for Dáil deputies in an open electoral system like STV is their constituents – hence the sorting out of social welfare issues, fixing of drains and chasing of hearses. All attention is on keeping the *electorate* sweet, chasing

transfers to ensure that TDs hold onto their seats. What happens as we move away from an open electoral system towards closed list PR (South Africa in Figure 3) is that attention shift from the electorate at large to the *selectorate* in the party – the people who determine how high up the rankings in a party list the candidate will be located. We’re merely replacing one reference group (the electorate) with another (the selectorate) whose welfare issues, drains and hearses would then become the focus of TDs’ attention.

Figure 4: Electing and selecting candidates



If list PR doesn’t offer much reason for hope, the issue becomes distinctly more complex once we start looking at the mixed-member proportional system. The supposed virtue of mixed-member systems is the fact that they’re seen to marry the best of Britain’s constituency-based SMP electoral system with the best of continental Europe’s proportional list electoral system – as the phrase goes ‘the best of both worlds’. But actually things are not quite as rosy as they might seem. Given the larger number of countries that use mixed-member systems we now have better data with which to assess how they operate, and the evidence is that there are serious risks of ‘contamination’ – in which features promoted by one part of the electoral system can impact in unintended ways on the other (Ferrara et al. 2005). A common enough example of this is how the list MPs seek to emulate (compete with) their constituency

counterparts in providing constituency service. Sound familiar?

A Proposal

If it is the case that Ireland's electoral system is not all that unique after all, if the international record of electoral reform to date is not all that impressive, if STV is really not the reason why we have the politicians that we have, then what are we left with to consider?

What we need is a better understanding of the nature of the problem as one that is *demand-led* rather than *supply-led*. If we want to reduce the constituency supply provided by our Dáil deputies then we need to address the demands made on them by us – the citizens. There are a number of shortcomings in our political and institutional structures that cause us to demand such high degrees of constituency service of our politicians – two in particular that should be singled out (Gallagher and Komito 2010). First, there are problems in the public service-citizen interface that is particularly acute in the health and welfare areas. It is no wonder, therefore, why so many of us call on our TDs to help sort out problems, bottlenecks, snags in the system – snags that really shouldn't have to arise. This is compounded by the second problem, which is the weakness of local government in Ireland. One of the curiosities of Irish politics is that we have at one and the same time one of the most decentralized (constituency-based) political systems in the world and also one of the most centralized (weak and under-resourced local government) – to paraphrase: the worst of both worlds. As rational actors Irish citizens have no choice but to knock on the doors of the TDs to sort out their problems.

The proposal therefore is that we address seriously the shortcomings in our public services and the weakness of our local government. Steps along this road would do much more than electoral reform to fix the more unsavoury aspects of Irish politics.

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