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Are Irish Parties Peculiar?

MICHAEL LAVER
University College Galway

Introduction

PEOPLE WHO WRITE about Irish politics sometimes describe Ireland as a rather peculiar sort of place, as something quite out of the European mainstream. This argument typically takes two forms.

The first has to do with Irish parties, and is based upon the assumption that the key features of Irish party politics have developed in response to social forces that are quite distinct from those to be found in the rest of western Europe. Symptoms of this are: the continued success of the two main parties, Fianna Fáil (the Soldiers of Destiny) and Fine Gael (the Tribe of the Gael), whose distinctive origins derive from the Civil War; the fact that these parties are difficult to classify according to any general western European schema of political party types; and the fact that policy differences between the main parties are small and ambiguous, so that party electoral appeals appear to play more upon traditional and enduring family loyalties than upon any sort of rational policy calculus.

The second type of argument about the peculiarity of Irish party politics is related to the first, and has to do with voting behaviour. Irish voters, it is claimed, simply do not behave like their European counterparts. Symptoms of this are: the fact that Irish voting patterns appear to be only weakly structured by social class; the fact that, despite the size of the Irish working class, Ireland has by far and away western Europe's weakest left.

In this paper I review these arguments, devoting by far the more attention to the alleged peculiarity of Irish parties. This argument is usually made rather informally in terms of party policies. The bulk of the paper presents some more systematic evidence on the role of policy in comparisons between the party systems of Ireland and the rest of western Europe. Before turning to this matter, however, I review very briefly the argument

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about the distinctiveness of Irish voting behaviour, an argument that has been much more extensively treated elsewhere.

The Social Bases of Party Choice

One of the first studies to compare patterns in Irish voting behaviour with patterns to be found elsewhere was produced by Whyte, author of the Irish chapter in Rose's edited volume *Electoral Behaviour: a Comparative Handbook* (1974). Using public opinion poll data from 1969, Whyte set everyone talking, in a phrase that spawned a thousand undergraduate essay titles, about 'politics without social bases'. This pithy epithet derived from the conclusion that there appeared to be very little difference in the social backgrounds of voters supporting different Irish parties. Writing several years later, Carty re-emphasised this line of argument in his book *Party and Parish Pump: Electoral Politics in Ireland*, with the claim that 'social characteristics do not structure voting behaviour in Ireland' (Carty, 1981: 24). The argument that Irish voters are peculiar was thus based upon the observation that, everywhere else in western Europe, there appeared to be much more difference in the social backgrounds of voters supporting different political parties.

In the past twenty years, however, the tools of comparative political research have been applied with increasing enthusiasm to the Irish case and the 'politics without social bases' thesis has been heavily revised. There have been two thrusts to this revision.

The first is that the social bases of partisanship in Ireland have been imperfectly estimated—this shortcoming is a product of the absence (now unique in western Europe) of an Irish academic election study. The resulting lack of crucial data has forced political scientists to rely upon public opinion polls, and thus upon the 'social grade' classifications used by market researchers. When more appropriate 'sociological' definitions of social class are employed in survey work, a social patterning of Irish voting behaviour, otherwise masked by the social grade classifications, becomes more apparent (Laver, 1987; Laver, Marsh, and Sinnott, 1987b).

The second argument for revising the 'politics without social bases' thesis is that Irish voting behaviour may have become more structured by social class since 1969, even if class is measured using imperfect social grade indicators. This argument sets on one side the small, and declining, level of support for the Irish Labour Party, and looks at the social bases of support for the other parties, particularly Fianna Fáil. The argument is based on the evidence summarised in Table 1, which analyses voting intention at Irish elections by social grade, in selected elections since 1969.

Table 1. Percentage of different social grades supporting Irish parties 1969–89.

Party[a]	Year	Social grade					
		Professional and managerial (AB)	Other non-manual (C1)	Skilled manual (C2)	Unskilled manual (DE)	Farmers with over 50 acres (F50+)	Farmers with under 50 acres (F50−)
Fianna	1969	37	48	40	43	38	53
Fáil	1981	34	48	46	45	35	49
	1987	26	32	45	41	30	48
	1989	32	42	39	41	43	
Fine	1969	37	26	21	14	46	26
Gael	1981	46	31	29	24	53	26
	1987	34	24	23	15	45	35
	1989	35	30	21	14	39	
Labour	1969	10	15	27	28	2	5
	1981	9	10	10	16	4	2
	1987	1	6	4	7	1	2
	1989	6	9	14	15	5	
Prog.	1987	18	18	9	9	10	2
Dems.	1989	10	6	6	7	4	
Workers'	1981	1	0	2	4	1	0
Party	1987	1	2	3	4	0	1
	1989	3	2	5	10	2	

[a] Support for 'other' parties and 'don't knows' excluded.
Sources: 1969–87, Laver, Marsh and Sinnott (1987: 102); 1989, Marsh and Sinnott (1990: 125).

(The 1969 data are precisely those on which Whyte based his conclusions. Unfortunately the 1989 data were reported, for farmers, in even cruder categories).

The first thing that is clear from Table 1 is that, even in 1969, voting behaviour in Ireland was to some extent structured by social grade. The cross-class support for Fianna Fáil is of course quite striking and is the feature of these figures that is usually cited as evidence for the 'politics without social bases' thesis. However, support for both Fine Gael and Labour was more strongly structured by social grade. Large farmers were *much* more likely to vote for Fine Gael than were unskilled workers; unskilled workers were *much* more likely to vote for Labour than were large farmers.

Changing patterns of party support are also evident from Table 1. By 1987, the cross-class basis of Fianna Fáil support appeared to be declining

—manual workers were significantly more likely than nonmanual workers to support Fianna Fáil. In addition the Progressive Democrats (PDs), a new party which first contested an election in 1987, clearly appealed more to nonmanual than to manual workers. These figures led analysts of the 1987 election to the conclusion that 'the class basis of Irish politics is more evident now than at any time in the previous twenty years' (Laver, Marsh and Sinnott, 1987b: 112).

In 1989, however, this trend was reversed. Fianna Fáil gained ground among large farmers and nonmanual workers, and lost support most significantly among manual workers. The PD vote fell sharply across all social grades, but especially among nonmanual workers. The net result was the apparent re-emergence of Fianna Fáil as a catch-all party, causing political scientists to re-evaluate the argument that the trend in Ireland is towards class-based voting behaviour: 'although 1989 involved significant class-related shifts in voting behaviour . . . it did not produce a strong class-based alignment. This was because such movements as occurred mainly served to redress the class pattern that emerged from the 1987 election' (Marsh and Sinnott, 1990: 125).

Perhaps the most striking comparison in Table 1, however, is between 1969 and 1989. For the two main parties, the social patterning of the vote is almost identical for the two years, and well within the realms of sampling error. By 1989, the PDs were not making a very big impact on the overall picture and the most striking difference that we can see has to do with the splitting of the left wing vote. This was united behind Labour in 1969, and divided between Labour and the Workers' Party in 1989.

The general trend in western Europe is for class-based voting to decline but certainly not to disappear (Gallagher, Laver and Mair, 1991). When class voting in Ireland was apparently increasing, there appeared to be a convergence with western Europe. The reversal of this trend leaves Ireland at the low end of the European class voting continuum. Voting behaviour is nothing like as strongly structured by social class as it is in Scandinavia, for example, but the pattern to be found in Ireland is not completely out of the European mainstream. As in 1969, the degree of social patterning in popular support for Fine Gael, Labour and the Workers' Party means that we do have useful information about how people are likely to vote if we know their social grade. And the crude social grade measures that continue to be used in Ireland, given the continued lack of an academic election study, undoubtedly mask a more subtle pattern of party choice.

Comparing Irish Parties with their European Counterparts

The argument that it is Irish parties, rather than Irish voters, that are peculiar can be found in various guises. Its pervasiveness is illustrated quite clearly by the fact that both of the current standard treatments of the Irish party system (Gallagher, 1985; Mair, 1987) feel it necessary to confront in their opening pages the widespread perception that Ireland is a deviant case. Both authors cite Whyte's famous comment that Irish party politics are *sui generis* (Whyte 1974: 648), and both note Garvin's now-familiar argument that patterns of party politics in Ireland fit the models of political science much better if they are compared with other post-colonial states, rather than with the developed polities of western Europe (Garvin, 1981). Gallagher (1985: 140–141) provides a striking review of the weird, wonderful and inconsistent ways in which various non-Irish authors have attempted to categorise Irish parties in comparative European terms. While Mair, and also Sinnott (1984), argue strongly that Ireland is not a deviant case, they do not do so on the basis that Irish parties are in any sense like their European counterparts. Rather they argue that standard political science theories, and notably that of Lipset and Rokkan (1967), can in general terms be used to account for the development of the Irish party system.

In the remainder of this paper I explore the argument that the Irish parties are much less peculiar than any of these authors have thus far been prepared to admit. I do this by comparing the role played by each party in the Irish party system with the roles played by equivalent parties in other western European party systems. Obviously, in order to do this, I need to develop a method of describing parties and party systems that allows such comparisons to be made. This method depends upon describing party systems in terms of the weights and policy positions of the parties concerned, and is elaborated in the following section.

Policy constellations

One way of describing a party system is to think of it as a collection of different parties, each with particular electoral and legislative weights, and each with a particular policy position. If we assume that policy positions can be represented in a 'space' defined by a set of policy dimensions, we can describe a party system as a constellation of parties in this space. The use of such 'policy spaces' is by now a very conventional way of describing the policy positions of political actors, typically associated with the seminal Hotelling-Downs model of party competition (Hotelling, 1929; Downs, 1957; and cf. Laver and Hunt, 1992). On this

account, many important features of electoral competition, legislative behaviour, government formation and policy bargaining can be analysed in terms of the structure of policy positions and bargaining weights of the actors in such a space.

If we can describe key features of politics in two countries in terms of the same basic policy dimensions, then we can compare aspects of the structure of party competition in these countries. For example, we can compare two countries in which there is a party with a particularly 'central' location in the policy constellation—such as the Christian Democrats in Italy and Luxembourg—and note that such a party will be very difficult to exclude from government coalitions, no matter how well or badly it does at elections. In what follows, therefore, I compare the Irish policy constellation with other European policy constellations, locating each in a space defined by the same two policy dimensions, both highly salient in a wide range of European countries.

There are two basic reasons for doing this. The first, to which I will return at the end of the paper, has to do with the electorate. If we assume that the constellations of party policy positions in these spaces are the parties' equilibrium responses to the strategic problem of maximising votes at election time, then comparing policy constellations and party weights allows us to compare electorates. The second has to do with government formation. If we assume that senior politicians must pay attention to the constellation of party policy positions when they engage in government formation negotiations, then different party constellations define different government formation games, and hence imply different political outcomes. The existence of similar party policy constellations implies important underlying similarities in the government formation game in two countries. I make no bones about an assumption that underlies this entire discussion, which is that the government formation game is the single most important feature of party competition in any parliamentary democracy.

Estimating party policy positions

In order to make such comparisons, it is necessary to estimate the position, on a range of policy dimensions, of political parties in each western European country. The estimates reported in this paper are derived from a large scale 'expert survey' of party policy positions, conducted in 1989. The survey was conducted by the author as part of a larger project to build an integrated comparative data-set on the policy bases of party competition in all parliamentary democracies. In addition to information on party policy positions, various other data on the role of policy in party competition were assembled. These include trade-offs between office- and policy-oriented

motivations among politicians; the location within parties of decision making on matters of policy and government formation; the role of policy disputes in cabinet politics; the relative salience of different cabinet portfolios, and so on. The study is described, and the data are reproduced extensively, by Laver and Hunt (1992). The main current application of the data is in the empirical elaboration of a new model of the role of cabinet portfolios in the government formation game, described by Laver and Shepsle (1990a, 1990b, 1991). A rudimentary application of this approach to the government formation game in Ireland in 1989 is reported by Laver and Arkins (1990). A more extensive application of the data to government formation in the Irish case, among others, can be found in Laver and Hunt (1992), and a full empirical exploration of the implications of the new model for the case of Ireland is part of ongoing work.

Essentially, a long quesionnaire on the policy positions of political parties in particular countries was sent to the universe of political scientists specialising in the country in question, identified using various directories. Each expert was asked to make a judgement about the position of each party on each of the policy dimensions defined *a priori* and listed in Table 2. Each was then asked to rate the political salience of each dimension for each party. Respondents were also given the opportunity to 'write in' their own, country-specific, policy dimensions, and many took the opportunity to do this. The data used here are mean expert judgements on party positions on each policy dimension in each country, based on a total of 356 expert responses.[1]

The relative importance of each policy dimension for each country was estimated by calculating a mean saliency score. More salient dimensions in a given country received scores of more than 1, while relatively less salient dimensions received scores of less than 1.[2] These estimates are reported in Table 3. They show that two particular dimensions, a 'taxes

[1] Several alternative techniques are available for estimating party positions, including the content analysis of party manifestoes (Budge, Robertson and Hearl, eds., 1987) and the dimensional analysis of mass and elite survey data (Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976; Sani and Sartori, 1983). These data sources are in some senses 'harder' than a Delphic poll of country specialists, but none provides a comprehensive comparative description of a range of different party systems in terms of a common set of ideological dimensions.

[2] These scores were derived as follows. The mean expert judgement of the salience of a given dimension in a given country for a given party was first calculated. The weighted mean salience of the dimension, for all parties taken together in the country in question, was then calculated—each party-specific saliency score was weighted by the proportion of the legislative seats that the party controlled. A global mean weighted saliency score for all dimensions in the country in question was then calculated—the weighted mean salience of each dimension was then expressed as a proportion of the global mean score. (See Laver and Hunt, 1992, for a more detailed description.)

Table 2. Policy scales estimated in expert survey.

1.	TAXES VERSUS PUBLIC SERVICES Promote raising taxes to increase public services (1) Promote cutting public services to cut taxes (20)
2.	FOREIGN POLICY Promote development of friendly relations with Soviet Union (1) Oppose development of friendly relations with Soviet Union (20)
3.	PUBLIC OWNERSHIP Promote maximum public ownership of business and industry (1) Oppose all public ownership of business and industry (20)
4.	SOCIAL POLICY Promote permissive policies on matters such as abortion and homosexual law (1) Oppose permissive policies on matters such as abortion and homosexual law (20)
5.	THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION Strongly anti-clerical (1) Strongly pro-clerical (20)
6.	URBAN VERSUS RURAL INTERESTS Promote interests of urban and industrial voters above others (1) Promote interests of rural and agricultural voters above others (20)
7.	CENTRALISATION OF DECISION MAKING Promote decentralisation of all decision making (1) Oppose any decentralisation of decision making (20)
8.	ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY Support protection of environment, even at the cost of economic growth (1) Support economic growth, even at the cost of damage to environment (20)
9.	OTHER SCALE 1 Respondent asked to interpret endpoints.
10.	OTHER SCALE 2 Respondent asked to interpret endpoints.

versus spending' dimension and a 'social policy' dimension, had the highest salience in the group of countries taken as a whole, as well as higher than average salience in almost every country studied.[3] Having used estimates of dimension salience of to identify key dimensions, expert judgements of party policy positions on these dimensions were then used to generate the policy spaces that formed the basis of comparisons between different party constellations.

In the Irish case, Table 3 shows that a 'user supplied' Northern Ireland policy dimension was rated as being highly salient. In this important sense,

[3] The religious dimension and the urban-rural dimension, in contrast, tended to be the least salient in most countries.

Table 3. Weighted means saliency scores, by dimension, by country.

	Taxes vs spending	Social policy	Foreign policy	Public ownership	Environment	Centralisation	Urban vs. rural	Religious dimension	Most salient local dimension
Australia	**1.27**	**1.10**	0.86	1.10	1.09	0.99	1.00	0.58	
Austria	**1.17**	**1.06**	0.90	1.08	**1.14**	0.73	1.04	0.88	
Belgium	**1.26**	**1.18**	1.02	0.98	0.78	**1.13**	0.82	0.82	
Britain	**1.35**	**1.08**	1.10	**1.25**	0.98	1.01	0.81	0.43	**1.37** (Nuclear)
Canada	**1.20**	**1.13**	1.04	**1.18**	0.98	1.06	0.83	0.58	**1.60** (US relations)
Denmark	**1.31**	**1.03**	**1.28**	1.06	1.01	0.85	0.92	0.56	
Finland	**1.11**	**1.03**	0.94	1.01	0.97	0.95	**1.14**	0.85	
France	**1.18**	**1.18**	0.94	**1.15**	0.76	1.06	0.80	0.93	0.85 (Europe)
Germany	**1.10**	**1.15**	1.05	0.95	**1.16**	0.89	0.94	0.76	
Greece	**1.16**	0.61	**1.56**	**1.18**	0.79	1.17	0.69	0.83	
Iceland	**1.08**	**1.16**	**1.17**	1.13	**1.25**	0.90	**1.18**	0.14	
Ireland	**1.42**	**1.21**	0.80	1.18	0.75	0.55	1.05	1.04	**1.46** (N. Ireland)
Italy	0.91	**1.15**	1.08	1.02	0.95	0.97	0.77	**1.17**	
Japan	**1.28**	0.90	**1.17**	0.76	0.76	1.02	1.08	1.04	
Luxembourg	**1.22**	**1.33**	1.18	0.82	**1.26**	0.48	0.89	0.81	
Malta	0.98	**1.09**	1.09	1.01	**1.15**	0.82	0.71	**1.14**	
Netherlands	**1.28**	**1.32**	1.09	0.95	**1.29**	0.64	0.65	0.77	1.17 (Nuclear)
Norway	**1.13**	**1.20**	0.99	1.09	0.98	0.91	0.93	0.78	
New Zealand	**1.33**	**1.14**	0.99	1.06	0.98	0.95	**1.11**	0.44	**1.21** (Nuclear)
Portugal	**1.04**	**1.17**	0.95	**1.28**	0.94	1.13	0.82	0.66	
Spain	**1.21**	**1.17**	1.11	1.03	0.85	**1.26**	0.67	0.68	
Sweden	**1.24**	**1.09**	0.96	**1.16**	1.08	0.98	0.82	0.66	
US	**1.37**	**1.44**	1.19	0.56	**1.21**	0.93	0.72	0.59	
	Mean	**1.20**	**1.13**	**1.06**	**1.04**	**1.00**	**0.93**	**0.89**	**0.75**

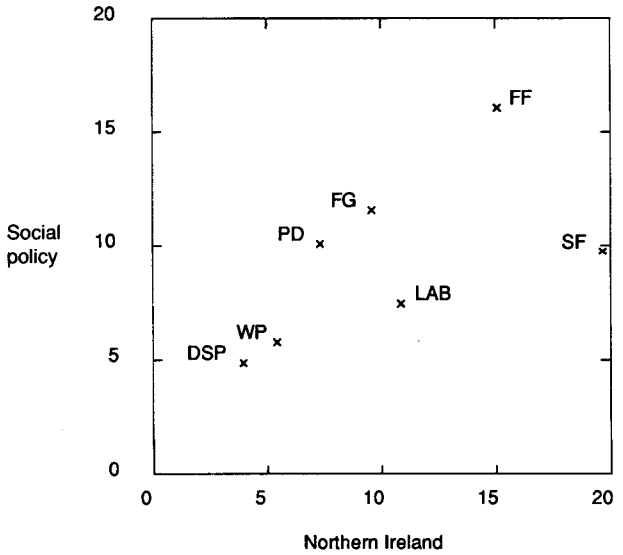

Figure 1. Relationship between social policy and Northern Ireland policy in Ireland. DSP, Democratic Socialist Party; FF, Fianna Fáil; FG, Fine Gael; Lab, Labour Party; SF, Sinn Fein; WP, Workers' Party.

the Irish party system is clearly unique. However, party positions on the Northern Ireland policy dimension are closely related to positions on the social and moral policy dimension, with parties that advocate a hard line with the British on Northern Ireland rated as conservative on social policy and parties that advocate a softer line being rated as more liberal on social policy. This can be seen in Figure 1, which plots Irish party positions on the social policy dimension against positions on the Northern Ireland dimension. Only the Labour Party and Sinn Fein deviate from this very strong pattern, each being more liberal on social policy than might be expected from their positions on Northern Ireland policy. For all other parties, the two policy areas are highly correlated, so that the Irish party constellation that we identify using the 'common' two dimensional analysis based on social policy would be little changed if we were to substitute Northern Ireland policy. The underlying structure of the relationship between the parties would be substantially the same.

Party positions on the 'taxes versus spending' and the 'social policy' dimensions were thus used to structure a common two dimensional view on each system. Party positions in these two dimensional policy spaces can be drawn neatly on a sheet of paper, but this should not for one moment be taken to imply that the policy spaces we are considering are inherently two dimensional, or that any or all of them are best represented by this

particular pair of dimensions. Indeed, estimating the 'real' dimensionality of policy spaces, once this is assumed to be less than infinite, involves deep and unresolved issues in political science (aired briefly by Laver and Hunt, 1992). I ignore such issues completely in this paper, in which I am certainly not claiming to present *the* picture of party politics in any particular country; what follows is *a* picture of each country, contributing to a series of pictures, each painted from a common point of view.

There is a major problem concerning the cross national comparability of such policy spaces, one that cannot be avoided. This arises because ostensibly the same policy dimension may in practice have a different meaning in different countries. For example, a relatively mainstream 'liberal' policy on social issues in the Netherlands might include support for free abortion on demand, decriminalisation of drug use and support for voluntary euthanasia. In Ireland, even those who think of themselves as very liberal indeed would never dream of publicly endorsing such policies. There is thus a big 'shift' in the social policy scale, comparing the Netherlands and Ireland.

For this reason, some would argue strongly that there is no basis whatsoever for comparing party positions on any particular policy dimension in two different countries, and that what I do below is to commit a serious methodological sin. It must be emphasised, however, that I make no assumption at all that absolute scale positions can be compared from one system to another—that a 10 on social policy in Ireland means anything like the same thing as a 10 in the Netherlands, for example. Rather, what I am looking for are patterns created by *relative, not absolute*, positions of parties in broadly comparable and salient policy spaces. I am looking for policy constellations, and specifically for types of European policy constellation that might approximate to the party constellation found in Ireland.

Comparing policy constellations

The policy dimensions used here to compare different European party constellations are two important facets of what has traditionally been regarded as a 'socio-economic', 'left–right' dimension. The first reflects economic strategy, the extent to which, if a choice must be made, tax cuts are preferred to public services. The second reflects the extent to which it is felt that the state should intervene in matters of personal morality. The degree to which these two dimensions are independent of each other in practice as well as in theory can be seen from the picture that they generate of the party constellation in the Netherlands, presented in Figure 2. The Dutch party constellation has been selected because it includes sufficient

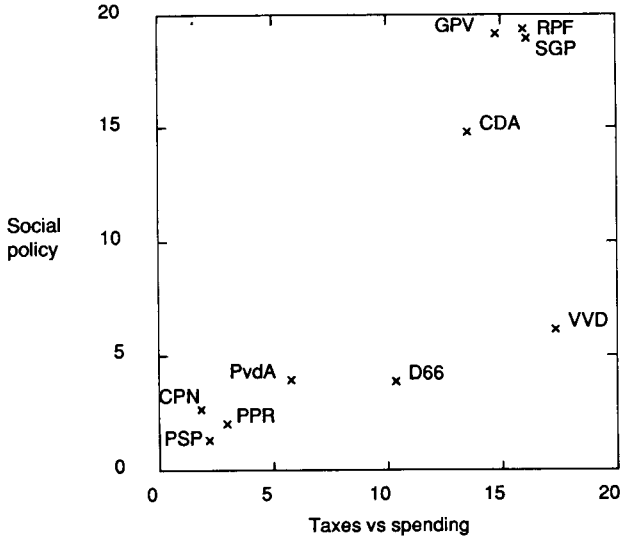

Figure 2. Two-dimensional view of the Dutch party constellation. CDA, Christian Democratic Appeal; CPN, Communist Party; D66, Democrats '66; GPV, Reformed Political Union; PPR, Radical Political Party; PSP, Pacifist Socialist Party; PvdA, Labour Party; RPF, Reformed Political Federation; SGP, Political Reformed Party; VVD, People's Party for Freedom and Democracy.

ideological variety to provide a useful set of reference points, which we can use to calibrate pictures of other party systems.

It is worth taking time to consider the party constellation in the Netherlands, viewed through this particular prism. The three main Dutch parties are the PvdA, a social democratic party, the VVD, a neoclassical liberal party, and the CDA, a biconfessional Christian democratic party. These parties, taken together, comprise an unmistakably triangular policy constellation. The PvdA provides a social democratic pole, anchoring the constellation at the centre-left of both policy dimensions; the CDA provides a Christian democratic pole, anchoring the constellation at the centre right of both dimensions. The VVD, on the other hand, is 'right-wing' on economic strategy and 'left-wing' on social issues, a typical libertarian profile. This provides a liberal pole for the constellation. The position of the minor Dutch parties can be described in relation to these three. The Communists (CPN), Left Radicals (PPR) and Pacifist Socialists (PSP) are all to the left of the PvdA on both dimensions. The three fundamentalist protestant parties (GPV, RPF and SGP) are all to the right of the CDA on both dimensions. The moderate D'66 is liberal on social issues and middle of the road on the economy. Despite the large number

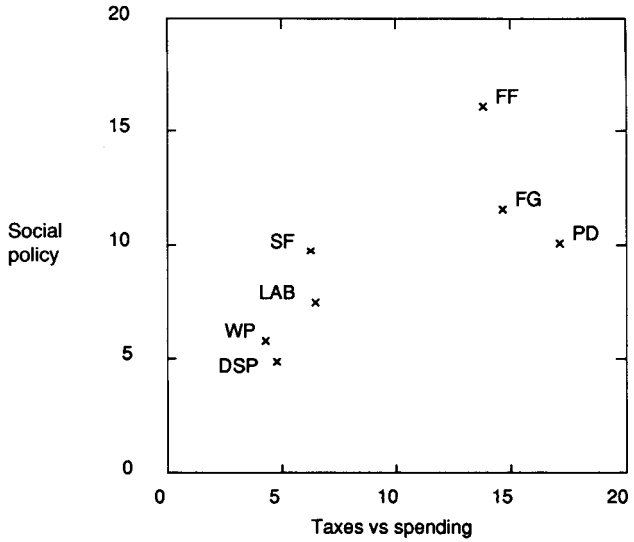

Figure 3. Two-dimensional view of Irish party constellation.

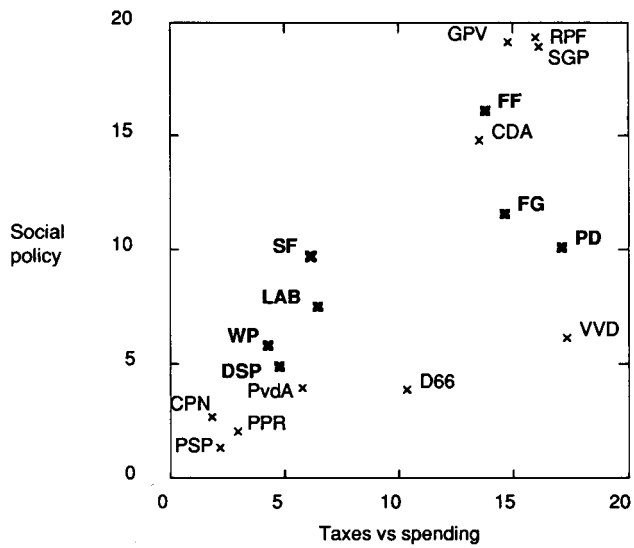

Figure 4. Superimposing the Irish on the Dutch party constellation.

of parties in the Netherlands, only four have been serious players in the government formation game during the postwar era. These are the PvdA, D'66, VVD and CDA. Thus, the main activity in Dutch politics takes place in the region of the policy space bounded by the positions of these parties.

No party inhabits the top left hand corner of the space, a position which would imply supporting left wing economics and a conservative social policy.

The Irish party constellation is described, using the same policy dimensions, in Figure 3. Stripping away irrelevant detail, it can be seen to be similar in several ways to the Dutch party constellation. This comparison is made clearer by superimposing the Irish party constellation on the Dutch, as in Figure 4.

Figure 4 shows that the position of Fianna Fáil in the Irish party constellation is rather similar to that of the CDA in the Dutch party constellation. Ireland has two parties in the role filled by the Liberals (VVD) in the Netherlands. These are Fine Gael and the Progressive Democrats, though neither is as distinctive in its position as the VVD. The Irish party constellation has two parties, Labour and the Workers' Party, filling the role of the Dutch PvdA. The fact that both the liberal and the social democratic poles are split in Ireland does increase the bargaining power of Fianna Fáil, compared to that of the Dutch CDA, but that is not our immediate concern. What we see from Figure 4 is that, taking Fianna Fáil as fulfilling the role of a Christian democratic party, taking Labour and the Workers Party as filling the role of social democratic parties, and taking Fine Gael and the PDs as in some restricted sense fulfilling the role of liberal parties, the Irish party constellation does not look that peculiar when compared to at least one representative European comparator.

Laver and Hunt (1992) discuss the juxtaposition of parties on the 'taxes versus spending' and 'social policy' dimensions for each of the twenty four countries included in their expert survey. They identify four different types of party constellation.

The first, of which the party constellation in the Netherlands is a very good example, is the 'Benelux' constellation. In the other Benelux countries, Belgium and Luxembourg, the basic structure of the party system is the same as that of the Netherlands. Each party constellation has a social democratic pole, a liberal pole and a Christian democratic pole. (In the Belgian case these poles comprise party 'families', each with Flemish and Walloon language wings.) In each case, the liberal pole is distinguished from the Christian democratic pole, despite roughly similar positions on economic policy, because the liberals promote a far less conservative social policy than the Christian democrats. This comparison can be extended easily to Germany, where the unvarnished social democratic (SPD)—liberal (FDP)—Christian democratic (CDU/CSU) triangle can be seen most clearly. Stretching a point, the Austrian party constellation can also be thought of as an example of the Benelux pattern, though there is less separation between the parties than in the other Benelux

constellations. As we have seen, the Irish case an be compared to the Benelux constellation if Fianna Fáil is treated as a Christian democratic party and if the rather less distinctive positions of the 'liberal' parties in Ireland are overlooked.

The second pattern suggested by Laver and Hunt is the 'Mediterranean' constellation. Once more, this constellation is grounded in a quite distinctive social democratic pole. The difference with the Benelux constellation concerns the opposition to social democracy. In countries with a Mediterranean constellation (Italy being an exception) this opposition is focused around a populist conservative party with a strong nationalist appeal, neither anticlerical nor particularly liberal on social affairs. This group includes the Gaullists (RPR) in France, New Democracy in Greece, the Nationalist Party in Malta, the Social Democrats (despite their name) in Portugal, and the Coalición Popular in Spain. These countries lack significant liberal parties, so that the underlying structure of party competition is bipolar rather than tripolar.

A good example of the Mediterranean constellation can be found in France, and Figure 5 shows the Irish party constellation superimposed upon the French. The comparisons, once more, are striking. The relative locations of the socialist parties are similar in both systems, though the French parties are at a somewhat greater distance from their rivals on the

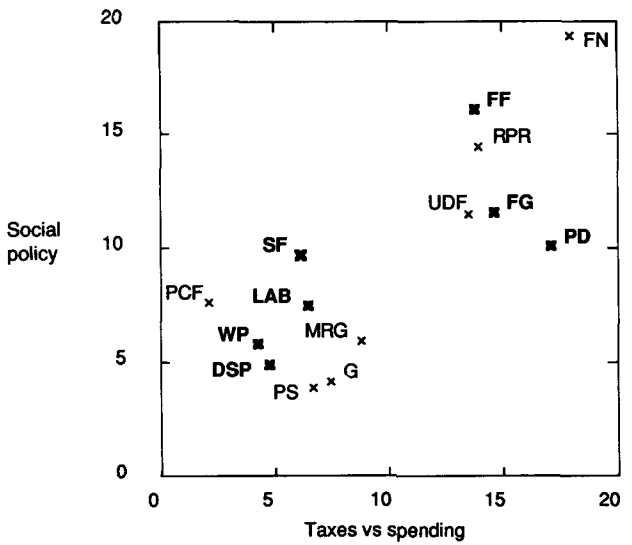

Figure 5. The Irish party constellation superimposed upon the French. FN, National Front; G, Greens; MRG, Left Radicals; PS, Socialist Party; PCF, Communist Party; RPR, Rally for the Republic (Gaulists); UDF, Union for French Democracy.

right. Fianna Fáil fulfils the same role in the Irish party constellation as the Gaullists (RPR) do in the French; Fine Gael fulfils the same role as the French conservatives (UDF). Taking Fianna Fáil as a Gaullist party, the Irish party constellation looks quite plausibly Mediterranean.

The final important set of party constellations can be found in Scandinavia, where commentators have traditionally emphasised the theme of 'two-bloc' politics. In the Scandinavian constellation, a largish secular conservative party tends to coexist with a small, protestant, Christian democratic party. Both of these confront a strong social democratic pole. The Scandinavian constellation differs from the strongly bipolar southern European constellations, however, in that a significant middle-of-the-road liberal or agrarian party tends to bridge the gap between the conservative pole and the social democratic pole. Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland all conform to this description. Two other possible candidates for inclusion are Iceland and Canada. In neither of these cases is there even a weak Christian democratic party but, in both cases, middle-of-the-road liberal parties bridge the gap between secular conservative and social democratic poles. A good example of the Scandinavian constellation can be found in Sweden, and the Irish constellation is superimposed upon the Swedish in Figure 6.

Once more we note the striking juxtaposition between the role filled

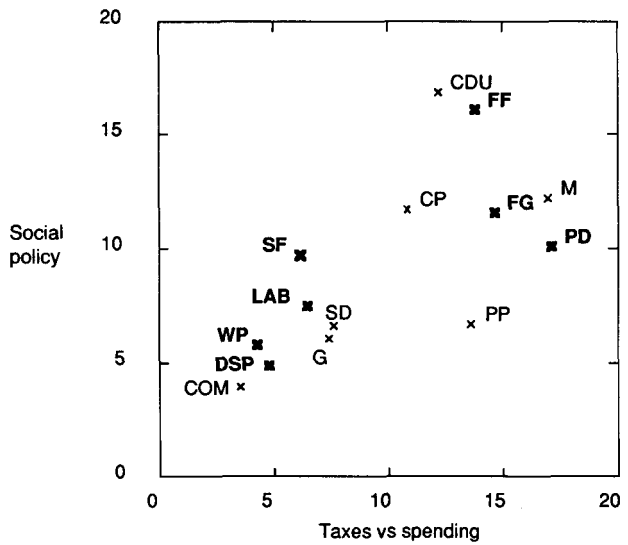

Figure 6. The Irish party constellation superimposed upon the Swedish. CDU, Christian Democratic Union; COM, Communist Party; CP, Centre Party; G, Greens; M, Moderate Unity Party (conservatives); PP, People's Party; SD, Social Democrats.

by Fianna Fáil and that of the Christian Democrats, and between the roles of Fine Gael and the secular conservatives. Once more, the social democratic poles fulfil similar roles in anchoring the left of each party constellation. But the Irish party constellation is unlike the Scandinavian in a number of important respects. In the first place, there is no centrist party in Ireland that bridges the gap between the social democratic and conservative poles, filling the role of the Centre Party (CP) in Sweden. (The positioning of such a party can have an important impact upon government formation games.) In the second place, while Fianna Fáil is close to the Christian democrats, the latter tend to be weak in Scandinavia. And, finally, a matter that we can ignore no longer—the social democrats are very strong in Scandinavia, while they are very weak in Ireland.

Which European party constellation does the Irish constellation most resemble? Overall, though this is very much a matter of taste, the Irish party constellation most closely resembles the Mediterranean. While the Irish constellation is moderately tripolar in shape, its liberal pole is not distinct enough from its 'christian democratic' pole for us plausibly to describe the Irish parties as conforming to the pattern of the Benelux constellation. And the strength of 'christian democratic' Fianna Fáil, coupled with the weakness of the left, leaves Ireland looking distinctly unScandinavian. The Irish constellation does, however, have some striking similarities with several Mediterranean constellations. Notably, in addition to the pervasive role of the main social democratic party, both the Irish and the Mediterranean constellation are defined by the position of a popular, and populist, non-anticlerical conservative nationalist party. There is typically, though not always, a weaker secular conservative party—most evident in France, absent altogether in Malta and Greece—fulfilling a broadly similar role to that of Fine Gael. The left is typically divided in the Mediterranean constellations, as it is in Ireland.

The one important caveat that must be entered in relation to this conclusion concerns previous Fine Gael–Labour coalition cabinets. These data were collected in 1989, two years after the last Fine Gael–Labour coalition had fallen apart over its inability to agree over cuts in public spending. We cannot tell from the data at hand whether Fine Gael and Labour had moved apart by 1989, having once been closer together, or whether Fine Gael–Labour coalitions were, rather, a response to what was then taken to be one of Fianna Fáil's 'core values', its refusal to share government power with any other party. In the latter event, it might have been the case that Fine Gael and Labour were as far apart in 1982 as they were in 1989, but still went into coalition together simply because this was the only hope that either had of ever getting into government. Fianna Fáil renounced this particular core value when it went into coalition with the

Progressive Democrats in 1989. Given this, and considering only party policy, it is now difficult to see future Fine Gael–Labour coalitions being formed without a major realignment of Irish party policy positions. Indeed, an analysis of the Irish government formation game in these terms, using these data, suggests that Fianna Fáil should remain well poised to form stable minority governments after those elections in which it fails to gain a parliamentary majority (Laver and Hunt, 1992).

Keeping this caveat in mind, we can conclude that there seems nothing particularly peculiar about the ideological configuration of the Irish parties. They seem to fit very well with one of the major European party constellations—the Mediterranean model that is characterised by the confrontation between a divided left, on one hand, and a powerful pole of populist nationalism, on the other—a constellation that is typically found among the Catholic countries of Southern Europe.

Party Positions and the Popular Vote

If it is accepted that Irish parties in themselves are not particularly weird or wonderful, then the most important distinctive feature of the Irish party system must undoubtedly be remarkable electoral weakness of the left in general and of the social democratic left in particular, a phenomenon documented extensively by Mair in the following paper. While the left is often divided in 'Mediterranean' party systems, as it is in Ireland, it is nowhere as weak. This weakness benefits not so much Fianna Fáil, the populist nationalist party (such parties tend to be large in each of the Mediterranean party constellations) but Fine Gael, the second-string conservative party, which is untypically large for a Mediterranean constellation.

One way of looking at this in more systematic terms is to relate levels of party support in the electorate to the two dimensional configurations of party policy positions reported in Figures 2 to 6. For obvious reasons, it is very difficult, though not impossible, to locate the electorate directly in these policy spaces. What would be required would be a large scale cross-national programme of mass attitude surveys, designed to estimate the distribution of electoral preferences in each country on the policy dimensions being used to represent party competition. In the absence of this, we can attempt to make inferences about electoral policy preferences from the relationship between the policy positions of parties and their levels of electoral support, assuming that electors are at least to some extent influenced by the relative policy positions of the parties when they decide how to cast their votes.

There has been relatively little systematic work on such inferences, which raise some intriguing methodological problems. First, there is the issue of whether to take electoral tastes as exogenous to party competition, or whether to assume that the tastes of voters can be moulded by the activities of parties. Implicit in almost all analyses of the relationship between policy and party competition is the assumption that electoral tastes are exogenous variables; this is the assumption that I too will make, but it is as well to be aware that it is being made. Assuming electoral tastes to be exogenous, and assuming that electors rank parties, all other things being equal, according to how close party policy positions are to their own ideal policy position, the second question concerns how voters decide which party to support. In a simple two party system it is logical for all parties to support the party that is closest to them in policy space. In all other party systems with a first-past-the-post electoral law, such as that to be found in Britain, a voter may choose to support a second choice party in the interests of keeping out a lower choice party if it seems likely that a first choice party will be defeated. In multiparty systems with proportional electoral laws, rational voters should take account of likely subsequent patterns of coalition formation when deciding how to cast their votes. The modelling of such behaviour is complex, and has only just begun. Results for a three party system with one policy dimension are reported by Austen-Smith and Banks (1988). In what follows, I assume 'naive' decision-making by voters who support the party closest to their ideal point, regardless of their expectations of subsequent coalition bargaining.

Assuming exogenous electoral tastes and naive voting, the interaction of election results and party policy positions can be used to generate information about the policy preferences of the electorate. If voters vote for the party whose policy position is closest to their own tastes, then the policy space can be divided into areas, such that each area is closer to a given party than to any other party. Think of this area as a party's 'policy domain'. Every voter whose ideal point lies within this area will, by assumption, vote for the party in question. Looking at things the other way around, the vote share for a given party is an estimate of the proportion of the electorate whose ideal points lie within the area of the policy space that is the party's policy domain.

We now simply confront the technical issue of drawing the policy domains. This involves drawing, for each party, the section of the policy space that is closer to that party than to any other party. Making the standard microeconomic assumption that the preferences of voters can be modelled in terms of the Euclidean distances between points in policy space, we are very fortunate that an existing packaged computer routine,

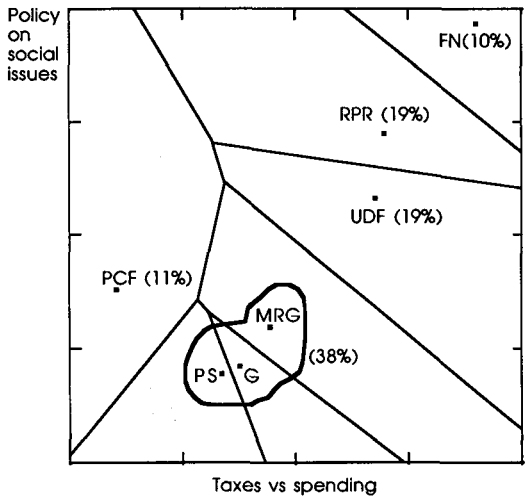

Figure 7. Party regions and party voting in France (votes June 1988).

originally developed by hydrologists, will do just this job for us. The resulting diagrams are technically known as Voronoi tesselations, or Thiessen diagrams.[4]

Figures 7 to 10 show the results of such an analysis. In each case the two dimensional policy space is divided into policy domains. Each domain has a party in its centre, and all points in the domain are closer to this party than to any other party. In addition, Figures 7 to 10 give the share of the popular vote won by each party at the election closest to the time when the data were collected, in early 1989. These diagrams thus allow us to use party constellations to tell us something about the electorate, if we assume that party voters are to be found in the appropriate policy domain. Figure 7 shows the situation in France, our reference Mediterranean constellation.

The pattern in France is repeated in most other European countries. We can draw a line from top left to bottom right of the standard two-dimensional policy space and thereby divide parties of the left from those of the right, taking both social and economic policy into consideration. About 50 per cent of French voters can be found on either side of this line. A broadly similar pattern can be found in the Netherlands (Figure 8) and Sweden (Figure 9).

[4] These diagrams were generated on a Macintosh SE, using the Voronoi Plot routine in the Systat 5.0 statistical package. Other graphics were also generated using Systat 5.0. A tentative exploration of using non-Euclidean metrics to model preferences can be found in Laver and Hunt (1982).

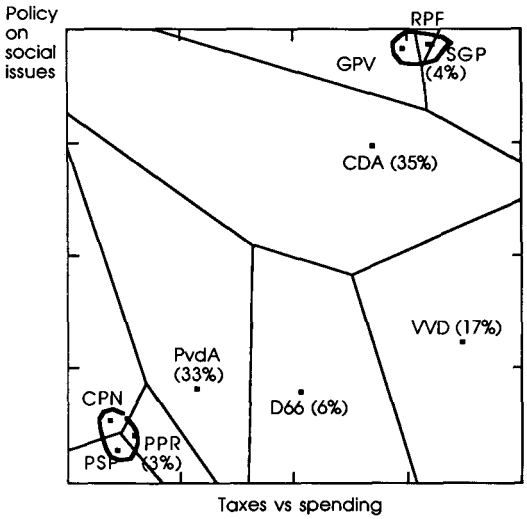

Figure 8. Party regions and party voting in the Netherlands (votes May 1986).

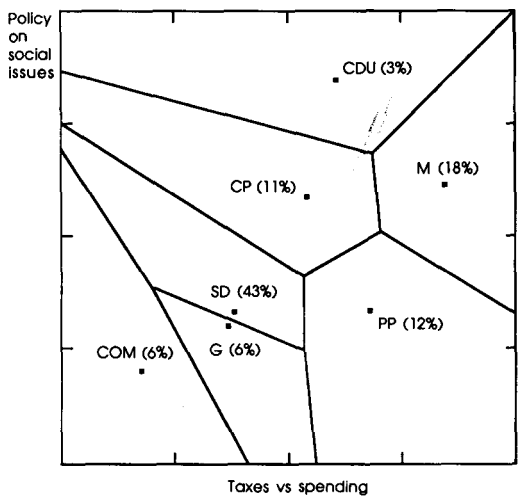

Figure 9. Party regions and party voting in Sweden (votes September 1988).

In the Netherlands, the left is rather weaker, in Sweden it is rather stronger, but the orders of magnitude are the same. In each case, a range of policy positions is offered to voters at election time, in each case there is a broadly even distribution of support between the two sides of the space. (Note that regions in the top left of the space, reflecting positions that are left wing on economic policy and right wing on social policy, tend

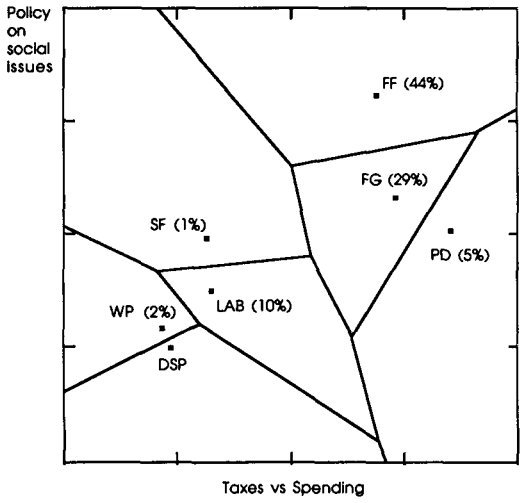

Figure 10. Party regions and party voting in Ireland (votes June 1989).

to be much less densely populated, though irredentist nationalist parties can sometimes be found in them.)

The situation in Ireland stands in stark contrast to this. About 80 per cent of the electorate is to be found in the upper right hand area of the space, despite the fact that a range of policy positions is offered in the bottom left hand region. No other western European country even approximates this distribution.

These diagrams thus give us a systematic picture of the essential peculiarity of Irish politics, seen in comparative western European terms. A number of parties offer policy positions on the left, but few voters support them.

Conclusions

In one sense, the main conclusion to be drawn from all of this is something of an anticlimax, since the data presented in this paper cannot help us to understand the causes of the weakness of the Irish left, clearly the most distinctive feature of the Irish party system. What the data presented have shown quite clearly, however, is that it is the electoral weakness of the Irish left that is *the* distinctive feature of Irish party politics.

Irish parties are *not* peculiar—they are common or garden European varieties, rather than the weird and wonderful mutants that some would have us believe. We do not have to travel far in Europe to find plenty of

parties like Fianna Fáil, or even like Fine Gael. The Irish Labour party fulfils a role in the Irish party constellation just like social democratic parties in almost every other European country, while the Workers' Party fills a role much like Communist or new left parties elsewhere. If we had to make a choice, and there is no reason why we should make a choice of course, the Irish party constellation looks decidedly Mediterranean.

What we have seen, in short, is that Irish voters are offered similar alternatives at election time to those offered to their European counterparts. Taken *en masse*, however, Irish voters make different choices between these alternatives. Understanding why this is the case, and estimating whether the pattern is changing, is the key to understanding whether Irish politics really should be seen as a deviant case in the western European context. Exploring these issues is the subject of Mair's discussion in the paper that follows.

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