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Minor Parties in Irish Political Life, 1922-1989

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Abstract: This article examines the role in Irish politics of parties other than the three "permanent" ones with a view to filling a recognised gap in political research. Minor parties are grouped into four loose categories on the basis of comparative studies of party systems: nationalist, agrarian, left-wing and right-wing parties. Following a profile over a 67-year period, the characteristics of minor parties are examined. The most important category in electoral terms, that of agrarian parties, consists mainly of parties that sought to mobilise the electorate on a new, alternative political issue. Nationalist and left-wing parties, by contrast, typically sought to challenge existing parties on traditional issues, alleging that the latter had deserted the causes they had originally claimed to serve. The right-wing category consists of parties which related in more diverse ways to the established party system: some sought to mobilise voters on alternative political issues, some sought to publicise a cause even if there was little prospect of electoral success (a type of motivation also to be found in the nationalist and left-wing categories) and some constituted essentially machinery of convenience for individuals.

I INTRODUCTION

The sudden entrance onto the Irish political stage of the Progressive Democratic Party in 1987 and its more recent role in altering the pattern of Irish government formation draw attention to the series of minor political groups which have appeared at crucial periods in the state's history and many of which have, at least temporarily, held a pivotal position. As most published research into Irish political parties to date has focused on the fortunes of the country's three major or "permanent" parties, it is the object of this article to attempt to fill part of the gap that remains by documenting the appearance and decline of minor parties since 1922 and by attempting to interpret them within the more general framework of the comparative study of political parties. As the more important of these parties have already been described in some detail (Manning, 1972, pp. 85-109; Gallagher, 1985, pp. 93-120),

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the emphasis here will be shifted deliberately in the direction of the lesser-known minor parties. This shift in focus may also be seen as a response to a recent criticism of the neglect of minor parties in the literature of comparative politics (Pedersen, 1982).

Two points of qualification need to be made. In the first place, detailed primary research into individual minor parties, a precondition of any analytical study that attempts to generalise, has been carried out only to a limited extent. This article consequently represents a descriptive study of a preliminary character rather than a theoretical one based on extensive empirical research. Secondly, in the absence of fully accurate data on elections for the period before 1948 and of detailed, reliable summaries for most of the subsequent period, data given in the tables must not be taken as definitive. No revision would be likely, however, to alter significantly the general pattern that emerges.

II DEFINITION AND CLASSIFICATION

In defining the upper boundary of the "minor party" category a simple, arbitrary decision has been made. The Labour Party has been excluded, together with Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, to leave a group which corresponds with what have been called "ephemeral minority parties" (Chubb, 1974, p. 74). The other boundary is less clearcut: it is not always obvious how a minor party is to be distinguished from a group of independents. Following the conceptual framework of the most significant theoretical study of minor parties, a minor party has been taken as "an organisation – however loosely or strongly organised – which either presents or nominates candidates for public elections, or which, at least, has the declared intention to do so" (Pedersen, 1982, p. 5). Where only one candidate went forward, the existence of a political party has been assumed only when there is evidence of the existence of an organisation with *de facto* power to sanction or to veto electoral candidacies, thus giving grounds for the inclusion of certain pressure groups in this category. It should be noted that this usage conforms with that in the definitive account of British minor parties (Craig, 1975, p. vii). For the period since 1963 it is in general possible to operationalise this definition by reference to a legal criterion: whether a party has been registered as such with the Registrar of Political Parties. Only groups that satisfy the Registrar that they are *bona fide* political parties may register under the terms of the 1963 Electoral Act, and candidates of these groups alone are permitted to use a party label on the ballot paper. A major disadvantage to use of this criterion is that it may result in the exclusion of certain significant groups. Sinn Fein, which has functioned as a political party for some years but which sought registration only before the 1987 election, is the most striking example.

An overview of the performance of minor parties at general elections over

time is given in Figure 1, which compares their position with that of the three major parties and with that of a distinctively Irish phenomenon, the set of independent candidates. It will be seen that minor parties have tended to flourish in three periods: in the 1920s (fading out in the 1930s), in the 1940s (declining in the 1950s and fading out in the 1960s) and, most recently, in the later 1980s. The combined strength of minor parties and independents has been inversely related, of course, to that of the three major parties. The latter reached its lowest ebb (66.1 per cent) in June 1927, peaked at 95.3 per cent in 1938, dropped to its next trough of 70.4 per cent in 1948 and then rose until 1965, when it reached its highest-ever level of 97.1 per cent. In 1987 it dropped sharply to a low point of 77.8 per cent. The collective electoral record of minor parties has fluctuated to a similar extent, unlike that of independents, whose share of the poll has remained relatively stable.

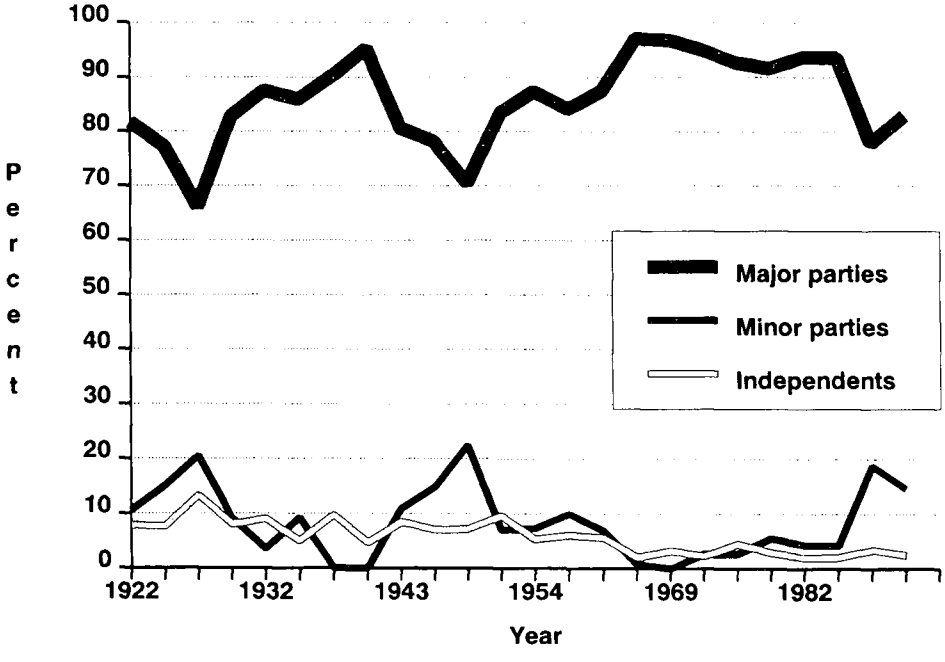

Figure 1: *Major Parties, Minor Parties and Independents, 1922-1989*

Minor parties, like political parties in general, may be examined from a number of perspectives. The major recent work of synthesis on political parties in western democracies suggests four domains of analysis, which correspond to four important functions of parties: the *ideological*, *organisational* and *electoral* levels, and the level of *political power* (von Beyme, 1985, p. 13). In this preliminary presentation, minor parties will be classified in ideological terms, and some brief remarks will be made in the concluding section about the other three domains.

The most ambitious attempt at classification of political parties in Europe in ideological terms, that is along the lines of the conflict issues that have divided them, has been that of Lipset and Rokkan.[1] Although its usefulness diminishes on the eastern and western peripheries of Europe, their model will be used here as a framework for the description of Irish minor parties. To oversimplify, they suggest that party systems are determined by political rivalries and alliances generated by four types of conflict:

(1) economic conflict between owners and workers, which tends to be reflected in a conservative-socialist division;
(2) economic conflict between consumers and producers, reflected in an urban-rural division;
(3) cultural conflict between church and state, reflected typically in a liberal-christian democratic division; and
(4) conflict between a culturally dominant centre and a subordinate periphery, reflected in a centralist-regionalist division.

While at least eight distinctive, one-issue parties might thus exist, overlapping interests normally serve to reduce this number considerably; and it may be reduced further in countries where the salience of one or more of the four issues is low. In Ireland, for instance, the third issue has been of relatively little party political significance, at least until recently. Each of the other three is associated, however, with particular types of party. The first kind of conflict divides what might, for want of a better term, be described as *right-wing parties* from *left-wing parties*. In the case of the second issue, only one pole has been represented by distinctive political groups, namely *agrarian parties*. The fourth type of conflict has been of unusual significance in Ireland: the centre-periphery cleavage may more profitably be seen as one separating Britain from Ireland before 1922, with important political consequences thereafter, rather than as a source of division within the 26 counties of Southern Ireland.[2] Again, only one pole has been politically significant (but enormously

1. See Lipset and Rokkan, 1967 and Rokkan, 1970. For recent re-interpretations of European party political groupings in terms of this model, see Seiler, 1980 and von Beyme, 1985, pp. 29-158.

2. For discussion of the application of these concepts to Ireland, see Garvin, 1974; Garvin, 1981, pp. 209-217; Murphy, 1982, pp. 40-51; Sinnott, 1984, pp. 301-304 and Coakley, 1986.

so) since 1922: that which has generated *nationalist parties*.

A second question about ideological orientation is necessary in the case of minor parties, some of which, as mentioned above, only barely fall within the definition of political party: the manner in which such parties relate to the established ones. Two types of response have recently been given in the case of "new" parties, which share many of the characteristics of the minor parties that are discussed here. The first suggests a distinction between "contender parties", which perceive some prospect of success from electoral competition, and "promoter parties", which are primarily concerned with drawing attention to a particular issue or cause but which may recognise the unlikelihood of ever having a significant electoral impact (Harmel and Robertson, 1985, pp. 517-518). The second distinguishes between "mobilising parties", which seek to mobilise political identities around a new cleavage or a redefinition of an existing cleavage, and "challenging parties", which compete with established parties on the basis of existing cleavages; residual parties fall into the "personal vehicle" category, amounting essentially to machinery of convenience for individuals (Rochon, 1985, pp. 421, 425-426).

As the three categories in the latter classification all appear to belong to the contender party type identified in the former, it is possible to distinguish between four types of new party in terms of their relationship to the existing party system:

- *mobilising parties*, which locate themselves by reference to a new issue or to a new position in respect of an existing issue;
- *challenging parties*, which seek to replace existing parties on grounds of their alleged failure to fulfil their commitments;
- *promoter parties*, which are little concerned with electoral success but wish to publicise an issue or signal the existence of a cause; and
- *personal vehicle parties*, which serve the ends of an individual.

Before examining parties belonging to the major "spiritual families" in the next four sections, a summary of their electoral performance is presented in Table 1. (In this and subsequent tables, only parties which contested general elections to the Dail are mentioned; other parties mentioned in the text contested other types of elections only, or did not contest any elections.) In categorising the parties, two types of difficulty presented themselves. In the first place, a few insignificant parties which lacked clearly defined policies have been grouped with the "right-wing and residual" category. Secondly, in the case of parties that might be placed in more than one category the allocation has generally been made on genealogical rather than ideological grounds. There are three exceptions. While the Workers' Party is clearly "left-wing" rather than nationalist today, its origin puts it in the latter category; it has

been assumed here, however, that its character changed fundamentally in the 1970s and it has been classified with its post-1970 Sinn Fein predecessor as "left-wing". Similarly, the Progressive Democrats' orientation is primarily neo-conservative, although they owed their origin superficially to divisions within Fianna Fail in relation to policy on Northern Ireland; they have been placed in the "right-wing" category. Finally, although the momentum behind the formation of the National Progressive Democratic Party in 1958 came largely from former members of the nationalist Clann na Poblachta, the latter cannot be seen as its parent and it has been placed in the "left-wing" category.

Table 1: *Number of Valid Votes Secured by Minor Parties at General Elections 1922-1989, by Type of Party*

Year	*Nationalist Parties*	*Agrarian Parties*	*Left-Wing Parties*	*Right-Wing and Residual Parties*	*All Minor Parties*		
					Total Votes	*%*	*No. of Parties*
1922	–	48,718	–	17,159	65,877	10.5	3
1923	–	134,915	3,848	20,709	159,472	15.1	10
1927 (Jun)	46,963	101,955	–	86,219	235,137	20.5	6
1927 (Sep)	–	74,520	12,473	19,822	106,815	9.1	4
1932	–	26,436	4,947	–	31,383	2.5	3
1933	–	126,906	–	–	126,906	9.2	1
1937	–	–	–	–	–	–	0
1938	–	–	–	–	–	–	0
1943	3,892	134,374	–	7,516	145,782	10.9	4
1944	–	131,243	32,727	15,665	179,635	14.9	4
1948	174,823	73,813	34,015	15,016	297,667	22.5	5
1951	54,210	38,872	295	–	93,377	7.0	3
1954	53,059	41,249	375	2,312	96,995	7.3	6
1957	86,272	28,905	–	6,619	121,796	9.9	5
1961	49,566	17,693	11,767	1,132	80,158	6.9	6
1965	9,427	–	183	–	9,610	0.8	2
1969	–	–	242	–	242	0.0	1
1973	20,689	–	15,832	–	36,521	2.7	4
1977	14,779	–	27,753	–	42,532	2.7	4
1981	56,349	–	37,597	–	93,946	5.5	6
1982 (Feb)	32,355	–	38,550	–	70,905	4.3	5
1982 (Nov)	8,395	–	62,159	–	70,544	4.2	5
1987	40,653	–	75,422	217,742	333,817	18.8	7
1989	26,964	–	92,435	122,806	242,205	14.6	8

Table 1 indicates clearly the great importance of agrarian parties in the past: even though no agrarian party has contested an election since 1961, the aggregate vote for parties of this type for the period under consideration (980,000) greatly exceeds the aggregate vote for all other types of minor party at general elections. Next in order of electoral popularity come the nationalist (678,000), right-wing (533,000) and left-wing (451,000) minor parties.

III THE NATIONALIST PARTIES

The prevalence of the nationalist issue in Ireland makes the country a strange phenomenon in Western Europe, where nationalist or separatist parties, where they exist, tend to be confined to the peripheries of political life. In Ireland the reverse is the case: it would not be too gross an exaggeration to suggest that the history of the Irish party system is, in large measure, the history of Sinn Fein and of its offshoots. This is partly because of the roots of the two major parties in the Sinn Fein party of 1905-1922 and partly because of the number of minor parties which have been generated by the nationalist issue. Such parties have tended to fall into two main types: those (usually IRA-backed) seeking electoral support for "The Republic" established in 1919 and denying the legitimacy of the institutions of the state, and those seeking to provide a constitutional alternative to the major parties, following on their alleged betrayal of the nationalist ideals for which they claimed to stand.[3] They correspond respectively with the promoter and challenging types, and their performance at general elections is summarised in Table 2.

Source: Calculated from *The Irish Times* (1922-1944) and from official election returns (1948-1989), supplemented by data from an unpublished compilation by Brian Mercer Walker of election results for the 1921-1944 period and from other sources, including Gallagher (1979a) and information supplied by Michael Gallagher. It should be noted that, especially for earlier elections, sources sometimes disagree on the affiliation of candidates and on numbers of first preference votes. Two inaccurately-recorded attributions of party affiliation in the official election returns have been corrected.

3. The distinction between these two groups is quite sharp: while parties in the former category have altogether rejected established institutions of the state, to the extent of refusing to take their seats in the Dail if elected, parties in the latter category have sought to attain their objectives of territorial unity and independence by working within the existing constitutional framework. All of the former and most of the latter described themselves as "Republican"; for the former, this meant that allegiance was given not to the system of government set up in 1922 but to the "Republic" of 1919, in theory an entirely independent state embracing the whole island but never in existence in practice. The sole legitimate government of the "Republic" eventually came to rest in the hands of the Army Council of the IRA. Because of the eccentric connotations of the word "republican" in Ireland (referring to matters of territory rather than to forms of government), parties so described have here been labelled "nationalist", a word that comes closer to defining their primary concern.

Table 2: *Strength of Nationalist Parties at General Elections, 1927-1989*

Party	*Election*	*Candidates*	*Seats*	*Votes* *Number*	*%*
Sinn Fein	1927 (Jun)	15	5	41,436	3.6
	1954	2	–	1,990	0.1
	1957	19	4	65,640	5.3
	1961	21	–	36,396	3.1
*H-Blocks group	1981	9	2	42,803	2.5
*Sinn Fein ("Provisional")	1982 (Feb)	7	–	16,894	1.0
Sinn Fein ("Provisional")	1987	27	–	32,933	1.9
	1989	14	–	20,003	1.2
Clann Eireann	1927 (Jun)	8	–	5,527	0.5
Coras na Poblachta	1943	5	–	3,892	0.3
Clann na Poblachta	1948	93	10	174,823	13.2
	1951	26	2	54,210	4.1
	1954	20	3	51,069	3.8
	1957	12	1	20,632	1.7
	1961	5	1	13,170	1.1
	1965	4	1	9,427	0.8
Aontacht Eireann	1973	13	–	12,321	0.9
*Independent Fianna Fail	1973	1	1	8,368	0.6
	1977	2	1	13,824	0.9
	1981	2	1	13,546	0.8
	1982 (Feb)	3	1	12,745	0.8
	1982 (Nov)	1	1	7,997	0.5
	1987	1	1	7,720	0.4
	1989	1	1	6,961	0.4
Irish Republican Socialist	1977	1	–	955	0.1
Party	1982 (Feb)	6	–	2,716	0.2
	1982 (Nov)	1	–	398	0.0

Source: As for Table 1.
Note: *Not officially registered as a political party.

On the orthodox ("non-constitutional" or abstentionist) side the most significant party has been *Sinn Fein*. This party has been to the nationalist fringe what the Communist Party has been to the left fringe: the only party with a more or less continuous existence since the formation of the state, a group whose confidence in its own ideological purity has sustained it through the most devastating electoral reverses, secure in the belief that the values it represents are imperishable. In the so-called "Third Sinn Fein" were collected all the major opponents of the Treaty; this was the group from which de Valera

seceded in March 1926, following his failure to win it over to a more pragmatic attitude to Free State institutions.[4] De Valera's new Fianna Fail party quickly overshadowed the Sinn Fein rump, which, at the time of the split, was still supported by a majority of anti-Treaty TDs. In the June 1927 election only 5 of the party's 15 candidates were returned, against 44 of Fianna Fail's 87 candidates, and the party did not contest any further elections until the 1950s, carrying on at times little more than a paper existence.

During this period of electoral reticence, Sinn Fein kept aloof from other Republican activities. The link between the IRA and Sinn Fein had been severed in 1925 and the two organisations frequently followed conflicting policies over the next two decades. A decision of the IRA's Army Council in 1949 to rescind the ban on members joining political parties left the way open for IRA colonisation of Sinn Fein and resulted in the reversion of the party to its best-known role: that of political arm to a paramilitary force (Bell, 1979, pp. 247-248). The party enjoyed some success in the 1957 election when 4 of its candidates were returned on a traditional abstentionist platform. This temporary success coincided with the IRA's border campaign (1956-1962), but the party's defeat at the polls in 1961 was the prelude to a period of political passivity.

A period of political turmoil for Republicans began in the late 1960s. Following the sectarian violence of the Summer of 1969 in Northern Ireland a split took place within the Republican movement. The superficial issue was that of recognition of the parliaments in Dublin, Belfast and Westminster: first the IRA Convention split in December 1969, then the Sinn Fein Ard-Fheis followed suit in January 1970. In each case those supporting a more pragmatic approach constituted a majority and retained control of the political and military organisations; the fundamentalists withdrew to establish their own Provisional Army Council of the IRA and Caretaker Executive of Sinn Fein, claiming to represent the authentic voice of Republicanism, unsullied by preoccupation with social issues. That economic policy as well as constitutional differences were at stake is clear from the more pronounced commitment of "Official" Sinn Fein to socialist ideals, symbolised in particular by its adoption of the name *Sinn Fein The Workers' Party* in 1977 and its dropping of the "Sinn Fein" portion in 1982 (see Rooney, 1984). This also marked a further shift away from the nationalist position. The party had already shed much of its remaining nationalist support: when in December 1974 it finally decided to abandon the abstentionist policy a secessionist group established

4. The term *Third Sinn Fein* has been coined to describe the anti-Treaty party which organised in 1923 under the label Sinn Fein, in contradistinction to the *First Sinn Fein* (1908-1917), whose object was an independent Ireland linked to Britain only by the crown, and the *Second Sinn Fein* (1917-1922), a broad nationalist front (Pyne, 1969; Pyne, 1970).

the *Irish Republican Socialist Party*, alleging that the parent party had become merely reformist. By the 1980s the Workers' Party's rejection of traditional nationalism had become so clear that it was no longer possible to place it in the same category as the other nationalist parties.

The leftward reorientation of Official Sinn Fein and of its Workers' Party successor represented not merely an attempt to redefine its identity by reference to the left-wing rather than the nationalist cleavage; it also represented a shift away from promoter party to challenging party status, a shift which threatened the electoral basis of the Labour Party and the influence of the tiny Communist Party in the international Communist movement. By contrast, *Provisional Sinn Fein* retains its promoter party status in the South, despite a more unambiguous role as challenger to the SDLP in Northern Ireland. This may be seen in the 1981 general election, which a group of candidates contested on an abstentionist, "H-Block" platform, securing the return of two TDs. The main organisations behind this initiative were Provisional Sinn Fein and the Irish Republican Socialist Party, but, following the end of the bitter Republican hunger strike in Northern Ireland, the two parties contested the February 1982 election under their own names, though only the latter was registered officially. Sinn Fein's decision in November 1986 that any candidates elected to the Dail should take their seats might be seen as representing movement towards challenging party status; but it provoked an inevitable split, when conservative dissidents, true to the old abstentionist traditions of the party, broke away to form *Republican Sinn Fein*.

During the period when the links between the IRA and Sinn Fein were in abeyance (1925-1949), the former made some tentative attempts to put forward a political party of its own. The initiative in this respect was usually taken by the left, the resulting parties broadening their political focus by adopting an economic and social programme. Examples of such efforts were *Comhairle na Poblachta* (1929) and *Saor Eire* (1931). The third party directly sponsored by the IRA was more traditional, emphasising abstentionist Republicanism rather than socio-economic matters: this was *Cumann Poblachta na hEireann* (1936). The most promising of all Republican ventures of the period, the *Republican Congress*, lacked IRA blessing but was supported by left-wing elements in the IRA. Founded in 1934, it sought to act as an umbrella organisation for socialist republican groups but succeeded in winning the support only of the Communist Party and faded out in 1935-36. In common with the three IRA-supported parties, it did not contest any general election, but, as in the case of Cumann Poblachta na hEireann, it contested the 1936 local elections in Dublin, polling poorly (Coogan, 1980, pp. 107-116).

The second type of Republican party has been the challenging type, and has sought to fill a perceived gap caused by the desertion by the two major

parties of the ideal of a united Irish republic. Such parties have constituted reactions against Cumann na nGaedheal's pragmatism in the 1920s and against Fianna Fail's from the 1940s onwards. The initial polarisation of pro- and anti-Treaty forces in 1922 related superficially to a difference over strategy rather than over long-term objectives: whether or not the Treaty could constitute a structure on which progress towards a 32-county republic could be based. Inevitably, however, it came quickly to coincide with a perceptible difference over the ultimate goal itself: whether partitioned Free State status could realistically be exchanged for united Republican status, or, even, whether such a change was desirable. The coincidence between these differences was not perfect, particularly on the pro-Treaty side, where several TDs quickly became disillusioned with the Cumann na nGaedheal government's increasingly unreserved defence of the Treaty.

The first split was precipitated by the army mutiny of 1924, when a section of the army leadership issued an ultimatum demanding speedy Government action to attain the Republic. Although the mutiny was easily crushed, the Minister for Industry and Commerce and 8 other TDs resigned from Cumann na nGaedheal in protest at the Government's handling of the matter, and late in 1924 formed their own *National Group* in the Dail.[5] This party quickly opted out of political life: all of its TDs resigned their seats in October 1924 and only 1 contested the resulting by-elections (unsuccessfully). The other splinter-group from Cumann na nGaedheal was equally unsuccessful. This had its origin in a reaction against the Government's acceptance of the existing border with Northern Ireland following the failure of the Boundary Commission to transfer predominantly Catholic territory from Northern Ireland in 1925. The party grew out of a nucleus of three TDs who resigned from Cumann na nGaedheal. It contested the June 1927 election under the label *Clann Eireann*, but polled very poorly and disappeared.[6]

As Fianna Fail increasingly proved no more successful than Cumann na nGaedheal in bringing about Irish unity and turned its attention instead to other matters, a number of alternative electoral channels became available to those republicans reluctant to join Sinn Fein and the IRA in the political wilderness. First a small party, *Coras na Poblachta*, founded in 1941 by individuals dissatisfied with both the IRA and Fianna Fail, contested the 1943 election, though without success. Some of the party's members went on to assist in the foundation in 1946 of *Clann na Poblachta*, a radical republican party led by former IRA chief of staff Sean MacBride. Clann na Poblachta's

5. See O'Sullivan, 1940, p. 142. The National Group had its own short-lived organ, *The Nation*.

6. One observer in an independent weekly periodical attributed the Clann's collapse to its disinterested election campaign: "Its speakers and its platforms stood for no mere party policy or party gain and boldly advised the electors to vote anti-Imperialist and worked just as much for Fianna Fail and Sinn Fein as for their own candidates", *Honesty*, 25.6.1927.

spectacular showing in the 1948 election proved as ephemeral as the best efforts of other minor parties: though it participated in the first Inter-Party Government (1948-51), it was racked by internal disputes and never recovered from its extremely weak performance in the 1951 election.

Another group which sought to provide a "constitutional republican" alternative to Fianna Fail was *Aontacht Eireann*, inaugurated in 1971. The formation of this party was precipitated by the "Arms Crisis" of 1970 and by the Fianna Fail Government's alleged reluctance to pursue an activist policy in relation to Northern Ireland, which provoked Local Government Minister Kevin Boland to resign from the Government and later to establish the new party. The party became moribund after its failure in the 1973 general election, though it remained on the register of political parties until 1984. A second challenging group has been of some regional electoral significance, though not registered as a political party. Following his dismissal from the Government in 1970, Neal Blaney continued to contest Dail elections successfully, won a seat in the European Parliament and supported a slate of candidates in local elections. His use of the name *Independent Fianna Fail* to describe this group reflects, however, his desire to minimise his differences with Fianna Fail, rather than representing an effort at the establishment of an entirely independent political party.

IV THE AGRARIAN PARTIES

Where agrarian parties have existed in Western Europe, as in Scandinavia and Switzerland, they have fallen into a fairly characteristic mould. They tend to represent the interests of larger farmers, concentrating on such issues as prices of farm products and the implications of tariff barriers; cottiers, agricultural labourers and, in some instances, poorer farmers tend to give their support to Labour or Socialist parties rather than to agrarian ones. Unable to obtain the support even of all of the agricultural work-force, and in a context where the proportion of the population engaged in agriculture has been declining steadily, agrarian parties have more recently tended to change their names (typically, to "Centre Party") in an attempt to project an image of wider electoral appeal.[7] In the short-lived democracies of Central Europe in the inter-war years, on the other hand, agrarian parties were quite different in composition and orientation: largely dependent for support on the landless rural population, the main issue of concern was land redistribution. These two radically different issues – the cleavage between the agricultural population and urban dwellers, and the cleavage *within* the agricultural population between

7. The Swedish Farmers' League, Norwegian Farmers' Party and Finnish Agrarian Union changed their names in 1957, 1959 and 1965, respectively, to Centre Party. In 1971 the Swiss Farmers', Traders' and Citizens' Party became the Swiss People's Party/Centre Democratic Union.

landed and landless groups (which cannot be located in terms of the Lipset-Rokkan paradigm) – have both been reflected in the history of Irish agrarian parties. These parties have generally been of the mobilising type; their electoral history is indicated in Table 3.

Table 3: *Strength of Agrarian Parties at General Elections, 1922-1961*

Party	*Election*	*Candidates*	*Seats*	*Votes*	
				Number	*%*
Farmers' Party	1922	13	7	48,718	7.8
	1923	64	15	127,798	12.1
	1927 (Jun)	39	11	101,955	8.9
	1927 (Sep)	20	6	74,520	6.4
	1932	7	3	26,436	2.1
National Centre Party	1933	26	11	126,906	9.2
National Democratic Party	1923	4	–	4,966	0.5
Workers' Farming Association	1923	1	–	888	0.1
Unpurchased Tenants' Association	1923	1	–	638	0.1
Evicted Tenants' Association	1923	1	–	625	0.1
Clann na Talmhan	1943	41	12	134,374	10.1
	1944	28	11	131,243	10.8
	1948	25	7	73,813	5.6
	1951	7	6	38,872	2.9
	1954	10	5	41,249	3.1
	1957	7	3	28,905	2.4
	1961	6	2	17,693	1.5

Source: As for Table 1. I am indebted to Tony Varley for information on the affiliation of Clann na Talmhan candidates in 1943.

The interests of middle class farmers were of primary concern to the Irish Farmers' Union, a federation of county Farmers' Associations which had come together during the First World War. The Union decided to intervene directly in the political forum and contested the 1922 election with a good deal of success. Its strongly pro-Treaty position caused it to ally itself with the Cumann na nGaedheal government. The nature of the economic links between Ireland and Britain led the *Farmers' Party* (as the political wing of the Union was called) to adopt a position in support of Free Trade, but there existed a strong protectionist group within the party. The conviction of the party's leaders that farmers' interests could best be served by a merger with Cumann na nGaedheal, together with internal dissensions, resulted in a decline

in both the Irish Farmers' Union and the party from 1927 on. By 1932 the party could do no more than leave it open to individual county organisations to decide whether to contest the election, and the party in effect went out of existence. The mantle was taken up by a number of independent farmer deputies, who in 1932 formed a *National Farmers' and Ratepayers' League*. In an attempt to attract the support of non-farmers, the party, anticipating by several decades the Scandinavian tactic, adopted a broader label the following year: the *National Centre Party*. The party's good showing in the 1933 election placed it in a strong bargaining position *vis-à-vis* Cumann na nGaedheal (now in opposition and in quest of partners). In a three-fold merger later in the same year, the Centre Party merged with Cumann na nGaedheal and the National Guard (a quasi-fascist group) to form Fine Gael.

While the Farmers' Party and its successors may clearly be related to the cleavage between urban and rural interests, parties representative of the conflict *within* the agricultural sector have also been in evidence. A number of small agrarian parties (certain of which might be placed in the promoter rather than the mobilising category) contested the 1923 election with a view to representing the interests specifically of deprived sections of the rural population. Among these were the *Unpurchased Tenants' Association* and the *Evicted Tenants' Association*, while a *Workers' Farming Association* contested the election in Monaghan. But perhaps the most promising representative of the smaller farmers was the *Land League of Unpurchased Tenants, Farmers and Ratepayers*, or *National Democratic Party*, as it came to be known. This party was critical of the repressive security policies of the Cumann na nGaedheal Government and took a strongly anti-Treaty stand. But it was also hostile to the Farmers' Party, which, it alleged, had been colonised by ex-Nationalist and ex-Unionist supporters. It was concerned with land distribution rather than with prices alone.[8] While the party was prepared at one stage to put forward as many as 13 candidates in the 1923 general election, only 4 were finally nominated and none was elected. The party's poor performance and disappearance in 1923 may be explained partly by the Land Act of 1923, which went far towards meeting many of the demands of the landless population by providing for completion of the land transfer process, and partly by its failure to maintain an identity distinct from that of the Farmers' Party, which tried to play down class differences in the farming community.

The longest-lived and perhaps most successful farmers' party was one whose support base lay among the small farmers of the West. *Clann na Talmhan* was founded in Athenry in 1939; its programme emphasising issues of concern to farmers in general but also some points – such as land reclamation and redistribution – which were of particular interest to the smaller farmer. Its unheralded

8. See the party's organs, *The Land* and the *National Democrat*, May-August 1923.

impact at the polls in 1943 was as spectacular as that of Clann na Poblachta in 1948, and it maintained its position in the next election. It participated in both Inter-Party Governments (1948-51 and 1954-57) but was already declining from 1948 onwards. Two of its deputies representing Munster constituencies revolted in 1951 and later helped to bring down the Government; the party's strength was thereafter confined to Connacht, where it maintained a stronghold until 1965, when it dropped out of political life.[9]

V THE LEFT-WING PARTIES

Since left-wing splinter groups have been a feature of working class politics in all West European states, their presence in Ireland comes as no surprise. They have almost all been of the challenging type, and the degree of success they enjoyed is indicated in Table 4. A universal phenomenon of the European left has been a split in the Labour or Socialist party immediately after the First World War, the occasion of which in almost all cases was the party's decision not to affiliate to the Third (Communist) International. The Irish Labour Party's position was unusual: at its 1920 congress it declined to join either the Third or the revived Second (Social Democratic) International, and this without provoking a split (Mitchell, 1974, pp. 226-227). Part of the reason for this achievement lay in the fact that many of the party's leading militants were no longer present. Larkin, fiery organiser of the country's largest and most militant union, the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU), had been in America since 1914; Connolly, the leading theoretician of the left, had been executed in 1916, and many of his more dedicated followers had chosen to wed socialism to nationalism by joining the Republican movement; while other surviving radicals found a mouthpiece in the *Socialist Party of Ireland*, an old organisation of Connolly's that had survived and that operated in association with the Labour Party. To the extent that a split occurred at all, it took place within the Socialist Party: in 1921 this group decided to affiliate to the Third International, changed its name to the *Communist Party of Ireland* and expelled some of those who opposed this course.

The electoral fortunes of orthodox (i.e. Moscow-oriented) communism have never been bright, though they flowered briefly in the 1920s following Larkin's return from the USA. Larkin found that the ITGWU was now controlled by an elite headed by William O'Brien and that he was unable to return to his former position of power. The dominant position of this union in the labour movement meant that the growing division over Larkin's role spread throughout the movement. Larkin was on the losing side, but the *Dublin*

9. The party continued to be registered as such until 1970. On its conception of its role in Irish politics, see Clann na Talmhan, 1944.

Table 4: *Strength of Labour, Socialist and Communist Parties in General Elections, 1923-1989*

Party	*Election*	*Candidates*	*Seats*	*Votes* *Number*	*%*
Dublin Trades Council	1923	4	–	3,848	0.4
"Irish Worker" League	1927 (Sep)	3	1	12,473	1.1
	1932	1	–	3,860	0.3
Revolutionary Workers' Groups	1932	2	–	1,087	0.1
Irish Workers' League	1951	1	–	295	0.0
	1954	1	–	375	0.0
	1961	1	–	277	0.0
Irish Workers' Party	1965	1	–	183	0.0
	1969	1	–	242	0.0
Communist Party of Ireland	1973	1	–	466	0.0
	1977	2	–	544	0.0
	1981	2	–	358	0.0
	1982 (Feb)	2	–	462	0.0
	1982 (Nov)	1	–	259	0.0
	1987	5	–	725	0.0
	1989	2	–	342	0.0
National Labour Party	1944	9	4	32,727	2.7
	1948	14	5	34,015	2.6
National Progressive Democratic Party	1961	3	2	11,490	1.0
Sinn Fein ("Official")	1973	10	–	15,366	1.1
Sinn Fein The Workers' Party	1977	16	–	27,209	1.7
	1981	15	1	29,561	1.7
	1982 (Feb)	15	3	38,088	2.3
Workers' Party	1982 (Nov)	20	2	54,888	3.3
	1987	29	4	67,273	3.8
	1989	23	7	82,257	5.0
Socialist Labour Party	1981	7	1	7,107	0.4
Socialist Party	1981	2	–	571	0.0
Democratic Socialist Party	1982 (Nov)	7	–	7,012	0.4
	1987	4	1	7,424	0.4
	1989	2	1	9,836	0.6

Source: As for Table 1.

Trades Council under the leadership of veteran trade unionist P.T. Daly remained faithful to him and decided, with Larkin's support, to contest the 1923 election independently of the Labour Party. The group fared poorly

and following a later quarrel between Larkin and Daly the Trades Council in 1926 sought re-affiliation with the Labour Party. The Dublin Trades Council secession has been interpreted as purely a personality clash (Mitchell, 1974, pp. 183-191); but, to the extent that it coincided with the O'Brien-Larkin conflict it had overtones of tension between reformist caution, on the one hand, and a more revolutionary approach, on the other.

The Communist Party had come out unambiguously against the Treaty but had not long survived the defeat of the Republicans in the Civil War of 1922-23. Small in membership, too weak to contest elections, it dissolved itself in 1924 on the proposal of the International that it be replaced by a more broadly-based body. Ex-party members thus joined forces with Larkin in a new venture, the *"Irish Worker" League*, an orthodox communist group centred about Larkin's newspaper, the *Irish Worker*. The League polled impressively in the September 1927 general election; Larkin was returned in Dublin North, but disqualified on the grounds that he was an undischarged bankrupt. He subsequently began to stray from the orthodox path and the League went into decline (though Larkin used it to back his candidature in the 1932 general election). Orthodox communism directed its energies instead through *Revolutionary Workers' Groups*, which were first organised in 1930. Though banned by the Cosgrave government in 1931, they put forward two candidates in Dublin in the 1932 general election, but were unable to afford this in the general election of the following year, when they implicitly supported Fianna Fail candidates.[10]

The second *Communist Party of Ireland* was organised in 1933 out of the Revolutionary Workers' Groups. Like its successors, it was more a promoter party than a challenging one, constrained by the conservatism of the Irish electorate to concentrate on keeping the red flag flying rather than on winning workers' power through the ballot box. It never contested a general election in the South, but counted as one of its major successes the active role it played in the short-lived Republican Congress movement of 1934. Like its predecessor it was an all-Ireland movement, but its Southern representation disappeared when its Dublin branch dissolved itself in 1941. Reorganisation began when in 1948 the *Irish Workers' League*, a 26-county orthodox communist group, was established. In 1962 it changed its name to the *Irish Workers' Party* but failed to secure registration as a political party under the 1963 Electoral Act and its Dail election candidates continued to be as unsuccessful as they had been under the former name. Finally, when the party re-united in 1970 with the Northern Ireland Communist Party, the third *Communist Party of Ireland*

10. On orthodox Irish Communist movements in the 1930s see Communist Party of Ireland, 1974; on the early history of Irish Communism, see Milotte, 1984 and Morrissey, 1983.

appeared. This party, too, was refused registration until on appeal the Registrar's ruling was reversed in 1975.

Not all secessions from the Labour movement were to the left. One concomitant of the decline of the Communist Party and "Irish Worker" League in the 1930s was the drift of several leading socialists – most notably of the Larkins, father and son, and of Roddy Connolly, son of the executed 1916 leader – into the Labour Party. This new blood encouraged a shift to the left in the Labour Party itself, symbolised in the acceptance of the "Workers' Republic" programme in 1936. This shift, together with the return of the Larkins, inevitably disturbed the anti-Larkinites in the ITGWU, and matters came to a head over the endorsement of the candidacy of Larkin in the general election of 1943. The ITGWU disaffiliated from the Labour Party, and 5 of the 8 Labour TDs who belonged to the union rejected the party whip and went on to form their own party in January 1944. The new party, the *National Labour Party*, campaigned in the 1944 and 1948 elections against the Labour Party, which, it alleged, had come under communist influence, but succeeded only in winning the allegiance of some Labour deputies in the South. National Labour was one of the five constituent parties of the first Inter-Party Government (1948-51) and the sharing of this experience with the parent party, together with the retirement of O'Brien and the death of Larkin, paved the way for the reunion of the two Labour parties in June 1950 (Gallagher, 1985, pp. 109-110; Lysaght, 1970, pp. 162-163).

The next significant left-wing party came closer in its origins to the radical republican Clann na Poblachta than to the Labour movement. It was formed by two prominent TDs who had been among those who broke with Clann na Poblachta in 1951 over that party's position on the celebrated "Mother and Child" issue. It was not until May 1958 that the new party, the *National Progressive Democratic Party*, was formed, with a broadly socialist programme. It merged with the Labour Party in November 1963, having succeeded in securing the return of 2 members in the 1961 election. There is one respect in which this merger contributed to a more recent split in Irish Labour: following the refusal of the Labour Party to sanction the candidacy of former National Progressive Democrat leader Noel Browne and other candidates opposed to the policy of coalition with Fine Gael in the 1977 general election, a *Socialist Labour Party* was formed with Browne as its parliamentary spokesman. A small *Socialist Party of Ireland*, founded in the 1970s, enjoyed a brief existence and contested the 1981 general election. Still more recently, independent socialist deputy Jim Kemmy formed the *Democratic Socialist Party* in 1982, a party most obviously distinguished from other parties on the left by its vehement opposition to traditional nationalism. In this it has much in common with a fugitive from the nationalist category described above, the *Workers' Party*.

VI THE RIGHT-WING AND RESIDUAL PARTIES

Parties other than those described in the last three sections have tended to take a number of different forms, and for the most part have been right-wing in orientation. These include, in the first place, mobilising parties attempting to revive two near-extinct traditions, Nationalism and Unionism, the latter the true inheritor of the conservative tradition; secondly, responses to corporatist political thought, also falling into the mobilising party category; thirdly, also in this category, an interesting Irish example of new right politics; fourthly, pressure groups seeking a more direct political voice, amounting essentially to promoter parties; fifthly, personal vehicle parties, the creations of individuals about whom they revolved; and, finally, a residual mobilising category represented by the ecologist movement. Table 5 summarises the electoral performance of the parties in this group.

The dominant strands in pre-independence Ireland, Unionism and Nationalism, tended to survive in an organisational sense, remarkably, only in Northern Ireland. What became of these traditions in the South? The small but substantial block of ex-Unionist opinion might have provided a power-base for a party representative of the Protestant minority; and the 1918 general election and 1920 local elections, while massively endorsing Sinn Fein, showed that there continued to exist a large number of nationalist voters who were not satisfied with Sinn Fein's policies. While ex-Nationalist and ex-Unionist opinion was reflected in the phenomenon of independent deputies, who flourished in the early years of the Dail, there were several attempts to channel such support into other parties.

On the ex-Unionist side, such attempts tended to take the form of businessmen's parties, which were concerned mainly with economic issues. A *Business and Professional Group* put forward 3 candidates in Dublin and 2 in Cork in 1922; 1 was elected. Dublin and Cork cities were the strongholds of the business interest, but little formal unity existed within the business community, perhaps because little was needed in so influential a group. In 1923 a group of 5 candidates contested constituences in Dublin as the *Business Men's Party*. This party was a creation of the Dublin Chamber of Commerce; it was, of course, pro-Treaty, but opposed the Government's policy of compulsory Irish for the civil service. In the economic field it advocated a policy of careful expenditure so that taxation could be reduced. Although 2 of its candidates were forced to give up the practice of open-air meetings due to intimidation from Labour Party supporters, the party succeeded in having 2 members returned. Cork business interests clustered around the *Cork Progressive Association*, which was also pro-Government, and both of whose candidates were elected in 1923. It is clear from the personnel involved and from the nature of each party's electoral appeal that the business parties tended to draw

Table 5: *Strength of Right-Wing and Residual Parties at General Elections, 1922-1989*

Party	*Election*	*Candidates*	*Seats*	*Votes* *Number*	*%*
Business and Professional Group	1922	5	1	14,542	2.3
Business Men's Party	1923	5	2	9,648	0.9
Cork Progressive Association	1923	2	2	6,588	0.6
Ratepayers' Association	1922	1	–	2,617	0.4
	1923	2	–	2,620	0.2
	1957	1	–	1,822	0.1
Town Tenants' Association	1923	2	–	1,853	0.2
	1927 (Jun)	1	–	1,012	0.1
	1927 (Sep)	1	–	832	0.1
Blind Men's Party	1927 (Jun)	2	–	1,659	0.1
Irish Housewives' Association	1957	3	–	4,797	0.4
National League	1927 (Jun)	30	8	83,548	7.3
	1927 (Sep)	6	2	18,990	1.6
Monetary Reform	1943	1	1	4,379	0.3
	1944	1	1	9,856	0.8
	1948	2	1	14,694	1.1
Ailtiri na hAiseirghe	1943	4	–	3,137	0.2
	1944	7	–	5,809	0.5
	1948	1	–	322	0.0
Young Ireland	1954	2	–	882	0.1
National Action	1954	1	–	1,430	0.1
Christian Democatic Party	1961	1	–	1,132	0.1
Green Alliance	1987	9	–	7,159	0.4
Green Party	1989	11	1	24,827	1.5
Progressive Democratic Party	1987	51	14	210,583	11.8
	1989	35	6	91,013	5.5
*Army Wives Group	1989	3	–	6,966	0.4

Source: As for Table 1.
Note: *Not registered as a political party.

strong support from the Protestant community.[11] After 1927 Southern Protestants tended to be found among the supporters of Cumann na nGaedheal, but in the 3 Ulster counties Protestant independent candidates continued to contest elections up to the 1950s.

The first and only significant attempt to mobilise ex-Nationalist opinion centred around the *National League*, founded in 1926 by Captain Willie

11. See, for instance, reports on meetings of the Cork Progressive Association and on the Businessmen's Party, *The Irish Times*, 20.7.1923 and later dates.

Redmond, independent TD in Waterford and son of John Redmond, leader of the Nationalist Party from 1900 to 1918. While in its policies it sought to appeal to such diverse groups as town tenants, publicans and ex-servicemen, all of whom were for one reason or another alienated from the Government, its main political plank was its stated desire to move the Irish people away from Civil War politics, and to offer itself as an alternative to the sterility of the Fianna Fail-Cumann na nGaedheal confrontation. In this it anticipated the ambition of many subsequent conservative parties, though it proved to be of more appeal to the electorate than most of these. It polled sufficiently well in the June 1927 election to win 8 seats and to be in a position, with the Labour Party, to threaten the Government's parliamentary position. It was precisely this situation that caused the Government to call another election in September 1927, and in this the National League's brief period of success was brought to a close. Only 2 deputies were returned, and the party subsequently faded out of existence.

The emergence of a fascist-type party in the 1930s was a universal feature of European democracies. The Irish version, the *National Guard*, was founded in 1932. Assessments of its policies, though varying in the degree to which they conclude that this group merits the description "fascist", agree that in terms of its programme, organisation and public profile it resembled its continental European fascist counterparts (Manning, 1970, pp. 232-244; Finnegan, 1989). The party supported Cumann na nGaedheal in the 1933 election and later in the same year agreed to merge with it and the National Centre Party as Fine Gael, with the National Guard leader, O'Duffy, as leader of the new party. Following later disagreements, O'Duffy broke off to found his own *National Corporate Party* in 1935, an initiative that collapsed almost immediately.

A late flowering of corporatist thought occurred in the 1940s, and received political expression in *Ailtiri na hAiseirghe*. This party grew out of a branch of the Gaelic League, *Craobh na hAiseirghe*, which believed in the use of militant methods to bring about a revival of the Irish language. A majority in the branch decided in 1942 to launch an overtly political movement, and a new party was founded with the object of establishing a truly Gaelic, Christian Ireland under the direction of an all-powerful leader, who would be advised by a Council of a Hundred in which there would be no political parties. Although it won several seats in the local elections of 1942, the party fared poorly in the general elections of 1943 and 1944 and on being defeated again in 1948 faded out, leaving as legacy a considerable body of propagandist literature.[12]

12. For an account of the development of the party see Mac an Bheatha, 1967, pp. 93-155. The organisation published a series of pamphlets ("Paimphléidí reatha"), 14 in number, between 1941 and 1944. On its policies see Ailtiri na hAiseirghe, 1943.

In a rather different mould, but bridging the gap with the next category, is the *Young Ireland Party*, which put forward 2 candidates in 1954. Its policies emphasised the need for a reduction in expenditure and cuts in taxation, the perennial conservative demands.[13] In this it anticipated a more recent and much more successful party of the same type, which arose from divisions within Fianna Fail. Desmond O'Malley, a leading advocate of a more conciliatory approach towards Northern Ireland and former rival of Charles Haughey's for the leadership of the party, was expelled from the organisation in 1985. He went on at the end of the year to establish the *Progressive Democratic Party*, to attract the support of 3 TDs who had been members of Fianna Fail, to win striking popular endorsement for the establishment of the new party in an opinion poll and to win the greatest number of votes ever for a minor party in the 1987 general election (on the party's formation and evolution see Walsh, 1986, and Lyne, 1987). Despite its origin in differences within Fianna Fail and the fact that most of its activists and public representatives were defectors from Fianna Fail, the new party is undoubtedly a mobilising rather than a challenging one: almost half of its support initially came from Fine Gael voters, while former Fianna Fail voters accounted for less than one-third.[14] The new party's neo-conservative ideological position, emphasising the need for cuts in taxation and public expenditure, places it close to its similarly-named counterparts in Scandinavia, the Progress parties in Denmark and Norway.

The most obvious instances of promoter parties, or of interest groups which decided to contest elections, were the *Ratepayers' Association*, which contested the elections of 1922, 1923 and 1957, and the *Town Tenants' Association*, which contested the elections of 1923 and 1927. Both of these consisted of federations of county associations, but the Town Tenants' Association at least tried to impose a measure of central control in the conduct of the election campaign. The freedom with which Labour or Farmer candidates could add the "Ratepayer" or "Town Tenants" labels to their party descriptions, however, makes the identification of candidates of these groups difficult. Other interest groups which put forward candidates include the *Irish Housewives' Association* (which put forward 3 candidates in 1957), the National Association for the Blind, which sponsored 2 candidates in Dublin constituencies in June 1927 under the label *Blind Men's Party*, and the *National Army*

13. See *The Irish Times*, 10.5.1954.

14. In terms of the parties they voted for in the general election in November 1982, the first wave of Progressive Democrat supporters consisted of people who moved from Fine Gael (47%), Fianna Fail (31%), Labour (5%), Workers' Party (2%), others (3%) and non-voters (12%) (*The Irish Times*, 10-11 February 1986); one year later these proportions remained almost unaltered, Progressive Democrat supporters comprising defectors from Fine Gael (50%), Fianna Fail (25%), Labour (4%) and others and non-voters (21%) (Calculated from Laver, Marsh and Sinnott, 1987, p. 109).

Spouses Association, which nominated 3 candidates as *Army Wives* in the 1989 general election.

The two parties which fall into the next category, that of the personal vehicle party, have been *Monetary Reform* in the 1940s and the *Christian Democratic Party* in the 1960s. The former, which cannot strictly be described as "right-wing", owed its origin to Oliver J. Flanagan, who was first elected in 1943. The growth in his popularity was extremely rapid, his first preference vote rising to 15,000 in 1948. In this election a second Monetary Reform candidate also contested the same constituency, Laois-Offaly. The party disappeared with Flanagan's decision to join Fine Gael in 1952. The Christian Democratic Party was the creation of Sean D. Loftus, who first contested a general election under this label in 1961. It arose out of a group known as *National Action*, which had put forward one candidate in 1954 on policies of a corporatist nature. The party predictably failed to secure registration under the provisions of the 1963 Electoral Act, and Loftus was forced to contest subsequent elections as an Independent. Having failed in his appeal against the decision of the Registrar of Political Parties, Loftus changed his name to Sean D. Christian Democrat Loftus, to ensure the appearance of the party's name on the ballot paper. Both the party and the name faded out after Loftus' failure to win a seat in the 1973 election; it was as an independent (using the name "Alderman Dublin Bay-Rockall Loftus, Sean D.") that he was elected to the Dail in 1981.

Finally, the 1987 general election was the first at which the new ecologist movement, so prominent elsewhere in Europe but represented in the November 1982 election only by independent candidates, formally presented a slate of candidates. Going forward initially under the label *Green Alliance* and with a strong Dublin base, the new party is a mobilising one and adopts a left of centre position on social issues. By 1989 it had adopted the name *Green Party*, and it had gone a modest distance towards emulating the success of its continental European counterparts by securing the election of one of its candidates.

VII CONCLUSION

While the weak base of inter-party ideological divisions in Ireland makes classification of minor parties along ideological lines difficult, the categories into which the parties have been placed above have, with some exceptions, been fairly clearly defined. It is worthy of note that the four ideological groups tend to be characterised by minor parties projecting rather different types of electoral appeal. Most homogeneous are the agrarian and left-wing categories, the former made up mainly of mobilising parties, the latter of challenging parties with the Labour Party as their target (the unimportant

exception being promoter parties in the Communist tradition). In the nationalist group a clear distinction is apparent between challenger parties (directed against Cumann na nGaedheal in the 1920s and against Fianna Fail since the 1940s) and an important promoter party tradition, represented by republicans who have refused to recognise the legitimacy of the state. Finally, the right-wing category consists of a number of promoter parties based on pressure groups, a couple of personal vehicle parties and three important types of mobilising party: attempts to revive pre-1922 political forces, such as Unionism or Nationalism, to create fascist-type organisations as in the 1930s, or to develop a new right position in the 1980s.

It remains to comment on Irish minor parties in three other domains: organisational, electoral and governmental. A detailed chronological analysis of the organisational structures of Ireland's major parties would be difficult; for the minor parties it is impossible, until such time as case histories of individual parties have been prepared. Little more can be said than that the left-wing parties, predictably, have tended to be better organised than the right-wing ones, and that many of the nationalist parties, whether in the Sinn Fein tradition or based on a Fianna Fail prototype, have had a well-developed grass-roots organisation.

It has been pointed out that minor parties may be seen as potentially following an electoral life cycle, which is characterised by a set of four important thresholds: the threshold of *declaration*, in which a party announces its existence as such, the threshold of *authorisation*, in which it acquires a legal existence and structure, the threshold of *representation*, in which it obtains its first seats in parliament, and the threshold of *relevance*, in which it becomes a significant actor in parliamentary politics. A new party may progress upwards through one or more of these stages, but it may subsequently lapse and regress downwards once again before disappearing (Pedersen, 1982). Of the parties mentioned in this article which crossed the first threshold and declared themselves to exist, 41 might be seen as having crossed the second threshold by actually contesting elections (these are the parties listed in Tables 2 to 5; in Table 4, the Workers' Party and the Communist Party have been grouped with their immediate predecessors). Twenty of these succeeded in crossing the third threshold and securing parliamentary representation. Of these, no more than 8 could be seen as having crossed the last threshold by acquiring some political relevance: the Farmers' Party, the National League, the National Centre Party, Clann na Talmhan, Clann na Poblachta, the National Labour Party, the Workers' Party (including its predecessor, Official Sinn Fein) and the Progressive Democratic Party.

The electoral life history of minor parties, which shows some remarkable uniformities, may not be clear from the tables above but is summarised in the

case of the "politically relevant" parties in Figure 2 (these are the parties mentioned in the last paragraph; the National Centre Party, which contested only one election, has been omitted). The remarkable tendency for initial success to be followed by rapid decline is characteristic of all except one of these parties, the Workers' Party, which seems to have established for itself a permanent position as a minor party. The failure of the other parties, and especially of challenging parties, reflects the difficulties faced by all such parties in western democracies; it is of some significance that the exception, the Workers' Party, retains elements of promoter party-type zeal that makes its persistence less dependent on electoral success.

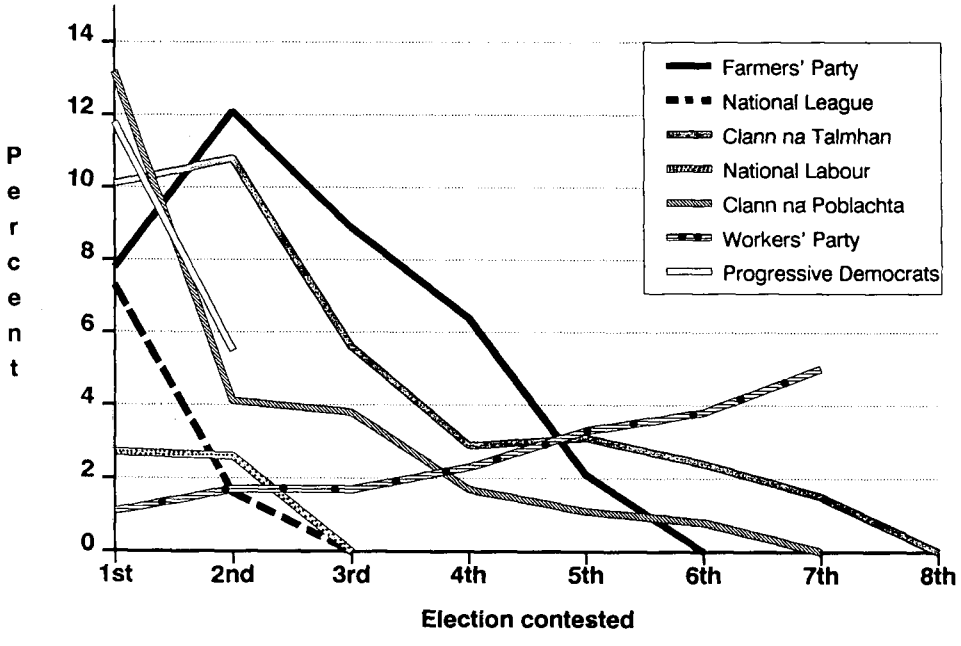

Figure 2: *Minor Parties' Performance at Successive Elections*

The electoral performance of minor parties is a function of two types of force: legal/technical and political cultural. In Ireland the former operates through three aspects of electoral law, each of them characteristic of the single transferable vote (STV) system of proportional representation and each tend-

ing to discourage electoral competition by minor parties. The first is constituency size. Unlike list systems, the STV form of proportional representation promotes small constituencies because of its complex voting and counting procedures, and in principle this tends to make it difficult for smaller parties to gain representation, unless they have a strong regional base.[15] Secondly, the STV system permits dissatisfaction with the established parties to be channelled into support for independents, by contrast to list systems, which typically force would-be independents to take on the trappings of a political organisation and thus leave minor parties as the only real alternatives to the establishment. Thirdly, the introduction in 1963 of a provision for registration of political parties introduced a formal distinction on the ballot paper between parties which met the Registrar's criteria and those which did not, arguably to the disadvantage of the latter. Since only the names of registered parties appeared on the ballot paper, candidates associated with these were more readily identifiable as such. It will be seen from the figures above that the major parties consolidated their positions after 1963, and research has shown that intra-party transfers of votes in the case of the larger parties also increased sharply after this date (Gallagher, 1979b, p. 4). The observation that "there is not much life outside party", based on an examination of the poor electoral performance of candidates who had left larger parties to contest elections under minor party labels or as independents, underscores this point (Mair, 1987, pp. 67-68).

It is more difficult to assess the political cultural preconditions that account for the timing of these bursts of electoral rebellion, and for their concentration in the 1920s, 1940s and 1980s. The first of these periods was, however, one of electoral instability all over Europe in the wake of the First World War: populations were adjusting to a new international order and to the strains of political democratisation and economic change. In addition, special features were in operation in Ireland. The country's second largest party refused to recognise the state so, it could be argued, disenchanted electors were forced to look for other alternatives to the government and pro-government parties. It has been plausibly argued that this factor led to a reduction in the salience of the nationalist issue and allowed opposition forces to be channelled into support for non-nationalist parties, a trend that was reversed only with the reassertion of the salience of the nationalist issue on Fianna Fail's entry to the Dail in 1927 (Mair, 1987, pp. 47-51). The later 1940s was also a period of electoral rebellion in Europe, as voters shifted to the left (and, particularly, to Communist parties) in the immediate aftermath of the war. While this

15. However, there is little evidence that, in practice, changes in constituency size since 1923 have significantly affected the degree of proportionality of the system (and, hence, the capacity of minor parties to secure representation); see Gallagher, 1975, pp. 504-508 and O'Leary, 1979, pp. 107-110.

might help to explain why voters preferred a new, radical party such as Clann na Poblachta to a party of the establishment such as Fine Gael as an alternative to the government, it does not explain the earlier success of Clann na Talmhan or the later success of Sinn Fein. Support for these parties – and particularly for the former – might be explained in terms of the impact of economic decline in a substantially agrarian economy, but a more detailed analysis of their electoral support bases would be required to develop this point. A more explicitly political explanation has also been offered: as Fianna Fail moved to the right, space was left for new challengers from the ground which the party was deserting (Mair, 1987, pp. 52-54). The popularity of the Progressive Democrats more recently has similarly been ascribed popularly to dissatisfaction with the consequences of the country's economic difficulties.

Because of the finely-balanced nature of the Irish party system, minor parties have been of considerable significance for the formation of governments. The most dramatic opportunity open to a minor party was in June 1927, when the National League was offered the chance of forming a minority coalition government with Labour, with external Fianna Fail support, but failed because of a loss of party cohesion. During the 1920s the Farmers' Party, too, enjoyed some leverage with the minority Cumann na nGaedheal Governments, and this relationship was formalised in October 1927, when the Farmers' Party was given a parliamentary secretaryship. The hour of the minor parties finally dawned in 1948, when three of them, Clann na Poblachta, Clann na Talmhan and the National Labour Party, together with an independent TD, joined with Fine Gael and the Labour Party to form the first inter-party Government. Clann na Poblachta, in particular, enjoyed a high profile during this period, but, to an even greater extent than its partners, it suffered electorally from the "Mother and Child" crisis that brought the Government down in 1951. Clann na Talmhan subsequently participated in Government (in the second inter-party Government of 1954-57), and minor parties have held the balance of power, along with independent deputies, on a number of occasions since then, most notably in 1982 and 1987-89. The bargaining success of the Progressive Democrats in 1989, when Fianna Fail was persuaded to go along with a fundamental strategic shift by participating for the first time in a coalition Government, illustrates the political leverage which minor parties may occasionally exert.

If Fianna Fail, Fine Gael and Labour are taken as constituting the core of the Irish party system, a high degree of similarity may be observed with other European party systems in terms of stability of the core over a long time-span and with regard to its capacity to resist the attempted intrusion of other political forces. As elsewhere in Europe, the predominance of the "established" parties was threatened from time to time, but they emerged eventually with

their hegemony undisturbed. It is only very recently that there have been signs of the emergence of new parties of the type that have disrupted the Dutch and Danish party systems in the late 1960s and 1970s, but it will be necessary for new parties such as the Progressive Democrats to prove themselves in a succession of general elections before it can be taken for granted that they have effected a lasting transformation in Irish party politics.

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