Chapter 2

Elections and political communication

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Election campaigns are sporadic events during which the apathy that the non-participatory political system engenders has to be momentarily surmounted to inject renewed legitimacy into the system of organised political parties. How the citizenry are to be motivated to mobilise from their habitual passivity depends on the quality and quantity of political communication with the electorate. In short it is influenced, if not determined, by the character of the election campaign. This chapter provides a brief introduction to how those competing for votes have communicated with the Irish electorate since the foundation of the state.

Campaign slogans, techniques and candidates

As the revolutionary generation that had monopolised political power for the first four decades of independence exited the political stage during the 1960s, prospective candidates for election had to find new ways of getting on the ticket. For those not part of a political dynasty forged during the formative years of the state, sport proved another way of coming to the attention of the electorate, and the party leaderships. The 1965 general election returned 17 former Gaelic games stars (Whyte, 1966, 31) but a focus on GAA luminaries provides only a partial picture of the influence of the organisation. Brian Farrell (1971, 321–22) has noted that the 1969 election returned in addition to 15 GAA 'stars' four GAA county officials and another 25 deputies who had been or continued to be active within the GAA as players or officials. The most significant figure of this new generation was Jack Lynch, who governed Ireland for

most of the period spanning the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, and whose complete lack of a political pedigree was compensated for by having won six All-Ireland hurling and football medals.

The passing of the revolutionary generation also led to increasing localism. Almost a third of those elected to the Dáil on the back of their revolutionary exploits represented constituencies other than their home districts (Cohan, 1972, 61) and, initially at least, the most prominent represented more than one constituency with some elected to both the Dublin and Belfast legislatures. This feature of revolutionary politics freed representatives from dependence on a local bailiwick and allowed them to view issues from a national rather than a parochial perspective. Conversely, the localism that typified the post-revolutionary elite has had the opposite effect, restricting the manoeuvrability of deputies and encouraging a provincial outlook, a trend accentuated by the PR-STV electoral system. Whereas, national prominence in the revolutionary era usually preceded constituency supremacy, for the post-revolutionary generations local dominance has been the only means towards achieving distinction at a national level. These contrasting routes to political eminence created different political creatures. Leaders of the revolutionary elite were politicians by accident thrust into a political life that few had envisaged when taking up arms against the established regime during the 1916 Easter Rising or subsequent war of independence. Their successors were politicians by design and had to undergo a more gradual and less dramatic progression to high office.

The normalisation that followed the Irish revolution and consequent localism that developed amongst the Irish political class is well-illustrated by comparing the

percentage of members of the revolutionary elite who had served on a county council with that of the post-revolutionary elite. Twenty nine per cent of politicians of the revolutionary elite had given such service at local level, the majority beginning their tenure shortly before their election as TDs. By the 1960s this figure had risen to 51% as service at local level rapidly became a *sine qua non* for entry to politics at national level (Cohan, 61). In addition, the absence of a revolution meant that the majority of aspiring politicians of the post-revolutionary generations have had to serve longer at local level before achieving Dáil success. This gradual progression to high office in a political system has inculcated a more gradualist approach to political problems. While the revolutionary elite was typified by its 'lack of connection with any formal governing apparatus that came before' (Cohan, 59), its successors grew up in a stable political environment that enjoyed majority support. This in turn made the concept of radical constitutional or political change more alien and unorthodox than it had appeared to many politicians of the earlier generation.

All of this has in turn contributed to changing political communication in Ireland. The political message became increasingly moderate, the target audience local, and the support base less partisan. The balance sheet has become one of votes won or lost rather than policy goals achieved or postponed. Writing in the 1960s of the mass peoples' parties (*volkspartien*) of which Fianna Fáil was Ireland's prime example, Otto Kirchheimer (1966, 192) argued that 'there is need for enough brand differentiation to make the article plainly recognisable, but the degree of differentiation must never be so great as to make the potential customer fear he will be out on a limb.' Principles were revered but ultimately elastic and Fianna Fáil's

main threat when in government was competition from a more attractively packaged brand of a nearly identical product.

Coinciding with the departure of the revolutionary generation was the advent of a national television service in 1961, which brought with it new challenges for those seeking election. The 1965 election campaign was the first to receive TV coverage and in February 1973, RTÉ had another pioneering moment when Jack Lynch became the first Taoiseach to concede defeat live on television, bringing 16 years of Fianna Fáil rule to an end. Television's role during elections expanded thereafter. For the 2007 election RTÉ had, for the first time ever, an outside broadcasting unit in every one of the 43 constituencies (RTÉ, 2007a). From the beginning, senior politicians had been wary of television. In his televised address on the opening of Telifís Éireann, President de Valera had noted that while TV could contribute to the vigour and confidence of the nation it could also, if used unwisely, 'lead through demoralization to decadence and disillusion' (see McLoone and McMahon, 1984, 149–50). Insofar as political debate is concerned, parliamentary business has been televised since 1991, three decades after the idea was first mooted (Dunne, 1961). The impact that the arrival of television has had on Irish election campaigns should not be underestimated. As Olivia O'Leary (2006, 10) has pointed out, 'in a television age, most policy messages were too complicated, too confusing. You needed a single product with easy brand recognition. It was simple. You marketed the leader.'

Jack Lynch was better placed than Liam Cosgrave, or his predecessor James Dillon, to grasp the possibilities offered by new technologies as evidenced by the razzmatazz generated by his presidential style tour via helicopter in 1977. Cosgrave's

performances were, by contrast, wooden and he was consistently ridiculed as miserly, authoritarian and uncharismatic in the hugely popular satirical programme 'Hall's Pictorial Weekly'. Much of the innovative character of Fianna Fáil's 1977 election campaign can be attributed to the party's young general secretary, Séamus Brennan, who had spent two months with the US Democratic Party's presidential campaign during the previous year to pick up some tips from the Carter v Ford pre-race. There he learned the style of electioneering that parties in Ireland would have to embrace if they were to successfully adapt to a new age, increasingly shaped by television and consumerism. One of the many novelties that resulted from Brennan's brainstorming was the commissioning of Ireland's first election pop song. Entitled 'Your Kind of Country' and sung by Colm C.T. Wilkinson the song contained some memorable lines, such as:

We're more than just statistics, and black official ink
We got our pride and feelings
They're stronger than you think ...
We need the kind of country where we can make our way
That's why I'm voting for a change
On this Election Day.

So let's make it your kind of country
Get out there and vote
And show them that you're free
Show them that you care a damn
And that you'll win somehow

Help us to make it

Your country now

Dismissed by the Fine Gael – Labour Party government as an 'election gimmick' (Ryan, 1977) the record deliberately targeted the unprecedented number of first-time voters (the 1977 election would be the first in which voters from the age of 18 could cast ballots). Banned after a week by RTÉ and with a similar prohibition issued to CIÉ bus drivers, the song attained a subversive quality its producers could only dream of. 'Your Kind of Country' T-shirts proliferated during the campaign and while we can never know how many votes were won or lost as a result, it kept the party in the public eye. The initiative was considered such a success that in 1979, Cathal Dunne, nephew of Jack Lynch and singer/composer of Ireland's entry to the Eurovision Song Contest that year, recorded the single 'We're On Our Way to Europe' to coincide with the first direct elections to the European Parliament. Fianna Fáil produced another song for the June 1981 election but instead of being a song that spoke generally of youth dissatisfaction with the status quo it was an entreaty to the electorate to 'Arise and Follow Charlie', a reference to party leader, Charles Haughey:

Hail the leader, hail the man

With Freedom's cause, it all began

With Irish Pride in every man

We'll Rise and Follow Charlie

Though widely played throughout the campaign and appreciated by supporters 'Arise and Follow Charlie' marked the end of the brief experimentation with party election

campaign songs. An attempt to revive the idea in the mid-1990s with the penning of 'The Man They Call Ahern' failed to take off. While commissioned by the party and premiered at a major rally at the National Stadium on 7 March 1995, the song was never recorded but was, instead, sung occasionally by party activists at social gatherings (Lord, 2007 & *Dáil Debates*, 1995).

The personalisation of politics that television encouraged was very much in keeping with the 1980s, much of which was characterised by a political Punch and Judy show between Fine Gael leader Garret FitzGerald and his Fianna Fáil counterpart Charles Haughey. Capitalising on opinion polls that found that FitzGerald was more popular than Haughey, Fine Gael election posters asked the electorate, in November 1982, to 'Put the Right Man Back' and emphasised that FitzGerald had 'a strong team united behind his leadership' hinting at the contrasting disunity in Fianna Fáil. With a failing economy and a divisive leader, the Fianna Fáil leadership responded by playing the green card and questioning FitzGerald's patriotism. A Fianna Fáil election leaflet in one constituency adapted the famous British army World War One recruiting poster with the slogan 'Thatcher wants Garret. Do you? Safeguard Irish neutrality. Vote Fianna Fáil'.

This electoral cult of personality extended to the smaller parties. When the Progressive Democrats (PDs) contested their first general election in 1987 they adopted (apparently against the wishes of their leader, Des O'Malley) a presidential style campaign though they made it clear (and their candidate numbers indicated) that they were seeking the balance of power. The campaign slogan – 'Dessie Can Do It' – involved the reinvention of Des O'Malley from errant Fianna Fáil TD of almost two

decades standing to a new visionary with fresh ideas. In keeping with this dynamic image, O'Malley embarked on a helicopter tour of the country. The PDs made a virtue of the fact that many of their candidates were political novices by stressing that they were not tainted with the failure of governments past. They were also instrumental in depriving Fianna Fáil of overall majorities in 1987 and 1989, which, in turn, prompted Charles Haughey to abruptly and unilaterally jettison his party's anti-coalition 'principle'. Since then all parties have contested elections with the working assumption that some kind of coalition arrangement would need to be negotiated after the election and have tailored their election messages accordingly.

The three elections that took place during the economic boom (1997, 2002, 2007) were dominated by the irrepressible success of Fianna Fáil leader Bertie Ahern and his inner circle. The first leader since de Valera to win three successive general elections, Ahern withstood the challenges of three different Fine Gael leaders – John Bruton, Michael Noonan and Enda Kenny. By the time of the 1997 election Ahern had discarded his trademark anorak for well-tailored suits and his party's election poster depicted a shot of a pensive leader over the banner 'people before politics'. Ahern represented a new type of leader in Irish politics – the 'everyman' whose popularity stemmed not from his exceptional qualities but from his very ordinariness, informality and accessibility. Few commended his intellect, or his oratory, and yet he commanded widespread approval and affection, bordering on devotion. Government setbacks or crises never dented Ahern's enduring popularity. So great was his ability to retain his personal approval-ratings irrespective of how grave or high-profile the scandal might be that he was dubbed the 'Teflon Taoiseach'. Buoyed by a booming economy Ahern could not be touched by political or journalistic adversaries. In 2007,

after a decade in power, Ahern was still deemed Fianna Fáil's strongest card with all party candidates depicted on their election posters as being part of 'Bertie's Team'. Ahern was photo-shopped into pictures that contained different target sections of the electorate and the campaign slogan – 'the next steps'.

The volume of elections influences the amount that parties can raise to communicate their message. The holding of a snap election in September 1927, just three months after the previous one, meant that only the larger parties could mount two campaigns while smaller parties like Sinn Féin, Clann Éireann and the like fell by the wayside. Similarly three elections in 18 months during 1981–82 resulted in a progressive reduction of expenditure. The estimated spending of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael declined from £1.6 million (June 1981) to £1 million (February 1982) to £500,000 (November 1982) (O'Leary, 1982, 366; 1983, 175). It was not beyond the ingenuity of political leaders to try to extract political capital from these cutbacks; driving home the point that political parties, like the nation, had little to spend, Garret FitzGerald did much of his campaign travel by scheduled trains (RTÉ, 1982a). The cost of electioneering proliferated during the years of the Celtic Tiger, with lamp-post posters costing €6 euro apiece and billboards €1,000 a fortnight for the 2007 contest. Despite these costs, 450 tonnes of posters were produced for the campaign (RTÉ, 2007b).

Smears, scares and slurs

Negative campaigning has a long history in Ireland. The civil war provided the material for much of the election literature of the Irish Free State's first decade. Confronted with a resurgent Fianna Fáil, Cumann na nGaedheal (the predecessors of contemporary Fine Gael) presented themselves during the 1932 campaign as Ireland's

‘bulwark against the terrorists’ in a country that lay ‘in the shadow of the gunman.’ The government portrayed Fianna Fáil as the instigators of a communist revolution under the guise of patriotism. As one advertisement, which took up the entire front page of the *Irish independent*, famously put it: ‘The gunmen are voting for Fianna Fáil. The Communists are voting for Fianna Fáil. How will you vote?’ (Ó Beacháin, 2010, 126). Similarly, on election day the *Irish Independent’s* editorial warned voters that ‘the very life of the State’ was at stake, and that should they choose Fianna Fáil the verdict of the world would be ‘suicide during temporary insanity’ (*Irish Independent*, 1932).

Once ensconced in office, Fianna Fáil employed the same election scares in an effort to maintain power. During the 1940s, its message to the electorate could be reduced to an assertion that as the only organisation able to offer a single-party government (considered synonymous with stability), Fianna Fáil was the only defence against anarchy. ‘If you vote Fianna Fáil, the bombs won’t fall’, the party proclaimed during the 1943 election. Fianna Fáil tried to whip up anti-communist hysteria by describing the mild-mannered William Norton as ‘the Kerensky of the Labour Party’, who, despite his innocuous rhetoric, was in reality ‘preparing the way for the red shirts’ (MacEntee, 1943). The scare worked; the Labour Party obligingly split in two early in 1944 on the issue of the level of communism within the party and during the election later that year the rival factions were too busy attacking each other to land many blows on de Valera’s government.

Clann na Poblachta replaced Labour as the target of electoral red scares during the 1948 election. Taking out expensive half-page advertisements in national and local

newspapers headed ‘A Plan for Safety’ Fianna Fáil warned of forces working for the overthrow of democracy, ‘disguised . . . perhaps even under names in the Irish language.’ Their methods would be ‘to destroy confidence in the motives of the Government, and, if possible, by slander and abuse of political leaders, to weaken public faith in the democratic system.’ The advertisement concluded in apocalyptic terms by claiming that the free election that would bring ‘the enemies of Christianity and democracy’ to power ‘is always the last free election ever held.’ Predicting that revolutionary danger was ‘on the horizon’, the advertisement maintained that a vote for Fianna Fáil’s opponents would signal the end of Christianity and democracy in Ireland and the triumph of revolutionary communism:

> The ‘cells’, whose task it is to exploit temporary causes of public discontent, and to promote social unrest are at work. The chance of destroying the Fianna Fáil Government, which the General Election gives them is being fully used . . . Fianna Fáil means safety. It means the preservation of democracy . . . which is the alternative to dictatorship. This is why these elections in Ireland are so important. That is why Fianna Fáil must win. (*Connacht Tribune*, 1948)

A comparison of the 1932 and 1948 elections demonstrates how close Fianna Fáil had come to the Cumann na nGaedheal party it had reviled. So great was the campaign in 1932 to portray Fianna Fáil as Bolsheviks that the party manifesto stated that they had ‘no leanings towards communism and no belief in communistic doctrines’ (Fianna Fáil, 1932). By 1948, Seán MacBride, like de Valera before him, was forced to claim that his policies coincided with Papal encyclicals and that there were ‘no Communists’ in his party (*Irish Times*, 1948). Cumann na nGaedheal’s 1932 election

slogan of ‘Safety first’ differed little from that adopted by Fianna Fáil after sixteen years in power: ‘Play safe’. The 1969 election brought the return of the ‘red scare’ to Irish politics. Having temporarily overcome its phobia about the word ‘socialism’ the Labour Party boldly entered the election asking the people to ‘peel off the tattered rags and battered image of the old Republic of the conservative Civil War politicians.’ Instead electors were exhorted to vote for ‘the new Republic,’ a land of communal responsibility, full employment and equal opportunity (*Irish Times*, 1969a). Few could imagine a more unlikely standard-bearer of socialism than Brendan Corish, who throughout the 1960s had displayed a greater knowledge of Papal encyclicals than many a parish priest. However, Fianna Fáil portrayed Corish as a man in the thrall of Marxist intellectuals eager to seize power and eradicate civil liberties. In keeping with traditional policy, Fianna Fáil did not issue a manifesto. In practice this was to allow the party the maximum flexibility after taking office, but Charles Haughey, as director of elections, offered a new ideological pretext. ‘Manifestos,’ he claimed, ‘have a Marxist ring about them’ (*Irish Times*, 1969b). With characteristic gusto, the veteran red-baiter Seán MacEntee claimed that the Labour Party stood for Lenin, Stalin and the ‘red flames of burning homesteads in Meath’ (*Irish Times*, 1969c).

In full-page advertisements in the national newspapers, the traditional argument espousing the virtues of a united single-party government (i.e. Fianna Fáil) as against a divided coalition of irreconcilables was extensively employed. Particular emphasis was given to those in the Labour Party who constituted a ‘group of extreme left-wing socialists . . . preaching class warfare and who want total state control and all that goes with it’ (*Irish Times*, 1969d). Neil Blaney warmed to this subject, accusing the Labour Party of promoting the ‘failed system of atheistic socialism’ of the Soviet

Union, Cuba, North Korea and Vietnam, where 'the freedom of man is a myth, where democracy has been trampled down and brutal dictatorship is supreme' (*Irish Times*, 1969e). The Labour Party programme, he concluded, was not for 1969 but for 1984 (*Irish Times*, 1969f). Jack Lynch claimed that by voting for Fianna Fáil the people would demonstrate 'that they prefer the reality of progress and prosperity to the Cuban myth' (*Irish Times*, 1969g). Anti-intellectualism was also much in evidence. Mícheál Ó Móráin, the minister for justice, condemned the 'left-wing political queers from Trinity College and Telefís Éireann', while another candidate, Joe Dowling, declared that 'the intellectuals had never done a day's real work in their lives' (*Irish Times*, 1969h; 1969i). Failing to make a major breakthrough, the Labour Party reverted to its default position of cautious moderation. The red scares snuffed out what little prospects there were for left wing or radical ideas to flourish during the early decades of the state.

Opinion polls

Political parties and commentators only began to understand that opinion polls provided an accurate reflection of voter sentiment after these same polls correctly predicted a Fianna Fáil landslide in 1977, despite the ill-concealed confidence of the government and media that the ruling coalition would be returned. Though the first opinion poll in Ireland seems to have been conducted as early as 1961 this was considered a novelty. The Labour Party had conducted a major internal poll in 1969 and there were sporadic efforts at party polling during the early 1970s but, as Garret FitzGerald recalls, most politicians viewed these as 'unreliable'. His party leader and Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave was 'known to be particularly dismissive of polls preferring rather oddly to be guided on public opinion by individual letters . . .

extracts of which he sometimes read to us in Government' (FitzGerald, 1991, 320). Cosgrave's hostility to polls had had a public airing at the 1972 Fine Gael ard fheis, when he attacked a market research company that had conducted a recent poll saying that 'those who organised it could now give back the thirty pieces of silver', which seemed to suggest that the pollsters produced the results desired by their paymasters (FitzGerald, 1991, 105–6). When Cosgrave indicated that he wanted an election in June 1977 there were some ministers who favoured a later date – when economic reforms would have taken greater effect – and considered conducting a poll but, as FitzGerald recalls 'we were inhibited from suggesting it by the dismissive reaction we believed we would have met from most of our colleagues, including the Taoiseach' (FitzGerald, 1991, 320).

Indifference to polls extended to the media. On their eve-of-poll front page the *Irish Times* proclaimed that according to their team of reporters who had covered all 42 constituencies 'the Coalition will win the election by a fairly comfortable margin' while the following day the banner headline was 'Coalition set to take election' (*Irish Times,* 1977a; 1977b). So great was the media consensus on the outcome that Seán Duignan said that if Fianna Fáil won the election it would be 'the greatest comeback since Lazarus' and that the elite corps of political correspondents would have 'a lot of egg on their faces' (Farrell, 1977, 97). Following Fianna Fáil's victory – the biggest in Irish electoral history – Garret FitzGerald, in an opinion piece published in the *Irish Times* (1977c), urged a reconsideration of attitudes to opinion polls:

> The failure of most commentators and politicians to detect the change in mood and to evaluate its political consequences has been aggravated by what might

> perhaps be described somewhat paradoxically as a naive cynicism of most people in Ireland with regard to public opinion polls . . . Perhaps the result of this election will encourage all concerned to take these polls more seriously in the future.

After 1977 opinion polls would become an integral part of the electoral landscape to the extent that they have become stories in themselves and frequently frame election debates. Indeed, there is some currency to the criticism that, as Christopher Hitchens (2010) put it, 'to be able to cite a poll is now the shortest cut to economizing both on thought and on research.' While poll results are always welcomed by those whom are reported to be performing well, politicians have developed an arsenal of well-rehearsed responses to poor showings. These include the rejoinder that the poll is just a 'snapshot in time', that it 'doesn't reflect what is being said on the doorstep' and/or that 'the only poll that counts is that held on Election Day'.

Polls not only reflect but also have come to greatly influence what people think and how they will vote. Candidates and parties can, consequently, become a victim of good poll results as Seán Gallagher discovered during the 2011 presidential election (see below). During the 2002 general election campaign, Fianna Fáil's march towards an overall majority was thwarted in large part by the burden of glowing opinion polls, which put party support at 59%, prompting its coalition partners, the Progressive Democrats to launch a campaign under the banner of 'One Party Government – No Thanks'. Though Fianna Fáil spokespersons did their best to dampen speculation that they could form a single party administration, and Bertie Ahern even went so far as to state a personal preference to maintain the coalition should his party secure an overall

majority – the PD campaign, assisted by influential media commentators, provoked a significant portion of the electorate to reflect on whether Fianna Fáil could indeed be trusted to govern alone. Consequently, the PDs, as self-appointed guardians of Fianna Fáil's morality, doubled their parliamentary representation to eight seats, despite a dip in their vote, and Fianna Fáil fell just short of a majority (Collins, 2005, 211–13).

Presidential elections

Presidential elections are fundamentally different from general elections in that candidates are not competing for power. The lack of influence is all the more anomalous considering that the president is considered to personify and represent the nation and is the only political position that is elected nationally. This need to appeal to the national electorate for an office with very few competencies has produced increasingly surreal struggles in which candidates engage in a popularity contest to prove that they are needed to fill a position that, however desirable, many appreciate is politically superfluous.

Hard as it is to believe today, opposition in 1937 to the constitutional provisions establishing the presidency centred on the charge that it would become the platform for dictatorship, a fear dampened by the selection by parliamentary consensus of 78-year-old Dubhghlas de hÍde (Douglas Hyde) as first president. A Protestant cultural nationalist, with no identifiable party preference and certainly no political ambition, de hÍde defused the controversy and subsequent presidential elections were, with some minor exceptions, characterised by mild-mannered competition between senior citizens. Since 1938 the presidency has been determined without a contest on six occasions, when the major political parties have conspired to block a number of

candidates. For example, after the premature death of one president, and the resignation of another in rapid succession, the Irish political elite, eager for a safe pair of hands, agreed, in 1976, on the candidature of Patrick Hillery who served a full two terms and 14 years as president without ever submitting himself to the electorate.

Presidential elections since 1990 represent a second era. These were the first contests that incorporated opinion polls, TV debates and other features of modern electioneering. The Fine Gael 1990 presidential campaign was debilitated from the start by the knowledge that candidate Austin Currie was asked to run after several party notables, including Garret FitzGerald and Alan Dukes, had demurred. Nominated by the Labour and Workers' parties Mary Robinson embarked on an impressive six month door-to-door campaign but opinion polls suggested that she was still likely to lose to the frontrunner, Fianna Fáil veteran Brian Lenihan, until a media ambush transformed the campaign. When an interview given by Lenihan to student and Fine Gael member, Jim Duffy, several months before the campaign contradicted a question asked by another Fine Gael activist on the current affairs programme 'Questions and Answers', his campaign was dealt a severe blow. He hoped to revive his fortunes by agreeing to a televised interview with RTÉ's political correspondent, Seán Duignan, but it backfired. Lenihan's key defence, that 'on mature recollection' he had erred in the interview he had given to Jim Duffy attracted ridicule and his tactic of staring into the camera failed to assuage voter incredulity. His support recovered as he garnered sympathy after being fired from his ministerial post, not least because he was a visibly ill man still recuperating from a liver transplant operation. It was not enough, however, and despite Lenihan outpolling his rivals on the first count, Currie's transfers ensured Robinson's triumph.

Robinson's election campaign proved that a door-to-door campaign, combined with generous media coverage, could challenge the more established political dynasties. So successful was Robinson's presidency considered to be that all parties and ambitious independents sought to emulate the 'model'. Whereas in 1990 Mary Robinson had been the first female candidate ever for the presidency, the 1997 contest saw four women seeking the office (a solitary male candidate ran as an independent and came last). Despite a dirty campaign during which her critics charged her with being 'soft on Sinn Féin' (encapsulated by Eoghan Harris, the *Sunday Independent* columnist and manager of Derek Nally's presidential campaign, who referred to her as a 'tribal time bomb'), Mary McAleese won easily, becoming in the process the first president from Northern Ireland.

The presidency lapsed back into the bad old ways when, in 2004, all the major parties conspired to avoid a contest. However, the 2011 election witnessed a return to competition with an unprecedented seven candidates who debated on the national airwaves on eight occasions (also a record) over a 25 day period. Cognisant that the constitution denied presidents from exercising real power, prospective candidates could not advocate policies as such, which reduced the contest to one between personalities. Most candidates had an Achilles Heel that the media targeted. It is Seán Gallagher's candidacy, however, that best illustrates how glowing opinion polls and a media ambush can conspire to deny victory. Throughout the campaign, Gallagher exuded confidence, ability, focus, and determination. Consequently in the month before election day his poll ratings almost quadrupled from 11% to 40% and as polling day beckoned, Gallagher's lead over his only realistic rival, Michael D. Higgins, appeared insurmountable. His stellar performance in the polls prompted

journalists and media commentators to cast a more critical eye on Gallagher's candidacy. Though the media is legally bound to afford each candidate fair and balanced coverage Gallagher was the target of more hostile questions than any of his rivals during the final TV debate and an unverified tweet from a bogus twitter account was read out, which depicted him as a Fianna Fáil bagman. With a blanket ban on electioneering and campaign reporting on the verge of kicking in, Gallagher had only a day to manage the crisis. His Icarus-like performance demonstrates the dangers of peaking too early in opinion polls. Gallagher's complaints regarding the disproportionate amount of hostile questions he was subjected to in the end-of-campaign debate and the failure to authenticate the controversial tweet were ultimately upheld by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI, 2012) but this vindication did not compensate for the loss of the presidency.

From television to twitter

As early as 1958, Key (1958, 375–6) observed in the United States that 'the doorbell ringers have lost their function of mobilising the vote to the public relations experts'. The ascendancy of media advisers came later to Ireland. As long-time Fianna Fáil minister, Kevin Boland (1989, 6), reflected:

> Consultation with the grassroots was, of course, an antediluvian practice outdated by the advent of the Think Tank. The organisation had been brought up to date, rationalised. There was a new tier of professionally qualified advisers available now, financed by the contributions of big business, which believed in requiting services rendered. The role of voluntary workers 'on the ground' was simplified. They were for putting up posters, carrying out the

> National Collection which was a public relations exercise rather than a significant source of revenue, and for comprising awe-struck audiences to hear the words of wisdom relayed to them from the Think Tank via the local deputy.

With the advent of television came criticisms that politics had been trivialised as the tyranny of the soundbite ruled supreme. Political life became more about choreography. Ard-fheiseanna [party conferences], now televised, are more for public consumption than the party faithful, who view them as social occasions. In these circumstances, strict discipline is expected and motions are carefully monitored lest they alienate the viewing public. Inevitably, the intellectual calibre of debates has greatly declined. Moreover, party tasks – particularly at elections – are increasingly remunerative.

Ireland had to wait until the early 1980s for election debates on national television. Ever since the famous Nixon–Kennedy debate in 1960, analysts have attempted to assess the influence of election debates in influencing voters in consolidated democracies. Fresh from his fact-finding mission to the US, Fianna Fail's party secretary, the young Séamus Brennan, returned to Ireland armed with an array of new ideas including TV ads, campaign battlebuses and billboards, and persuaded Jack Lynch to publicly challenge Liam Cosgrave to a TV election debate (Lahiffe, 2009, 7–8). Cosgrave's dismissal of the offer as a gimmick only assisted his rival and was true to form. Lynch and Cosgrave represented two very different styles of political communication and as Olivia O'Leary (2006, 11) has pointed out:

> Lynch . . . suited an age which was moving away from megaphones and chapel-gate meetings. Ireland's public debate now happened on the national television service which had expanded and moved from black and white to colour, and people had got used to the shorter, feel-good messages of commercial advertising. Lynch's avuncular, pipe-smoking presence suited the more intimate atmosphere of a television studio. People watching from their armchairs at home felt reassured . . . Cosgrave's bristly moustache and his stiff military bearing looked out of place on television. He was uneasy with the informal style of television interviewing and refused to allow any intrusion into his private life. He avoided the limelight as much as he could and let the many stars in his cabinet shine instead. He belonged to another age.

Their successors as leaders of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, Charles Haughey and Garret FitzGerald, did not immediately agree to a TV debate and during their first contest in June 1981 there was no direct one-to-one confrontation but rather a panel of journalists interrogated the three main party leaders. Ireland had to wait until February 1982 for its first television showdown. Two days before election-day the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael leaders participated for the first time in a live television debate moderated by 'Today Tonight' host, Brian Farrell (RTÉ, 1982). A TV debate between FitzGerald and Haughey was also the highlight of the November 1982 election campaign. Haughey, the more aggressive on the night, emphasised that, unlike Fine Gael, his government had produced an economic plan and he stressed the impossibility of any party but his securing an overall majority and the dangers of unstable government. FitzGerald contrasted the unity of his own party to the well-known internal dissensions within Fianna Fáil. Though no clear victor emerged from

the debate FitzGerald was able to form a Fine Gael – Labour Party coalition government after election-day.

During the 1997 election, the format of TV debates had to adapt to the slow proliferation of parties. The governing ‘rainbow coalition’ of Fine Gael, Labour and Democratic Left was being challenged by a rival Fianna Fáil – Progressive Democrats combination though there was considerable disparities in party strength and their places in opinion polls. Consequently, the new Fianna Fáil leader, Bertie Ahern, debated with John Bruton in what might be dubbed as the Taoiseach debate while the PD leader Mary Harney took on Dick Spring in a contest between prospective Tánaistí. The Democratic Left leader, Proinsias de Rossa, was left with no one to debate and so was instead interviewed by RTÉ presenter Eamonn Lawlor.

Despite becoming an integral part of election campaigns, securing large audiences and attracting extensive media analyses, TV debates have never become the game-changers that many believed they might or can be. The media consensus that Michael Noonan had demolished Bertie Ahern in the 2002 debate (the analysis on RTÉ alternately described Ahern as ‘stuttering’, ’stumbling’, ‘nervous’, ‘in flight’, ‘uncomfortable’, ’on the backfoot’, ‘on the ropes’, and ‘wide-eyed with terror’) did not reflect the election result; Fine Gael reached an historic low while Ahern led Fianna Fáil to within a whisker of an overall majority (RTÉ, 2002). The 2007 debate between Bertie Ahern and Enda Kenny favoured the incumbent while a debate for the leaders of the smaller parties produced some memorable one liners as when Labour’s Pat Rabbitte depicted the PD’s Michael McDowell as a ‘menopausal Paris Hilton . . . an inveterate attention-seeker’ and McDowell’s responded that the opposition was

composed of ‘the left (Labour), the hard left (Sinn Féin) and the leftovers (Greens)’ (*Irish Examiner*, 2007). The 2011 election produced two firsts. Apart from the debate between the leaders of the two main parties, Micheál Martin and Enda Kenny, there was also a five way debate including the leaders of the Labour Party, Sinn Féin and the Green Party. And on TG4 Martin, Kenny and Gilmore conducted the first TV election debate exclusively through the medium of the Irish language.

In recent years, Facebook and Twitter have become core communication platforms for politicians and their parties. According to one survey of 48 TDs conducted shortly before the February 2011 general election less than one third (32%) had used social networking tools during the 2007 election but over three quarters (77%) would do so during the 2011 contest. Facebook was the most popular social media tool for the TDs (86%) with Twitter lagging some distance behind (42%). While a substantial majority (60%) of those politicians surveyed maintained that door-to-door canvassing and face-to-face communication were the most important means of communication during an election campaign, almost nine out of ten (88%) believed that social media is changing the dynamics of politics and communication with voters, and almost all believed they would be using these media (blogs, YouTube) more frequently and expansively in the future (O’Keefe and Cunningham, 2010). There was certainly no correlation between the numbers of followers of the Twitter accounts of politicians or the volume of Tweets sent, with the number of votes garnered on polling day 2011. For one thing, followers are not geographically concentrated; ultimately, it is not the number of supporters globally but, rather, in one’s constituency that carries a candidate into office. Moreover, to follow a candidate on Twitter does not necessarily imply an endorsement of their political views. Prior to the 2011 general election, the

Green Party was unique in that all six of its TDs had Twitter accounts compared to 75% of Labour TDs, 37% of Fine Gael TDs and a mere 27% of Fianna Fáil TDs (siliconrepublic.com, 2010). The minister for communications, energy and natural resources, Eamon Ryan of the Green Party, had the most followers of any Oireachtas member and those following Green Party leader John Gormley outnumbered those of the then Taoiseach-apparent, Enda Kenny, who tweeted daily as election day approached. History records, however, that the Green Party was annihilated in election 2011, losing its entire parliamentary representation in the process, while Enda Kenny led Fine Gael to an historic victory, attaining more seats for his party than at any time in its 80 year history.

The 2011 election was the first to involve Twitter and it is quite clear that the use of this social medium was very much in transition. On the eve of the 2011 election, only 38% of TDs (63 out of 166) had Twitter accounts. Within a year of the February 2011 election, however, this number had risen to 139 (84%) and at the time of writing (June 2013) the figure is 147 (88.55%). Fine Gael now has the highest percentage of TDs on Twitter (93%) followed by the Labour Party (82%) and Sinn Féin (64%) with Fianna Fáil still lagging (58%), in particular when compared to independent TDs and those of the smaller parties, 89% of whom have Twitter accounts. Sometimes it is the man and not the message that has attracted followers. In February 2012, Taoiseach Enda Kenny had the highest number of followers despite not having tweeted since July 2011, while the minister for education, Ruairí Quinn, ranked 15th in terms of followers despite never having tweeted (Murray Consultants, 2012b).

While it is too early in the evolution of these types of social media to determine the influence they will exert during elections, a few trends are already evident. While there are four times as many Facebook accounts in Ireland as those for Twitter (approximately 2 million compared to 500,000) the number of Facebook and Twitter accounts attached to TDs is relatively even (297,000 v. 234,000), suggesting that Twitter is more politicised (candidate.ie, 2012b) and, therefore, likely to be of greater importance in forthcoming elections. This is underlined by the fact that, as of the end of 2012, the number of individuals following the flagship accounts of the political parties was over 25% greater on Twitter than on Facebook (candidate.ie, 2012c). Facebook is more suited to detailed press releases, dissemination of photos and videos, whereas Twitter has a more immediate news value, its terseness more in tune with the age of the soundbite. Smaller and challenging parties along with independents have, initially at least, shown most enthusiasm and success in embracing new media (Candidate.ie, 2012a, 2012c) but this edge is already being eroded as the bigger and more established parties direct their assistants to manage Facebook and Twitter accounts as part and parcel of the routine political activity of disseminating policies, publicising achievements and criticising opponents. However, new social media will most likely complement rather than replace traditional election tactics, which in the Irish context rely very much on face-to-face encounters.

Conclusion

The passing of the revolutionary elite combined with technological advances has ensured that the way in which politicians communicate with the electorate has evolved over the decades. Despite the ascendancy of the media as a means of communicating political messages during election campaigns, and irrespective of the

fact that journalists and broadcasters generally prefer gladiatorial, adversarial contests, election campaigns today are much less confrontational than they were during the early decades of the state. The rival eve-of-election monster meetings have given way to TV debates though these have never been decisive. Opinion polls, once considered akin to political astrology, now play a major role in framing debates and, along with focus groups, help parties fine-tune and tweak their policies. The door-to-door, house-to-house style of campaigning has not died however. All indications are that voters still need to feel they 'know' a politician before voting for them and this can only be satisfied by the candidate making all efforts to come to the voter be they in shopping malls, on the street, or at home. Social media will undoubtedly make greater inroads in coming elections. It will, however, most likely complement rather than replace the existing emphasis on personal interaction. As a people living in a small country, with multi-member constituencies and an electoral system that encourages clientalism while placing a high premium on 'preferences', Irish voters are not quite ready for an exclusively virtual relationship with their political representatives.

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