

The Single Transferable Vote and the Irish General Election of 1977

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I INTRODUCTION

One of the most important lessons to be learned by a party strategist when preparing for an election with PR-STV, is that an increased vote does not necessarily imply an increase in the number of seats won by his party. This was particularly evident in the 1973 General Election where Fianna Fail, despite marginally increasing its 1969 vote from 45.7 per cent to 46.2 per cent, dropped from 75 seats to 69. Fine Gael and Labour, on the other hand, which in 1969 had a joint total of 51.5 per cent of the vote, winning 68 seats, dropped to 48.8 per cent in 1973 and yet won 73 seats.¹ A number of factors contribute to how successfully a party manages to use its vote in an STV election: in particular, the party's ability to retain its lower preferences and so prevent valuable votes 'leaking' away to its competitors can prove crucial in many contests (Mair and Laver, 1975). In 1973, through judiciously agreed nomination strategies, and by encouraging their supporters to transfer within the Coalition, the joint Fine Gael-Labour ticket proved immensely more successful than had been the case when each party conducted an independent campaign in 1969 (Cohan, *et al.*, 1975). It was primarily as a result of the high level of intra-coalition transfers in 1973 that

1. Figures for 1969 and 1973 are derived from the official results published by the Stationery Office, Dublin. Those for 1977 are extracted from the *Irish Independent*, *Irish Press*, *Irish Times* and *Cork Examiner* of June 18 and June 20, 1977.

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Fine Gael and Labour were able so successfully to overcome Fianna Fail, despite the slight increase in the latter's vote.

The incidence of intra-coalition transferring could, if anything, have been expected to become even more evident in the 1977 election. The four years of Coalition government had been marked by a virtual absence of any significant inter-party rivalry, and the manifesto which was presented to the electorate made it clear that the two parties were not going to conduct independent campaigns. Equally important was the emphasis placed, in the parties' publicity, on the need to vote the whole Coalition ticket: in Sligo-Leitrim, for instance, the name of the Labour candidate, Tommy Higgins, was placed in a prominent position on the Fine Gael posters, while those of the Fine Gael candidates were displayed on Higgins's posters. It is also worth noticing that, on June 1st, the Fine Gael national headquarters dispatched a document to its local directors of elections arguing that 'the vote of a government supporter who does not continue his or her preferences for *every* National Coalition candidate may become worthless in the final stages of a close contest and of no more value than if the voter had stayed at home. To be sure of continuing the national Coalition Government in office, *every* voter must give some preferences to *every* National Coalition candidate' (original emphasis).

Against this, however, there was the possibility that the more radical supporters of Labour might have become disenchanted with the continued alignment with Fine Gael, and that the more wealthy farmers, who had traditionally supported Fine Gael, might be reluctant to transfer to Labour as a result of the introduction of farmer taxation. Nor can the persistent distrust of Coalition governments be discounted, in so far as it could find expression in a demand for a return to single-party government (Mair, 1978).

In the event, the election saw Fianna Fail return to power following an anti-Government swing of 5.5 per cent. Fianna Fail's vote, at 50.6 per cent, was the second highest percentage ever recorded by a single party in the history of the state, and gave that party an unprecedented majority in Dail Eireann. As can be seen from Table 1, Fianna Fail benefited from the peculiarities of STV to a far greater extent than either Fine Gael or Labour, needing only 9,662 votes for each of its seats, compared with 11,367 for Fine Gael and 11,651 for Labour. This is in sharp contrast to the position in 1973 when Fianna Fail expended 9,184 votes for each seat, Fine Gael 8,774 and Labour 9,719. Table 2 effects a valid comparison of both elections by taking each party's ratio of seats to votes as a percentage of that of Fianna Fail in each election, and demonstrates clearly that Fianna Fail gained a major relative advantage in 1977 as compared with 1973.

Table 1: *General Election Results, 1977*

	<i>Total vote</i>	<i>Per cent vote</i>	<i>Total seats*</i>	<i>Per cent seats*</i>	<i>Ratio of votes to seats*</i>
Fianna Fail	811,615	50.63	84	57.14	9,662
Fine Gael	488,767	30.49	43	29.25	11,367
Labour	186,410	11.63	16	10.88	11,651
Sinn Fein Workers Party	27,209	1.70	—	—	—
Others	89,026	5.55	4	2.72	22,232
<i>Total</i>	1,603,027	100.00	147	100.00	—

Electorate: 2,118,606

*Excludes the Ceann Comhairle, Sean Treacy (Lab), who was returned unopposed.

Table 2: *The ratio of votes to seats for the three major parties expressed as a percentage of Fianna Fail's ratio of votes to seats, 1973 and 1977*

	<i>1973* per cent</i>	<i>1977* per cent</i>
Fianna Fail	100.00	100.00
Fine Gael	95.54	117.65
Labour	105.83	120.59

*Calculations exclude Ceann Comhairle's seat.

II VOTE WASTAGE

A party can gain an advantage such as this in an STV contest simply by wasting relatively few of its votes. There are two principal ways in which votes are wasted by parties in the STV system: in the first place, they are wasted if a candidate from the party is runner-up in a particular constituency, in that they have neither been used to elect him nor can they be transferred to any other possible candidate. Wastage also occurs as a result of 'vote leakage' where, rather than pass on to a running mate of the transferee, the votes of an elected or eliminated candidate become either non-transferable or go to a candidate from a competing party. Having already seen that Fianna Fail was relatively advantaged in the distribution of seats in the 1977 election, and that the Coalition parties were relatively disadvantaged, we will now assess to what extent this was due to varying degrees of vote wastage by the parties.

Table 3: *The wasted vote of each of the three major parties as resulting from the number of times their candidates were runners-up in particular constituencies, 1973 and 1977*

	1973			1977		
	Total wasted vote	Wasted vote as % of 1st preferences	N Runners up	Total wasted vote	Wasted vote as % of 1st preferences	N runners up
Fianna Fail	123,625	19.79	19	108,557	13.38	17
Fine Gael	77,951	16.45	15	114,755	23.48	16
Labour	34,531	18.70	7	55,152	29.59	9
(Coalition)	(112,482)	(17.08)	(22)	(169,907)	(25.16)	(25)

The figures in Table 3 show the extent to which the three major parties wasted votes as a result of being in the runner-up position in particular constituencies. It is quite evident that both Fine Gael and Labour experienced much more of this type of wastage in 1977 than had been the case in 1973. Whereas they wasted a combined total of only 17 per cent in 1973, this had increased to over 25 per cent in 1977. Fianna Fail, on the other hand, reduced its wastage by some six per cent. Clearly this imbalance had much to do with the eventual over-representation of Fianna Fail in the subsequent distribution of seats.

The second type of wastage occurs when a party retains a smaller proportion of its transfers than its opponents do of their's, and so fails to gain as much relative value from its votes. The more loyal the party's supporters are, and the more solidly they vote the entire party ticket, then the more value the party will obtain from its votes, and thus the greater the likelihood that it will be over-represented *vis-à-vis* its opponents (Mair and Laver,

Table 4: *Transfers from the three major parties at counts where all three remained in the running, 1973 and 1977 (per cent)*

	To:	Fianna Fail	Fine Gael	Labour	Others	NTV	Total transfers	N Constituencies
<i>From:</i>								
Fianna Fail	1973	84.32	5.68	5.10	2.96	1.94	54,638	24
	1977	85.48	4.80	5.14	2.25	2.33	110,230	27
Fine Gael	1973	6.28	70.39	19.94	1.21	2.18	47,019	22
	1977	6.60	69.71	16.62	2.97	4.10	97,097	29
Labour	1973	4.77	16.50	71.66	2.42	4.65	35,955	12
	1977	10.06	16.21	65.53	4.44	3.76	23,495	14

1975). Table 4 assesses the comparative solidity of the supporters of each of the three major parties, as expressed by their willingness to vote the entire party ticket rather than cross over to candidates from other parties. The figures relate to transfers which were made when all three major parties were still in the running, so enabling the supporters' loyalty to be placed in a valid perspective. The most striking aspect of these figures is the consistency displayed over both elections, and particularly that shown by Fianna Fail and Fine Gael supporters. The only differences between the two elections are the lower rate of Labour-Labour transfers in 1977, and the lower Fine Gael-Labour rate in the same election. Perhaps significantly, the lower Labour-Labour rate was accompanied by a sizeable increase in that of Labour-Fianna Fail.

III TERMINAL TRANSFERS

In the case of Fine Gael and Labour in these two elections, however, where the contest was fought between Fianna Fail and the *Coalition*, loyalty to the Coalition is a much more important factor than loyalty to the individual parties, and can be assessed by examining the pattern of the 'terminal' transfers of the Coalition parties, i.e., those votes which are transferred when no candidate remains from the transferring party to whom votes can be passed and thus, *of necessity*, these transfers must become either non-transferable or pass to another party. It was the willingness of Labour voters to transfer these terminals to Fine Gael in 1973, and vice versa, which enabled the Coalition to gain such a high value from its votes in that election,

Table 5: *Destiny of Labour and Fine Gael terminal transfers in counts where the other Coalition party and Fianna Fail were still in the running, 1973 and 1977 (per cent.)*

	To:	Fianna Fail	Fine Gael	Labour	Others	NTV	Total transfers	N Constituencies
<i>From:</i>								
Fine Gael	1973	7.52	—	70.91	*	20.72	12,270	7
	1977	9.74	—	71.77	*	18.47	17,287	9
Labour	1973	9.68	71.47	—	4.06	14.79	24,642	13
	1977	13.93	58.53	—	14.98	12.56	27,461	13

*Less than 1 per cent.

so ensuring its victory over Fianna Fail (Cohan *et al.*, 1975). As we have seen, however, (cf. Table 2), the Coalition gained a lower return on their

combined vote in 1977. Table 5 assesses the extent to which the rate of intra-Coalition terminal transfers was responsible for this lower return. While Fine Gael maintained its 1973 rate of transfers to Labour, Labour's tendency to reciprocate declined quite sharply. What was even more damaging to the Coalition was the increase in number of terminal Labour transfers which passed to Fianna Fail and to other candidates opposed to the Coalition. In Artane, for instance, when the official Labour candidate, Paddy Dunne, was eliminated, Noel Browne, the Independent Labour candidate, received almost 40 per cent of his 3,078 transfers. These transfers helped to ensure Browne's election and left Fine Gael holding the runner-up position. If the Coalition strategy was to work effectively in 1977, then it was essential that a very high proportion of Labour's terminal transfers accrue to Fine Gael: as the smaller and weaker party, with fewer candidates in the field than its larger Coalition partner, it was obvious that Labour would be eliminated at an earlier stage than Fine Gael in more constituencies than where the reverse situation would obtain. In the event, the smaller party was eliminated before Fine Gael in thirteen constituencies, with Fine Gael going out at an earlier stage in only nine. Had Labour maintained its 1973 transfer patterns, then some Coalition seats could have been salvaged. The enormous pro-Fianna Fail swing, however, allied to the high proportion of Coalition votes which were wasted by runners-up, would have been sufficient to ensure the relative over-representation of Fianna Fail regardless of how well either Coalition party had used its terminal transfers.

Terminal transfers can also give us some useful information as to how 'exclusive' party supporters believe their politics to be. In cases where a large proportion of a party's vote becomes non-transferable at the terminal stage, we can then assume that that party's supporters see themselves as

Table 6: *Destiny of Fianna Fail terminal transfers where Fine Gael and Labour were still in the running, 1973 and 1977 (per cent)*

	<i>To:</i>	<i>Fine Gael</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>Others</i>	<i>NTV</i>	<i>Total transfers</i>	<i>N Constituencies</i>
<i>From:</i>							
Fianna Fail	1973	19.82	21.62	7.84	50.72	7,261	6
	1977	56.33	27.96	4.83	10.88	13,721	7

being highly differentiated from the other parties in the system. Alternatively, as is the case with the two parties in the Coalition, where a large proportion of the party's vote does transfer at the terminal stage, then we can assume that its supporters view the other party or parties as being politically proximate. In so far as one can judge from the figures in Table 6, then Fianna

Fail supporters felt themselves to be more politically exclusive in 1973 than in 1977. These figures must, however, be treated with some caution: very few constituencies are involved and only one is common to both sets of figures (Galway West). If the figures are meaningful, then we can observe that a major proportion of terminal transfers which became non-transferable in 1973 passed to Fine Gael in 1977. This could possibly indicate that a number of former Fine Gael voters had decided to change to Fianna Fail for the latter election, reverting to the traditional loyalty with their lower preferences — clearly an issue such as farmer taxation could have proved crucial in stimulating such a shift of loyalties. Nevertheless, it must be again emphasised that the available figures are inadequate in themselves to justify final conclusions.

IV SINN FEIN WORKERS PARTY

The 1977 election was also characterised by the serious attempt of Sinn Fein Workers Party to make its mark in Irish electoral politics. Encouraged by the public dissent of Labour's left-wing and its dissatisfaction with Labour's participation in government, and hopeful that a new lacuna had been opened up on the left of Irish politics, Sinn Fein Workers Party nominated candidates in 16 of the country's 42 constituencies. As the party made clear at its initial press conference in Dublin, it was not overly hopeful of winning any seats in the election, but intended to use the campaign as a foundation for future excursions into electoral politics. In the event, it won only 1.7 per cent of the overall vote, while within the 16 contested constituencies it won 4.3 per cent. Though doing less well than it had originally expected, the party did have some minor successes: in North-East Cork, for instance, the Sinn Fein Workers Party candidate received 9.5 per cent of the poll, while in Waterford, with 10.6 per cent, it managed to secure the runner-up position. As can be seen from Table 7, the party supporters do not appear to regard their politics as particularly exclusive: with all three major parties still in the running, only 15 per cent of the votes of eliminated Sinn Fein Workers Party candidates became non-transferable, the majority passing to either Fianna Fail or Labour, with less than 12 per cent going to Fine Gael. One could interpret this as evidence of the two major strands which are present in varying degrees in the politics of Sinn Fein Workers Party: traditionally a wholly Republican party, it has in recent years attempted to place more and more emphasis on strictly socialist policies and, as its awareness of the domestic politics of the South has increased, so too has its concern with Irish unity decreased. Given that Fianna Fail can be regarded as proximate to the republican strand in Sinn

Fein Workers Party, and given that Labour is proximate to the socialist strand, then it is not so surprising to see these two parties gaining the lion's share of the terminal transfers.

Sinn Fein Workers Party also hoped to attract protest voters who could see it as the only available alternative to either Fianna Fail or the Coalition. The period since 1973 has been marked by a 'waning of opposition' between the two major protagonists (Mair, 1978), and clearly the party hoped to

Table 7: *Destiny of Sinn Fein Workers Party transfers where Fianna Fail, Fine Gael and Labour were still in the running, 1977 (per cent)**

To:	Fianna Fail	Fine Gael	Labour	Others	NTV	Total transfers	N Constituencies
<i>From:</i>							
Sinn Fein Workers Party	30.79	11.78	32.91	9.46	15.06	12,670	10

*All SFWP Transfers were terminal, as the party nominated only one candidate in each of the 16 constituencies.

capitalise on the disenchantment of voters unable to distinguish between the policy options offered by Fianna Fail and the Coalition. Evidence does seem to indicate that some protest voters did opt for Sinn Fein Workers Party: in Finglas, for instance, almost 50 per cent of the party's transfers went to a candidate other than those from the three major parties; in North Central, the figure was over 30 per cent, while in Limerick East it was over 60 per cent. Unfortunately there are too few cases to enable us to come to any firm conclusions regarding this hypothesis, as the majority of constituencies saw the Sinn Fein Workers Party candidate being eliminated when only major party candidates remained in the contest.

V CONCLUSIONS

Through its more effective management of the STV system in the 1977 General Election, Fianna Fail gained a significant advantage over the less well managed Coalition parties, in that a smaller proportion of Labour's crucial terminal transfers passed to Fine Gael than had been the case in 1973. Had these terminals simply become non-transferable, then the disadvantage to the Coalition would have been minimised. In the event, however, an increased proportion passed to Fianna Fail and to other non-Coalition candidates, a pattern which indicated a growth in Labour dissatisfaction with the Coalition arrangement.

But the major advantage which Fianna Fail gained in the election resulted from the relatively small proportion of votes wasted by Fianna Fail 'runners-up' in the various constituencies. Whereas runners-up had wasted almost

20 per cent of Fianna Fail's first preference total in 1973, this was reduced to just over 13 per cent in 1977. By contrast, Coalition wastage in this fashion increased from 17 per cent to 25 per cent. Given the sizeable pro-Fianna Fail swing in 1977, there was little the Coalition could have done strategically to improve its position, since the number of its candidates who are runners-up is largely dependent upon a party's first preference vote. However, it is also somewhat dependent upon the distribution of that vote between the candidates, and hence, indirectly, upon the number of candidates which the party nominates. In an STV contest, too many names on a ballot paper can confuse voters and compound vote leakage (Mair and Laver, 1975), and we can assume that this did happen in the case of the Coalition. Whereas Fianna Fail nominated 132 candidates, the Coalition total was 172 (FG: 116, Lab: 56), with the result that the latter's vote was more dispersed and less effective than that of Fianna Fail. In one sense this problem is endemic to Coalitions, in that each of the coalescing parties strives to make an individual impact over and above that of the Coalition itself. In so far as this is the case, and in so far as inter-party transferring within a Coalition is likely to be less solid than any intra-party transferring, then we can conclude that a single party in an STV contest will almost always maintain an in-built advantage over a Coalition of equivalent size.

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