Party Loyalty and Irish Voters: The EEC Referendum as a Case Study

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VOTER loyalties to the established parties in the Irish political system are quite strong, but by no means unconditional. Shifts in voter support do occur over time. The most vivid instance of the Irish voter's ability to discriminate between party and policy was afforded by the Referendum of 1959, which was combined with a Presidential election. The electorate returned Mr. de Valera, while simultaneously rejecting his party's proposal to replace Proportional Representation as the constitutionally established electoral system.[1]

The EEC Referendum

It is normal for constitutional referenda in Ireland to command a low poll and a high proportion of spoilt votes, in comparison to general elections. Issue confusion, apathy and the absence of personality interest probably go a long way to explain this lack of voter interest. In the past, the electorate has normally rejected the proposal and opted for the status quo.

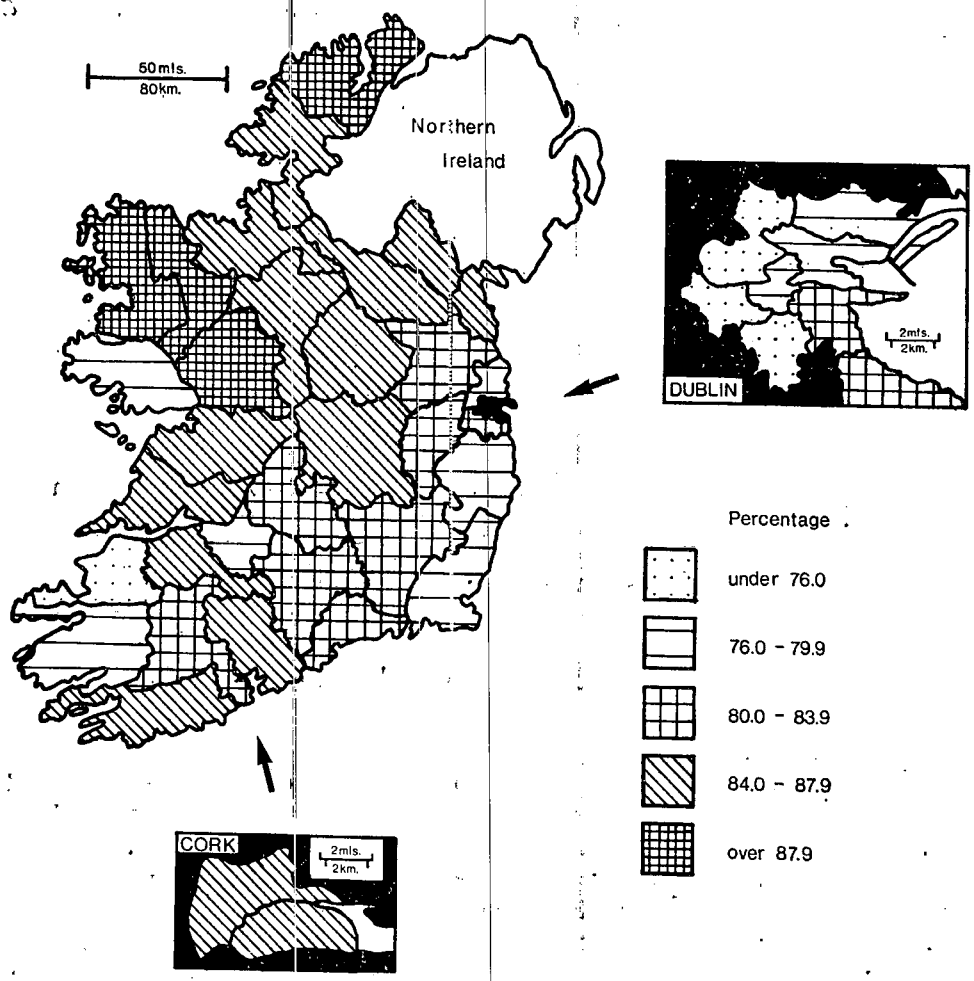
The Referendum of May 1972, conformed to none of these generalisations. A high percentage poll and a low proportion of spoilt votes were accompanied by a massive five-to-one majority in favour of amending the Constitution to permit EEC entry. The vote has variously been interpreted as a massive rejection of the IRA physical force movement, a turning away from autarkic Gaelic nationalism, and as an acceptance of European perspectives. Perhaps it is better interpreted as a reflection of not only the economic, but also the political, facts of life in Irish society.

The spatial distribution of the percentage voting in favour is shown by con-

1. See O'Leary, Con, *The Irish Republic and its Experiment with Proportional Representation.* Notre Dame U. P., 1961.

Figure 1:

Percentage Voting "Yes", by Constituency, May 1972



stituencies in Figure 1. In general terms there is a trend from higher percentages in the north and west to lower percentages in the east, with the western Leinster and eastern Munster constituencies returning about the national average. All constituencies voted heavily "yes", only two having less than 75 per cent of the poll in favour, and the overall range between the highest (North-East Donegal) with 90·65 per cent, and the lowest (South-West Dublin) with 72·86 per cent, was less than 20 per cent. Within the broad north-west to east trend, a number of anomalies appear. There was, for example, a substantially lower vote in the constituency of West Galway, probably a reflection of the efforts of the Gaeltacht Civil Rights Association.

The "yes" vote was lower in Dublin; but this is not everywhere true of urban areas. The two Cork city constituencies both voted more heavily in favour than the nation as a whole, as did Louth, which contains the large towns of Dundalk and Drogheda. Perhaps more fundamental in explaining the geographical variations are the political beliefs and habits of the electorate, although these coincide partially with certain socio-economic groupings.

Party Loyalties and the Referendum Vote

The electorate's previous voting patterns afforded a rough and partial guide to these beliefs and habits. For the purpose of the referendum campaign, the governing party (Fianna Fáil) joined forces with the main opposition party (Fine Gael) in recommending EEC membership to the nation. In a sense, the EEC campaign can be said to have started in the late 1950s, when both large parties decided in favour of Europe.[2] Fianna Fáil has traditionally drawn its support from the small farm population concentrated mainly in the west, adding to that substantial working-class and middle-class support. Fine Gael is predominantly backed by larger farmers, and what may be termed the older middle-class elements. Opposition to the EEC was led by the Labour Party, supported by less than one fifth of the electorate, mainly drawn from the working-class of Dublin and the eastern region generally.[3] Allied with Labour were the two Sinn Féins, and a congeries of small, radical, dissident groups.

Table 1 shows the correlation coefficients calculated between the vote for each party in 1969, and the Referendum vote, together with the combined 1969 votes for the pro-EEC parties and the anti-EEC groups. For the purposes of this exercise, two Fianna Fáil orientated independents (Hilda O'Malley and Joseph Sheridan) and one Fine Gael oriented independent (Maurice O'Connell) were included in the FF and FG totals. Otherwise it was found impossible to divide up the vote into pro- and anti-EEC groups. The percentages in each constituency voting for particular parties were used as inputs.

The table clearly indicates that the most significant relationships are positively between the FF-FG vote and the "yes" vote, and negatively with the "no" vote

TABLE 1: *Correlation Coefficients of Political Parties' Votes in 1969 and Referendum Vote, in May, 1972*

	FF+FG	*LP+Others*	*FF*	*FG*	*LP*	*Others*
Yes	0·826*	−0·496	0·469	0·743*	−0·800*	−0·148
No	−0·839*	0·505	−0·477	−0·755*	0·806*	0·155

*significant at 1 per cent level.

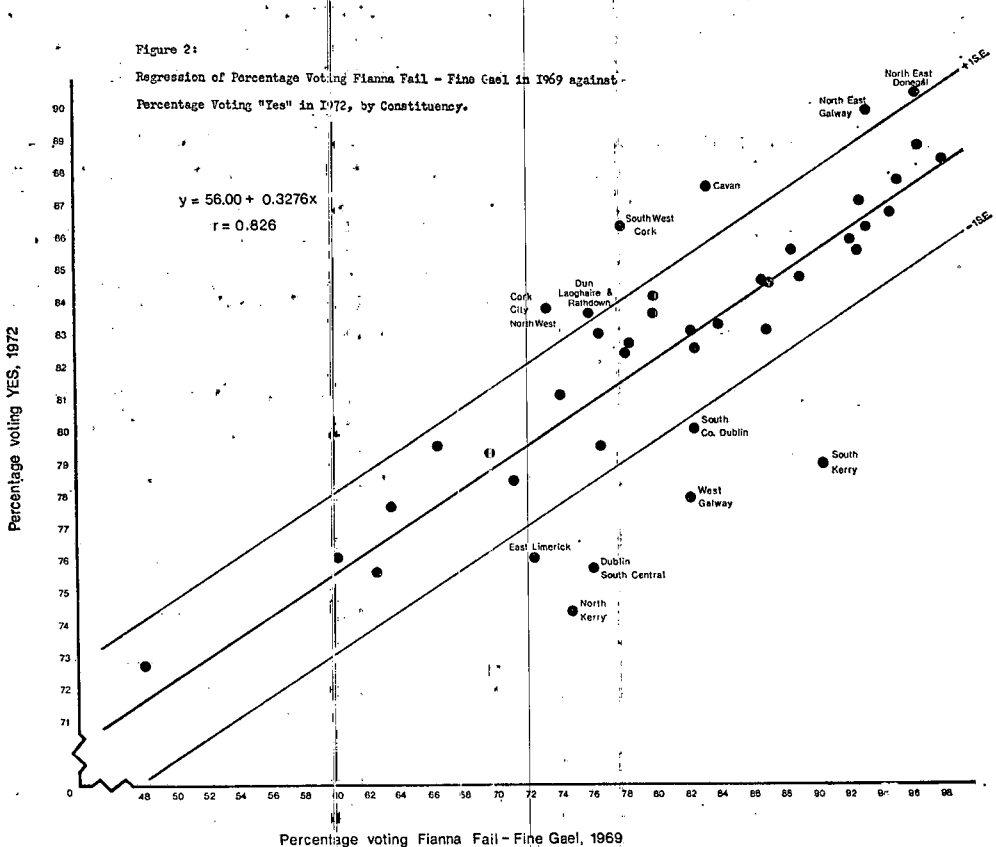
2. See *Hibernia*, Dublin, May 26th, 1972.

3. On support for the parties in the electorate, see John Whyte, "*Ireland*," in R. Rose (ed), *Comparative Electoral Behaviour*, New York, Free Press, 1972, (forthcoming). Also M. Manning, *Irish Political Parties*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1972, pp. 114–120.

and the FF-FG vote. The combined Labour plus Others accounts for less than half the variance accounted for by the FF-FG grouping, largely because of the amorphous character of the Others group.

The coefficients for the individual parties show some particularly revealing results. The strongest relationship both for and against Europe is with the Labour vote. Contrary to common belief, it seems that Labour did not split electorally on the Europe issue. If anything, they were possibly the most cohesive group. The confused character of the Others group is evidenced by the fact that the correlations for this group are not significant even at the 5 per cent level, and the consequent reduction in the explanation of the variance in the "yes" vote when this group is added to the Labour vote. On the other side of the fence, Fine Gael voters were more solidly behind their party's line than were Fianna Fáil voters. Singly FG explains 55·2 per cent of the "yes" variance, while FF alone explains 22·0 per cent. Together, the two party affiliations explain 68·3 per cent, an increase of 13·1 per cent over FG alone.

Even with the strong relationship between the combined FF-FG vote and the "yes" vote, a number of constituencies are anomalous, as Figure 2 illustrates.



Twelve constituencies lie beyond ±1 standard error from the regression line, and these are scattered spatially throughout the country. Most of these anomalies may be explained in terms of local deviations from the national pattern in 1969 because of local issues, or by political changes which have occurred since 1969. West Galway has already been mentioned as a special case. In South County Dublin, Kevin Boland's ex-Fianna Fáil group campaigned against Europe with some apparent effect. In Kerry South, the Common Market Defence Campaign, and some residual republicanism, seem to have managed to dent the "yes" vote. Conversely, the cooperation of both Fianna Fáil factions in Donegal North-East in the pro-EEC campaign resulted in a very impressive majority.

Conclusions

Overall, the picture is one of a high voter consistency between 1969 and 1972. The larger the party, the more its cohesion was weakened on the EEC issue. The vote can scarcely be interpreted as a rejection of Sinn Féin, a massive defeat for Labour or, for that matter, as an endorsement of the Government. It is a confirmation of the highly entrenched character of party loyalties in the Irish electorate.

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