

The Consolidation of Coalition Politics in the Republic of Ireland.

Abstract

Ireland is a parliamentary democracy created as a result of a revolutionary secession from the United Kingdom. While Ireland has many institutional and administrative features that are quite similar to the Westminster model, there are also some important departures, most notably the adoption of limited government via a written constitution, and the adoption of PR-STV which has facilitated the formation of coalition governments. For most of the 20th century (up until 1989 at least) a Fianna Fáil single party government was the default outcome of the government formation process, though many of these cabinets were ‘large’ minority administrations. The only method of ejecting Fianna Fáil was for the second the third largest parties (Fine Gael and Labour) to form a coalition government which they did on a number of occasions. The bargaining environment permanently changed in 1989 when Fianna Fáil broke the habit of a lifetime and entered its first coalition with the Progressive Democrats. Since then almost all governments have been coalitions.

This paper examines the life-cycle of coalition government in Ireland: formation, governance and dissolution. Coalition agreements have evolved over the decades and have become much more important, detailed and hence more lengthy. It is clear that the coalition programme is central to the work of the government: senior civil servants increasingly treat the relevant section as a plan of work for their department. The coalition programme plays a key role in the work of the cabinet and the relations between the parties. There is quite strong evidence that the increasingly detailed coalition agreements are a very important commitment device during the life-cycle of coalition governments. The increasing fragmentation of the party system has meant that coalition formation bargaining has become more challenging.

Ireland is now unequivocally a country whose political system is dominated by coalition governance. Before 1989 Ireland’s pattern of government formation was very similar to what we might call the ‘old Norwegian model’: a single dominant party (Labour in Norway, Fianna Fáil in Ireland) governing for most of the 20th century, but sometimes rotating with a coalition of (most of) ‘the rest’. The dominance of these two parties is

now a thing of fading memory and both have had to resort to coalitions. All governments in Ireland since 1989 have been coalitions.¹

The paper analyses the evolution of coalition governance in Ireland. It considers the institutional context and party system and then sequentially examines of life cycle of coalitions: formation bargaining, governance and termination. There is a greater than usual focus on the governance phase with particular attention to the increasingly important (and lengthy) coalition agreements which set out the initial policy bargain. Politicians quickly became aware that the coalition contract is not automatically implemented and have sought to develop a whole range of monitoring and enforcement devices, in an attempt to attenuate both agency and partisan losses.

The institutional setting

The new state of Ireland which was founded in 1921 following a revolutionary secession from the United Kingdom adopted a set of governing institutions which are in many respects quite similar to the Westminster model. The state was conceived as a parliamentary democracy with many features such as the organization of parliament, procedures for law-making, and the administrative structure clearly inherited from Westminster.

Nevertheless, Irish political institutions contain some important institutional differences that are highly relevant in shaping how the country is governed. Probably the most important institutional divergence from the UK was the adoption of limited government by a written Constitution (first in 1922 and superseded by the current 1937 Constitution – Bunreacht na hÉireann) protected by a Supreme Court and developed by judicial interpretation and popular referendums. All changes to the Constitution require the consent of the people via a referendum.² Proposals to amend the Constitution must be

¹ With the partial exception of two governments that formed after the 2016 election, which were single party minority governments (with three independent cabinet ministers) and crucially an external support arrangement with the main opposition party. Following the 2020 election a ‘normal’ three-party coalition was formed, but with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael governing together for the first time ever in a formal coalition.

² But citizens themselves cannot initiate referendums.

initiated in the Dáil (the most important lower house of parliament). The wording of the referendum is determined by the government and then the people decide the outcome by a majority of valid votes cast. The frequency of referendums has been increasing: while only two occurred before 1968, since then (1968-2019) forty more have taken place, averaging slightly less than one a year.³

A second very important innovation with a clear relevance to the party system and pattern of governance was the adoption of proportional representation by means of the single transferable vote (STV) for all parliamentary elections.⁴ Ireland's candidate-centred electoral system can be expected to influence the incentives and loyalties of deputies (TDs). In most proportional representation systems each voter's principal decision is to choose between rival party lists. Although many countries' list systems have some elements of intra-party preference voting, electors nevertheless usually vote first for the chosen party, and their vote may help elect an individual whom they oppose. The central feature of Ireland's electoral system is that the electorate votes directly for individual candidates in multimember districts. There was (and still is) support amongst the electorate for a pattern of small district constituency representation similar to the Westminster plurality system, but without the latter's pronounced disproportionality at national level. Two aspects of STV are particularly important.

First, it is a preferential electoral system in which voters have the opportunity to rank individual candidates in constituencies with a small district magnitude (since 1947 between three and five seats). This typically means that only two or three of a major party's candidates have much chance of being elected and that the voters alone decide which of the party's candidates are successful. A frequent result is intense intra-party competition because STV puts candidates of the same party in competition with each other. They often attempt to differentiate themselves from their party running mates

³ Since the turn of the century (2000-2019) there have been nineteen referendums.

⁴ The electoral system of PR-STV is protected by the Constitution and can thus only be changed by referendum. Fianna Fáil governments have on two occasions proposed replacing STV with single member plurality (in 1959 and 1968), but lost both referendum and on the second attempt decisively (61 per cent against the proposed change). More recently the Fine Gael-Labour government (that formed in 2011) established a Convention on the Constitution (comprised of 66 randomly selected citizens, 33 politicians and an independent chair) - the convention voted overwhelmingly (79 per cent) against changing the electoral system. The Government accepted this recommendation (see Farrell et al, 2017 on the Convention).

through intense ‘constituency service’.⁵ They are right to be worried: it has been calculated that between 1922 and 1997, 34 per cent of all TDs who suffered defeat at an election lost their seat not to a rival party’s candidate but to one of their running mates (Gallagher 2000, Gallagher and Komito 2018).

The second relevant feature of STV is that preference voting is not limited to an intra-party choice: voters can (and do) vote across party lines. There are strong incentives for candidates (and parties) to try and attract lower preferences from partisans of other parties, and this clearly has important consequences for campaigning and for legislative and executive coalition building. Two other institutional features should be mentioned more briefly. Although Ireland is bicameral, the Dáil (the lower house) is by far the stronger. Bills come before the Seanad (Senate) but, at most, it can delay them for 90 days. The Fine Gael-Labour coalition wanted to abolish the upper house, and a referendum on abolition was held in October 2013. In something of a surprise (and on a low 39 per cent turnout) the people voted against abolishing the Senate by 52-48 per cent.

Despite the fact that Ireland has a directly elected President (on a seven-year term) he or she plays no role in government formation. There is, however, a constitutional clause relating to the powers of legislative dissolution which could influence government composition if invoked by the president. In normal circumstances, when a Taoiseach requests that the president dissolves the Dáil in order to hold an election, the president is required to do so (Art. 13.2.1). However, according to Article 13.2.2 the president ‘may in his absolute discretion refuse to dissolve Dáil Éireann on the advice of a Taoiseach who has ceased to retain the support of Dáil Éireann’. A Taoiseach who has just lost a no-confidence motion would clearly justify invoking this clause, but there is some debate about whether there are other circumstances in which a president could refuse to dissolve – for example, if it was obvious that the government’s legislative base had diminished but there has not actually been a formal vote? This question was partially answered ‘when President Mary Robinson “let it be known” that if the Taoiseach Albert Reynold’s, leading a rump Fianna Fáil minority government in November 1994 following the collapse of his coalition with Labour, had asked her to dissolve the Dáil, she would have invoked Article 13.2.2 and refused to do so’ (Gallagher, 2018, 166). With the signal

⁵ This electoral incentive towards candidate differentiation does not of course necessitate that intense constituency service be the method of competition. Candidates could compete as effective legislators, ministers or take up distinctive policy positions.

received, Reynold's resigned, and an alternative coalition took office for the first time without an election. While this power has not yet been explicitly used, a president could encourage coalition renegotiation during an inter-electoral period as a possible alternative to the traditional resort to an early election. Given an increasingly fragmented party system and hence a higher incidence of minority situations in parliament (every parliament since 1979), this power might become more relevant.

The party system

The title of the Irish chapter in Müller and Strøm (2000) was 'Ireland: From Single-Party to Coalition Rule', and reflected a dramatic transformation in the bargaining environment from a predominant party system⁶ famously characterised by Peter Mair (1987, 1993) as 'Fianna Fáil versus the rest', to a less constrained context in which a wider range of coalitions might be feasible. For most of the 20th century a Fianna Fáil single party government was the default outcome of the government formation process, though many of these cabinets were 'large' minority administrations. Since Fianna Fáil first entered government in 1932 up until it entered its first executive coalition in 1989 the party enjoyed an average first preference vote of 46.4 per cent (19 elections from 1932-1987). Given that the electoral system is not perfectly proportional and typically provides a 'seat bonus' to the largest party, Fianna Fáil in the same period (1932-1987) on average won 49.6 per cent of the seats with the result that it could typically form either a majority government or a large and fairly secure minority government on its own. Fianna Fáil were ideologically opposed to even the principle of coalition⁷, though no doubt this stance also had strategic underpinnings.

⁶ For Sartori (1976, 174) a predominant party system is one in which a single-party democratically wins a majority of seats on a regular basis, but this 'threshold can be lowered to the point at which minority single-party governments remain a standing and efficient practice', as is often the case in Norway, Sweden and Denmark. Sartori (175) judged that 'the Irish system has been predominant between 1933-1948 and 1957-1973.'

⁷ The Irish Times observed on 3 November 1947 that 'Mr de Valera's abhorrence of coalitions is proverbial', quoted in MacDermott (1998, 67).

Thus, at elections before 1989 there were only really two possible outcomes of the government formation process which typically followed a general election. If Fianna Fáil had a majority of seats they always formed a single party government which they managed to do on eight occasions.⁸ If they did not have a majority of seats, then the availability of an alternative to a Fianna Fáil minority cabinet depended on the current attitudes of the opposition parties to working together. In the same period of 1932 to 1987 there were eleven minority situations following general elections: five of these resulted in coalitions and six in Fianna Fáil minority governments. The two main opposition parties Fine Gael (usually the second largest party) and the Labour Party (usually the third party) faced heavy strategic constraints given Fianna Fáil's size combined with its refusal to cooperate with any other party. Their reactions to this predicament oscillated over the decades between pursuing mutually exclusive strategies in the hope of achieving sufficient electoral growth to enable them to lead a government⁹, and then subsequently resorting to a mutually dependent coalition as the only way of removing Fianna Fáil once it becomes clear that the long hoped for seat gains have not materialised in sufficient quantities. Patterns of government formation often appeared to be on an endless repeat cycle Fianna Fáil governs most of the time either by virtue of obtaining a majority or by default when Labour and Fine Gael pursue divergent strategies in order to forge stridently independent identities untainted by coalition compromises. Eventually, they reconsider their lengthy tenure on the opposition benches, and form a coalition which usually results in electoral losses, hence necessitating lengthy periods out of government to recuperate.¹⁰ The Labour party, always the second party in any coalition has always suffered electoral costs, most recently severely, from any time spent in coalition.¹¹

⁸ 1933, 1937, 1938, 1944, 1957, 1965, 1969, and 1977. In 1937 and 1965 Fianna Fáil won exactly half of the seats in the Dáil.

⁹ For example, Labour pursued an anti-coalition strategy in the mid-1960s and famously declared at its 1967 'new republic' conference that 'the Seventies will be Socialist', though they did not always define what 'socialist' meant (Gallagher 1982, 69).

¹⁰ Of the seventeen countries included in Strom, Muller and Bergman (2010), cabinet parties in Ireland suffered the second worst 'adverse incumbency effect' losing on average 4.47 per cent, compared to a loss of an average of 2.59 per cent for all of the countries included (see Narud and Valen 2010, 379).

¹¹ The only partial exception was the 1951 election in which Labour managed to increase its vote by 0.1 per cent following the first coalition government (if the vote for National Labour, now remerged with Labour, is added to Labour's 1948 vote).

Given that Fianna Fáil would always cast a large shadow over the process, the extra problem for the other parties was that ‘the coalition alternative’ would require almost *all* of the other parties to combine against the dominant party, irrespective of whatever policy differences, personal dislikes or divergent strategies existed among the other parties. Overall, during the 57 year period from when Fianna Fáil formed its first government in 1932 until it entered its first coalition in 1989, Fianna Fáil governed on its own for 41.6 years (73 per cent of the entire duration), whereas coalitions of ‘the rest’ governed for only 15.2 years (27 percent of the duration).

The bargaining environment permanently changed in 1989 when Fianna Fáil broke the habit of a lifetime and entered its first coalition with the Progressive Democrats. Why Fianna Fáil abandoned its total opposition to coalitions is a complex issue (see chapters in Gallagher and Sinnott 1990; Marsh and Mitchell 1999). But be that as it may a new era of coalition politics began in 1989, so that there were nine successive coalition cabinets (1989-2016) interrupted only by the rather unusual formation of a ‘small’ single party minority government in 2016 (discussed in the next section). Back in 1989 and reacting to Fianna Fáil’s new coalitionable status Mair (1990, 213-4) rather presciently predicted that ‘ironically . . . far from weakening Fianna Fáil, this may well have the effect of cementing its hold on office even more securely than before’. The point of course is that as by far still the largest party and with a fairly non-ideological position in the centre of the party system, Fianna Fáil would be a member of most potential winning coalitions. From 1989 to 2017 Fianna Fáil led eight of the twelve cabinets that have formed, and all of them were coalitions.¹² To put this another way, during 1989-2017 Fianna Fáil governed in coalition for 18.8 years (69 per cent of the entire duration), and Fine Gael led governments for 8.7 years (31 per cent of the duration; calculated from Table 11.6, below). One final way of looking at it is to observe that it took almost the economic and financial collapse of the country to remove Fianna Fáil from government in 2011!

The party system has been changing and most recently more dramatically than normal. Three parties have dominated and been ever present since the first election in 1922. While the fortunes of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour (usually in that order of size) have oscillated over the decades (with some notable challenges from new parties in the 1940s-50s that no longer exist), they have generally dominated the party system and

¹² Except the very short-lived Cowan II which only lasted 33 days.

hence also government formation. In the post-war period until 1987 the combined two-party vote (of FF + FG) was generally over 80 per cent. It fell sharply in 1987 (when another new party that no longer exists the Progressive Democrats took 11.8 per cent at their first election), but the two-party vote has never been above 74 per cent since 1987. The three-party vote was mostly above 90 per cent from the mid-1960s to mid-1980s, but has also fallen away sharply. Fianna Fáil last won an overall majority of votes and seats in 1977, but since then all parliaments have been minority situations. Fianna Fáil which used to regularly win 45 per cent plus slipped gradually to averaging nearer 40 per cent in the 1990s and 2000s, no doubt encouraging its participation in coalition politics.

Cross-checking Laver's (1994) expert survey with the 2014 CHES data we can approximate the ordinal placement of currently existing parties as follows (from left to right):¹³ AAA-PBP – Sinn Féin – Green – SD - Labour – FF – FG

There is some doubt, however, that any of these surveys, which are snapshots since the 1990s, can accurately reflect the ordinal placement of the parties for the entire post-war period. For example, using manifesto data Mair argued that Fine Gael can be placed to the left of Fianna Fail for the period 1965-77 (Mair 1986: 463-5). Part of the problem here is that there are no really large policy differences between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. Nevertheless, as an approximation, the above ordinal left-right placement seems reasonable.¹⁴ On this dimension, Fianna Fáil, as normally the far largest party, is the median party for most of the history of the state (they lost this position to Fine Gael in the 'earthquake election' in 2011). We should note that there is an increasing problem in confidently identifying the median party on the first dimension, and the second dimension due to the greatly increased number of elected independents. There have always been a significant number of TDs belonging to no party, quite high numbers in the early years of state, fewer in the 1960s-80s, but a noticeable growth since 2002. This reached a new peak in 2016: 23 TDs belong to no party at all, that is almost 15 per cent of the parliament.

¹³ Older parties, for example, CnT and CnP are simply our best judgement since they are not included in any of the expert surveys. A party that was important for about 20 years (and was a member of six coalition cabinets) was the Progressive Democrats (PDs). The PDs were the most 'free-market' party but also socially relatively liberal.

¹⁴ It is however far from clear that Irish voters think in terms of a left-right dimension. Analyzing data from the 2011 Irish National Election Study, Gail McElroy (2017, 80) concludes: 'despite almost three years of economic crisis, left and right appear to have no more substantive meaning for Irish voters in 2011 than in 2002'. But see also chapters in Marsh et al (2018).

Since there is no reliable way of locating each of these in the relevant policy spaces they have been excluded from all estimates.¹⁵

We cannot complete discussion of the party system and recent context without a fuller consideration of the implications of the financial crisis. Without exaggeration in 2011 Ireland experienced a truly earthquake election (see Gallagher and Marsh 2011 for the full story). At the previous election in 2007 things looked pretty much like business as usual. Fianna Fáil won 41.6 per cent of the first preference votes and 78 seats (46.7 per cent). Six votes short of an overall majority Fianna Fáil decided to form a three-party coalition with the Green Party (6 seats) and the Progressive Democrats (2 seats). Thus, Bertie Ahern formed his third coalition government and looked forward to a happy retirement from politics in 2011 when he would be 60 years old (Murphy 2011, 9). Instead, Ahern was overwhelmed by a bizarre series of personal and party finance scandals so that he was forced into early retirement and resigned in May 2008 (he was later expelled from Fianna Fáil). The same coalition continued with Brian Cowan as the new Fianna Fáil leader and Taoiseach. Cowan's first setback was the loss of the referendum on the Lisbon Treaty (53 per cent to 47 per cent), but this was nothing compared to what was about to follow.

The crisis struck in September 2008. There had been about six months of serious turbulence on the stock market following the collapse of the US investment bank Bear Sterns. The Irish banks were heavily reliant on borrowed money from international banks and this credit flow had begun to dry up. Murphy (2011, 16; Murphy 2016) notes: 'as the Irish property market began to crash spectacularly in the autumn of 2008, a concomitant collapse of the banks' liquidity ensued due to the enormous sums loaned by all the main banks, particularly Anglo-Irish Bank, to property developers'. There was a serious threat that the collapse of one of the main Irish banks would trigger the collapse of all the others and hence undermine the entire solvency of the state. On the night of 29 September 2008 an incorporeal cabinet meeting took place with ministers contacted by phone between

¹⁵ In Mitchell (2000), a Northern Ireland policy scale was listed as the second dimension of party competition, even though in Laver's survey (1998) this 'second dimension' was actually the most salient dimension. This may have reflected the fast moving events of that decade with two IRA ceasefires and the eventual negotiation of the Belfast Agreement in 1998. From the more recent Chapel Hill data (2014 survey) the two leading candidates for an Irish second policy dimension (that meaningfully differentiate the parties) would be GALTAN and/or Nationalism. On GALTAN the parties are ordered (from liberal to traditional): AAA-PBP – GP –LAB –S F – FG – FF. On NATIONALISM (from cosmopolitan to nationalist): GP – AAA-PBP – LAB – FG –FF – SF.

3am and 5am (Murphy 2011, 15).¹⁶ The decision was taken to ‘guarantee the deposits, loans, obligations and liabilities of the six Irish banks, a total sum of Euro 440 billion, more than twice the country’s gross national product’ (Murphy 2011, 15). Ultimately Ireland could ill afford this bank bail-out: GDP dropped by seven per cent in 2009, unemployment rose sharply and public sector pay was cut. Although the government tried hard to resist, it eventually had to accept a Euro 85 billion bailout of the country from the EU and IMF on 28 November 2010. The Green Party announced that it would only stay in government to pass the December 2010 budget, but then wanted an election in January 2011. The first opinion poll of 2011 estimated support for Fianna Fáil at 14 per cent, prompting after some more theatrics, the resignation of Brian Cowan. Fianna Fáil would contest the 2011 election under a new leader, Micheál Martin.

Electoral change in 2011 was ‘truly seismic. Fianna Fáil suffered a negative tsunami of votes that has few parallels among governing parties anywhere’ (Gallagher 2011, 139). Fianna Fáil plummeted from 41.6 per cent in 2007 to 17.4 per cent in 2011, losing 58 of their 77 seats. The Green Party was entirely wiped out. By contrast Fine Gael (36.1 per cent) and Labour (19.4) had their best elections in many years and Sinn Féin rose to 9.9 per cent. The combined two party vote (of FF + FG) fell to only 53.5 per cent). There is no mystery as to what happened - it was a classic case of ruthless electoral accountability. The opinion polls show a clear pattern of two sharp drops in support for Fianna Fáil - the first after the Irish Government’s bailouts of the Irish banks in September 2008 and the second two years later when Ireland withdraws from the bond market and has to be bailed out by the EU/IMF. The ‘outcome was in essence a classic example of the voters exacting punishment for what was widely seen as a succession of bad economic decisions. Fianna Fáil (and the Greens) destroyed the economy, and the voters went some way to destroying those parties in revenge’ (Marsh and Cunningham 2011, 172-4).

Some years of deep austerity and competent government by Fine Gael and Labour between 2011-16 helped facilitate a remarkable turnaround in Ireland’s macroeconomic position, so that by the time of the next election in 2016 Ireland had the fastest growing economy in the EU (Murphy 2016, 2). Despite many objective economic achievements sustained austerity is nearly always electorally dangerous for incumbent governments.

¹⁶ John Gormley, the leader of the Green Party, could not be contacted by phone – he was woken by a garda (police) at his home asking him to please ring the Taoiseach! (Leahy, 2009, 333).

Fine Gael were reduced to 25.5 per cent (-10.6, and the loss of 27 seats) and Labour were almost destroyed scoring only 6.6 per cent (-12.8. Labour lost 30 of its 37 seats in the Dáil). In 2016 the three-party vote (of FF+FG+Lab) was only 56 per cent, meaning that ‘the others’ now comprise 46 per cent of the vote. The others include 23 TDs for Sinn Féin, 6 for AAA-PBP, 3 for a new party the Social Democrats, and an astonishing 23 TDs who belong to no party at all. The party system fragmented with some sharp rises in the effective number of parties and disproportionality.

Government formation

The bargaining context: coalition formation before and after elections

Certain electoral systems, especially those that encourage transferring votes from one party to another, provide extra incentives to engage in coalition formation before as well as after the election. The single transferable vote (STV), by encouraging voters to rank-order candidates (and thus parties), rewards cooperative electoral strategies. High transfer rates (of lower preference votes) among parties engaged in pre-electoral coalitions can make all the difference to the distribution of a fairly small number of seats. Given that the Dáil is often delicately balanced and governments rarely enjoy large majorities (if they have one at all), transfers can make or break a prospective coalition.¹⁷ Thus, there is a distinction between pre-ballot coalitions (transfer pacts under STV) designed to maximise the seat share of a particular set of cooperative parties and the negotiation of an executive coalition once the results are in (Mitchell 1999). Clearly these are analytically distinct arenas, and parties may cooperate with different parties in each stage, though they risk incurring credibility costs if they do so. This is what happened in 1992: the Labour party fought an independent campaign with no electoral alliances. They were rewarded with their then best ever election result partly based on such a pro-change anti-Fianna Fáil message. Labour then dismayed many of their new voters by forming an ill-fated coalition immediately after the election with Fianna Fáil. This was seen as such a breach of trust that Labour were heavily punished at the next election.

¹⁷ Of the 29 cabinets from 1944-2017 9 had no majority. A further 4 cabinets controlled exactly 50 per cent of the seats. Of the remaining 16 cabinets only 5 had an initial legislative strength of 55 per cent or above. Thus most Irish cabinets have had very small majorities, or no majority at all.

Alternatively, a party may cooperate with different partners in the ‘before and after’ phases of coalition building. An example occurred in 1989. During the campaign, Fine Gael and the Progressive Democrats issued a joint statement claiming that they were a viable alternative government to Fianna Fáil. The statement covers areas of policy agreement (‘An Agreed Agenda for Action’). Thus, they formed a ‘pre-electoral coalition’ but rather undermined the success of this venture by failing to also form an ‘electoral alliance’ (under STV this would manifest itself as an explicit pact between parties in the pre-electoral coalition to recommend that they exchange terminal transfers with the favoured partner). Neither leader issued a national direction on transfers, but left it to local candidates to decide for themselves what was the best way of defeating Fianna Fáil. After the election the hoped for FG-PD coalition was not numerically viable (only 61 seats combined when 83 was needed for a bare majority). Instead the Progressive Democrats changed partners and formed a government with Fianna Fáil (83 seats). On other occasions, for example in 2016, the incumbent coalition (Kenny I between Fine Gael and Labour) formed a pre-electoral coalition and an electoral alliance but still failed to form after the election, in this case due to the ‘voluntary’ withdrawal of Labour following its electoral meltdown.

The bargaining process

Coalition building in Ireland is a fairly unstructured process in which the party leaders examine their bargaining weights and then try to explore what might be feasible. There are no recognition rules and no one is institutionally designated to lead or chair the negotiations. For most of the history of the state there was never a choice of more than two alternative governments. As mentioned, if Fianna Fáil had a majority (or near majority) it would form a single-party government, if not the existence of an alternative would depend on the willingness (or not) of Fine Gael and Labour to coalesce. This facilitated speedy government formation so that all governments (before 1993) were put together within the ‘official gap’ between the dissolution of parliament for the purposes of elections and the first scheduled meeting of the new Dáil. De Winter and Dumont (2008, 130) list the average formation durations for seventeen countries. The average for

16 countries (i.e. excluding Ireland) is 23 days. Ireland averages 15.7 days. Of course this average figure for the entire 1944-2007 period disguises a more recent evolution to some more lengthy duration periods that reflects the more complicated bargaining environment as a wider range of options became possible. Thus Reynolds II took 48 days to form, Bruton I 28 days and more recently Kenny II took 70 days.

Patterns of government formation have closely corresponded to what Laver and Schofield (1990) described as ‘free style bargaining between elites’. There are no size or composition requirements, *formateurs* or *informateurs* (see Strom, Budge and Laver 1994). There is an investiture requirement so that a proposed Taoiseach must win a plurality vote of those voting in the legislature (Art. 13.1.1-2). It is important to note that a proposed candidate does not need an absolute majority of TDs but only a majority of those who vote. Thus, parties and/or independent TDs can help to facilitate the formation of a particular proposed government by deciding to abstain on the investiture vote. While this has always been true the importance of this detail was highlighted much more dramatically in 2016 when Enda Kenny won an investiture vote 59 to 49 (with 49 abstentions). Once the incoming Taoiseach is approved by the Dáil and subsequently appointed by the President, he (so far always a he) must return to the Dáil and subject his list of ministers to a second vote. The cabinet is invested collectively in that the Dáil must vote to accept or reject the nomination of cabinet ministers en bloc (Martin 2015).¹⁸

Composition and Size of Cabinets.

Since the modern coalition era began in 1989 all governments have been coalitions.¹⁹ Of the twelve cabinets formed between 1989 and 2017 four have been minimum winning coalitions, two have been surplus majority cabinets and six have been minority cabinets. The average parliamentary strength of these twelve cabinets was just 50.3 per cent. Government’s with large and seemingly²⁰ secure majorities can happen, for example

¹⁸ The Taoiseach is not required to indicate portfolio allocations which means that reshuffles are possible without a further legislative vote. But new additions to the cabinet must be approved by the Dáil (Martin 2015).

¹⁹ With the exception of the two Fine Gael led cabinets that have formed since the 2016 election. These are technically single party minority cabinets that each contain three independent cabinet ministers. Each was sustained by an external ‘confidence and supply’ arrangement with Fianna Fáil.

²⁰ Despite its large majority Reynolds II fell apart in coalition conflict after only 674 days of a possible five year term.

Reynolds II in 1993 controlled 61 per cent of seats in the Dáil, and Kenny I in 2011 was supported by 68 per cent), but these are very much the exception rather than the rule.

Government formation in Ireland has often been facilitated by the availability of non-party independent TDs who might be persuaded to support a prospective government in the investiture vote, and might even be willing to offer on-going legislative support in exchange usually for spending commitments in their constituencies. Independent MPs are not common in European politics²¹, so this is clearly an interesting and unusual feature of coalition politics in Ireland. The presence of sometimes quite large numbers of independents increases the ability of minority cabinets, single-party or coalitions, to pass their key legislation. The number of independents was high in the early decades of the state, much lower in the 1960s and 1970s, but has been on the rise in recent elections. Ten or more independent TDs have been elected in each of the last four general elections, with 15 in 2011 (out of 166) and an astonishing 23 (out of 158) in 2016. Thus, currently about 15 per cent of TDs in Ireland do not belong to any party.²²

For example, after the 1997 election Bertie Ahern formed the first of his three successive cabinets by putting together a minority coalition with the Progressive Democrats. The coalition with 81 votes in a 166 seat parliament was thus two or three votes short of a working majority. In 1997 six non-party independent TDs were elected so that Ahern was able to negotiate legislative support with three of them in return for mostly pork-barrel spending commitments in their respective constituencies (Mitchell 1999, 256-59). Thus the minority coalition had extra legislative support and won the investiture vote by 85 votes to 78. The 1997-2002 Fianna Fáil - Progressive Democrat coalition (Ahern I) lasted a full five-year term (1786 days) - quite stable for a minority two party coalition propped up by support from three independents. In 2002 the economy was booming and the available data support the idea that 'a feel good factor favoured the incumbent government in general and Fianna Fáil in particular' (Garry et al 2003, 140). Fianna Fáil won 81 seats (+ 4) on an increased vote, while the Progressive Democrats doubled their seats to 8 (on a slightly reduced vote). Given this arithmetic, combined with greater fragmentation among the opposition forces, Ahern chose to rebuild the

²¹ Weeks (2016b, 209) calculates that of the 18 European Union democracies that currently permit independent candidates for lower house election, there were just 19 independents elected at the first set of elections held in the 2010s. These were one in the UK, three in Lithuania and the remaining 15 in Ireland.

²² For much more on the independent TD phenomenon see Weeks 2014, 2015, 2016.

outgoing coalition with the Progressive Democrats, rather than govern as a large Fianna Fáil minority government with negotiated legislative support from a few independents (Mitchell 2003). Ahern II also lasted a full five years.

The actual process of government formation can be illustrated with a short account of what happened after the 2011 election. Some things about this formation were ‘typical’ of how Irish coalition governments are put together and some things were not, the changes due largely to the country’s unprecedented financial crisis. The out-going lead governing party, Fianna Fáil, had collapsed in the earthquake election. Fine Gael achieved its highest ever number of seats (76), just six short of a bare majority. Labour also achieved a record seat total: 37. Given that Fine Gael would not contemplate a coalition with Sinn Féin (14 seats), Fine Gael had two main options. Either they form a hopefully stable coalition with Labour, or they negotiate an external support arrangement with some of the independents and/or small parties (of which there were 19). However, given the extreme economic crisis and the tough austerity measures that the incoming government would have to implement, neither Fine Gael nor Labour seriously contemplated refusing to govern together. Election day was Friday 25 February 2011. The new Dail was due to meet on 9 March – and it is during this approximately two-week period, that most Irish coalitions are negotiated. The two party leaders, Enda Kenny of Fine Gael and Eamon Gilmore of Labour, first met on Sunday evening for 80 minutes (O’Malley 2011, 270; see also Leahy 2013). Among other things they discussed the portfolio split (with Labour pitching for 9-6, but eventually having to settle for 10-5) and who would get the Department of Finance. For the most part the party leaders do not directly take part in the detailed policy negotiations, but are kept informed and serve almost like a political appeals court for matters that the negotiators cannot resolve.

Each party appointed a negotiating team of 3 TDs, and being selected for this role is a good predictor of securing a cabinet position. The Fine Gael team was led by Michael Noonan (who would become Finance minister), in addition to Alan Shatter and Phil Hogan. The Labour team was led by Brendan Howlin (who would become the Minister for Public Enterprise) and included Joan Burton and Pat Rabbitte. All six of the negotiators would become cabinet ministers. In an innovation, prompted by the financial crisis, both parties’ chief economic advisors (not elected TDs) were included as the fourth member of their respective teams. Negotiations commenced on Tuesday 1 March at

Government Buildings. But rather than immediately getting down to inter-party negotiations (for example identifying the ‘red lines’ in each party’s election manifestoes), the first two days moved into seminar mode, whereby all of the negotiators had to listen to successively dire warnings and summaries by the country’s top economic, civil service, financial and banking officials. Once the negotiations returned to inter-party issues, they compromised on most of the big economic questions. For example, Fine Gael had wanted to target reducing the deficit to 3 per cent of national income by 2014, Labour the slower pace of 2016. They split the difference on this and many other items, agreeing on 2015 for the deficit. One other unusual aspect of this formation was that it was subject to external, indeed even international veto-players: the agreed deal had to be within the parameters set by the EU/IMF bail-out (O’Malley 2011: 272).

Portfolio allocation of cabinet ministers

Portfolio allocations are decided during the coalition negotiations after the policy programme has been agreed. Having said that party leaders will have a good idea how many cabinet positions they are likely to get since Ireland like many countries follows an approximately proportional norm. Browne (1973) first pointed out what he called a ‘relative weakness effect’ whereby small parties tend to get a little more than their proportional share. Ireland cannot indulge in portfolio inflation (at least at cabinet level) because the maximum number of cabinet ministers is restricted to fifteen by the constitution. Thus the set of fifteen ministries are a fixed prize that has to be divided in a zero-sum manner among the coalition parties. Most allocations are fairly proportional, but it is striking how frequently smaller parties are able to successfully bargain and gain themselves one ‘extra’ cabinet position. For example, since 1973 the Labour Party has taken part in six coalition governments and has been allocated an ‘extra’ cabinet seat in four of them. Another way to look at it is that in seven of these ten coalition governments the largest party has had to give up one (and in one occasion two) cabinet ministers that it was proportionally entitled to.

There is clearly also some relationship between the core policy concerns of some parties and the portfolios that they secure during negotiations. We can see this most clearly with the case of the Labour Party, the only smaller party that has been in enough coalitions for us to fairly reliably discern a pattern. Labour has taken part in eight coalition

governments between 1948 and 2016. It is striking that in six of these eight governments Labour has filled the Social Welfare cabinet portfolio (and on one occasion when it did not the Social Welfare cabinet minister was from Democratic Left, a party that subsequently merged with Labour). Labour (1948-2016) has had a total of 36 cabinet ministers. Two-thirds of them have been from just six departments (Social Welfare 6 times, Health 4, Industry 4, Employment 4, Education 3 and Foreign Affairs 3 times).

Coalition agreements

All coalition governments in Ireland have had a coalition agreement. In almost all cases these have been post-electoral written coalition agreements. Irish parties mostly prefer to conclude negotiations after elections in order to emphasise their independent appeals during the election campaign and hence maximise their first preference votes. The two exceptions are 1973 when Fine Gael and the Labour Party agreed a pre-electoral manifesto, and in 1994 when for the first and so far only time one coalition replaced another without an election and hence wrote its own agreement. These written and published documents are not coalition 'agreements' in the wider sense, rather they are coalition policy documents. Thus they do not discuss general rules of coalition behaviour, procedural rules or the distribution of offices or competences. They are all about the initial policy bargain on which the coalition is founded.

These coalition agreements have evolved over the decades and have become much more detailed and hence more lengthy. Of the coalition agreements analysed across 12 European countries (Muller and Strom 2008, 172) the average length was 7,511 words, and in Ireland 10,161. While the lengthening of these agreements does not follow a strictly unilinear pattern, the overall trend is clearly towards longer and more comprehensive documents.

At one extreme consider the first ever 'coalition agreement'. On 17 February 1948 Fine Gael leader Richard Mulcahy issued a statement to the press on behalf of Fine Gael, Labour, National Labour, Clann na Poblacta, Clann na Talmhan and the independents supporting the prospective coalition. The five parties had agreed on ten points of policy. The agreement amounted to 119 words (National Archives of Ireland, S10719 A, D/T memo, 31.3.48, reproduced in McCullagh, 1998). The agreement contained some specific pledges like cutting taxes on beer and cinema tickets, improving the treatment of

tuberculosis (here the government was very successful), to pledges of a vaguer variety, like reducing ‘the cost of living’. John A. Costello in his speech accepting his appointment as Taoiseach of Ireland’s first coalition government said:

‘The various Parties who have formed this Government have sought to find, and have found, numbers of points on which they can completely agree. This Government has been formed on the basis of full agreement on all those points. Any points on which we have not agreed have been left in abeyance.’
(Dáil Éireann Debates 18.2.1948, vol. 110, col.77).

The second coalition led by the same Taoiseach formed in 1954 on a similar basis. Having learnt from some of the difficulties of policy implementation during the first coalition, the Labour party wanted to drive a harder bargain and agree a somewhat more detailed policy agreement. Labour said that it would only take part if the coalition was publicly committed to an agreed policy program ‘in broad conformity with Labour policy’. Also Labour in 1952 decided that a special delegate conference would have to approve any proposal to enter government, helping ensure the inclusion of enough ‘Labour inspired’ policy content. A historian of the Labour party noted (Puirseil, 2007, 175): ‘Labour: had learned from experience that if the devil is in the detail, it was best to summon these demons and deal with them at the outset’. Following the election result – McCullagh (2010) – reports that intensive negotiations between FG and Labour followed on a coalition agreement, with a sequence of position papers being exchanged. For example, on social welfare FG’s proposals were vague (promising to ‘improve social welfare’) – Labour responded with much more specific policy demands. Fine Gael needed Labour to have any chance of forming a government, so in this key area for the smaller party, all of Labour’s proposals were included in the draft government programme. (JACP P190/551). On 31 May 1954 Fine Gael and Labour held simultaneous press conferences to announce a coalition programme of ‘12 objects’ (previously passed by a Labour Special Delegate Conference). The 1954 coalition agreement was 750 words, very short by contemporary standards, but three times longer than previously.

Coalition agreements as we currently know them expanded in length in the 1980s (to 5-10,000 words), in the 1990s (to 10-20,000 words), and since then to 20-33,000 words.

Interestingly, the governments which formed after the 2016 election (Kenny II; and then in 2017 Varadkar I continuing with the same agreement) had the longest ‘coalition agreement’ ever though it is not technically a coalition – because there was only one ‘party’ in the cabinet. Kenny II and Varadkar I were Fine Gael led governments with three independent cabinet ministers (see more below). The ‘Programme for a Partnership Government’ was an agreement between Fine Gael, the Independent Alliance²³ and a number of other independents. It was composed of 156 pages, and 42,182 words.

Government formation during and after the financial crisis

Until 2016 all Irish governments have either had a majority or have been ‘large’ minority governments close to a legislative majority and often facilitated by explicit or implicit external support deals with a number of independent deputies. But in 2016 the party system fragmented to its highest ever level of 4.93 (ENPs), so that the two largest parties were no longer very large. Fine Gael won 32 per cent of the seats (from only 25 per cent of the votes), while Fianna Fail had a small recovery to 28 per cent of the seats (from 24 per cent of the votes). In the absence of even a single large party as a pole of coalescence government formation was less certain than ever. In other countries, it might reasonably be expected that these two would form a coalition. Such a coalition would be a clear MCW winner with 93 seats in a down-sized Dáil in which the absolute majority threshold was now 79.²⁴ So far Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have always refused to govern together²⁵ and this remains a major bargaining constraint, as increasingly does the refusal of the other parties to coalesce with Sinn Féin.²⁶ In 2016 it took 70 days to form a government, a national record for Ireland, although far short of a European record.

As mentioned earlier an important feature of the institutional rules are that to win an investiture vote a proposed candidate for Taoiseach only needs a simple majority of those who choose to vote, not an overall majority of all TDs. Thus, while an absolute majority

²³ The Independent Alliance did not register as a political party. The group was established by five independent TDs and two Senators. ‘In a group charter, it outlined ten principles and priorities but did not devise a constitution or rule book’ (Reidy, 2016, 66). The Alliance’s ‘leader’ joined the cabinet.

²⁴ At the 2020 election the Dáil was increased from 158 to 160 seats.

²⁵ Labour has long fantasized about the merger of Fianna Fail and Fine Gael leading to a left-right realignment of the party system. But as Gallagher (1982, 168) observed Fianna Fail and Fine Gael are each ‘steeped in [their] own traditions, and for many members, opposing the other party at every turn is the essence of political activity; a merger would take all the fun out of politics’.

²⁶ But see footnote 34 below.

would require 79 votes (if everybody votes) if either Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael abstain on the investiture vote then Enda Kenny could be elected with 58 votes and Micheál Martin could be elected with 54 votes. This means that Kenny needed the support of at least eight more TDs and Martin at least eleven more (O'Malley 2016, 262). Thus, both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil opened up talks with some of the smaller parties and independents to see who could attract the most support, and to try to avoid an immediate second election. The already scheduled first meeting of the Dáil was held on 10 March, at which a Fianna Fáil member was elected Ceann Comhairle for the first time by secret ballot. Fine Gael leader Kenny was proposed for Taoiseach and defeated 94 against / 57 for. The leaders of Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and the AAA-PBP were then proposed and all defeated by larger margins. Having lost the investiture vote Kenny was then required to tender his resignation to the President, though of course he and the outgoing government continued to serve in a caretaker role.

The Dáil met on two further occasions and failed to elect anybody as Taoiseach. Labour, heavily damaged in the election, effectively ruled itself out. After the second failed meeting of the Dáil, Enda Kenny's office issued a statement saying that he had made an offer of 'full partnership government' to Fianna Fáil with an equal number of cabinet positions for each party. Many in Fianna Fáil saw this as an insincere trap, that Fine Gael knew Fianna Fáil would refuse (it would need to pass a Fianna Fáil special party conference, which was unlikely) – they believed it was designed to shift the blame to Fianna Fáil if an early election was required. Negotiations between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil finally opened on 11 April, and then switched venues a week later to Dublin's Trinity College. Finally, on 3 May both parties signed a 1800 word agreement – not a programme for government – but a 'confidence and supply' arrangement by which Fianna Fáil would facilitate the election of Fine Gael's Enda Kenny, in return for various policy concessions (see O'Malley 2016 for full details). Negotiations with independents continued so that finally on 6 May Kenny was elected Taoiseach by 59 votes for / 49 against, with Fianna Fáil abstaining. Kenny was supported by five votes from the Independent Alliance (which had agreed ministerial appointments with him), and by positive votes from four other independents. The cabinet that formed contained twelve Fine Gael ministers and three independents (a further three independents became junior

ministers). Thus, the 2016 cabinet with only 59 votes out of 158 was a government with the smallest legislative coalition in the history of the state.

Coalition governance

There are no real ‘official rules’ of coalition politics. The practice of coalition governance has evolved from the early coalitions that made essentially *ad hoc* minor adaptations to the policy and decision-making procedures that prevailed during earlier single-party governments²⁷ to the more recent practice of the coalition parties adjusting the policy process and informal norms of behaviour, in order to facilitate better coalition governance. For example, during one of the early coalitions (Fine Gael-Labour, 1973-77) the ministers chose not to act as party blocs within the cabinet. Indeed, the ministers of each party did not even sit together in party teams: ‘the decision not to do so was taken at the start, as a token of the two parties’ willingness to operate amicably’ (Gallagher 1982: 219). A lot has changed since then.

There have been at least three significant changes since the 1980s that have moved Ireland closer to the ‘coalition compromise model’ whereby parties simultaneously attempt to promote their own policies and scrutinize the activity of their coalition partners, via the evolution of a range of monitoring and credible commitment devices. First, coalitions agreements became much more detailed and were taken more seriously as guidelines for the policy priorities of the government. Secondly and connected with this much more explicit methods of monitoring the implementation of the government programme were developed. The exact practices have varied somewhat by cabinet, but beginning in the 1990s there was a much greater use of ministerial ‘special advisors’²⁸ and even ‘partnership programme managers’, whose essential job was to look after the partisan interests of the minister and his or her coalition party, as well as facilitating better cooperation with the relevant part of the civil service. In addition, and more recently some coalition governments are publishing annual monitoring reports on the coalition programme, some of which are longer than the original coalition agreement. Third, there

²⁷ Given the earlier normative prejudice against even the concept of coalition governments (constantly encouraged by Fianna Fail) some of the early coalitions almost pretended that they were not coalitions. The first two coalitions avoided the word ‘coalition’ calling themselves ‘inter-party’ governments.

²⁸ In September 2020 it was announced that at least 10 of the junior ministers would get their own special advisors.

has been starting in the early 1980s but escalating in the 2000s a significant growth in the numbers of Ministers of State (Ireland has one level of junior minister). It was mentioned earlier that portfolio inflation is not possible in the cabinet,²⁹ but this is not true at the junior ministerial level.

The role of individual ministers in policy-making

The style of cabinet decision-making is structured by Article 28.4.2 of the Constitution: ‘The Government shall meet and act as a collective authority, and shall be collectively responsible for the Departments of State administered by the members of the Government’. The cabinet acts as a clearing house for most major decisions and the doctrine of collective cabinet responsibility ‘normally denies ministers the right to record private dissent, let alone public opposition, to cabinet decisions’ (Farrell, 1993, 174). The first coalition government (1948-51) was unusual in this respect in that it had quite frequent breaches of collective responsibility and a number of instances of ministers trying to interfere in each other’s’ jurisdictions. In response to a question Taoiseach Costello said that in the inter-party government ‘it was considered permissible for a Minister in an individual or party capacity to give public expression to views which might not necessarily be those of the government as such’ (quoted in McCullagh, 1998, 53). The opposition made much political capital from these publicly aired divisions between ministers and coalition parties, so that during the 1954 election campaign (that would lead to the second coalition government (1954-57) Costello declared that collective cabinet responsibility would be observed the same way as in a single party government

²⁹ Even here though creative politicians can try and find a way around this problem. In 1994 Democratic Left only managed to secure one cabinet post which was what they were proportionally entitled to. They wanted a second representative in cabinet, so one of their Ministers of State was designated as a ‘super junior’ minister with the right to attend cabinet but without a vote (the argument being that the lack of a vote would avoid contravening the constitution). This way the sole DL cabinet minister had a party colleague at cabinet, and the cabinet does not vote anyway. Indeed, in practical terms the main substantive manner in which the ‘super junior’ is not a full cabinet minister, is not really to do with the lack of a vote and more to do with the fact that the ‘super junior’ will have an immediate ‘boss’, the cabinet minister of the ministry in which he or she is a junior. This practice of appointing a super junior was repeated by some subsequent governments, for example to give the PDs a second presence in cabinet. And the cabinet formed in 2016 (not technically a ‘coalition’) appointed two ‘super junior’ ministers, one from Fine Gael and one independent. In 2017 three were appointed. In addition the government chief whip (a junior minister) automatically attends the cabinet, but is not usually referred to as a super junior.

(McCullagh 2010). While of course there have been occasional breaches of this doctrine in general it is upheld.

The Taoiseach is the boss both formally and in practice. The Taoiseach's ministerial nominees will be appointed by the President providing that they have been previously approved by Dáil Eireann (Article 13.1.2). Clearly, the Taoiseach's power over ministerial selection is amended during coalition governments, so that the leaders of the other governing parties pick their own ministers.³⁰ Similarly the Taoiseach can fire any member of the government 'for reasons which to him seem sufficient' (Article 28.9.4) though again in practice a PM cannot fire a minister of another party without that party leader's consent.

There is a far reaching division of labour in government and this gives decision-making a departmental structure in which each cabinet minister has considerable agenda powers to determine which policy options are brought to the cabinet for a formal decision. However, while energetic and determined ministers no doubt have considerable scope to shape the policies of their departments, this autonomy should not be exaggerated. Particularly during coalitions party leaders cannot afford to allow full ministerial discretion since they would then lose all policy input in jurisdictions in which they did not control the minister. Parties have strong incentives to underwrite the credibility of their key policies – and attempt to commit their coalition partners to them – by negotiating their inclusion in the coalition policy document and subsequently policing these promises by a variety of devices designed to monitor progress towards the party's goals (Mitchell 1999). Nevertheless, most policy-making does take place within departments. Ministers have clear agenda setting powers – they decide which policy options emerge from their department for decision elsewhere. And it is virtually unheard of for a policy proposal to emerge from one department that is clearly the jurisdiction of another department. O'Malley and Martin (2018, 258) quote former Taoiseach John Bruton as saying: 'most ministers spend 90 per cent of their time immersed in their own departments, with only 10 per cent concerned with the rest of the government' (John Bruton, *Irish Times*, 1 November 2014).

³⁰ Technically, the nominees are recommended to the Dáil as members of the government rather than to particular departments. This underlines the Taoiseach's power to alter assignments or jurisdictions at will.

Coalition governance in the executive arena

There is a *Cabinet Handbook* which sets out, at least in theory, the rules and procedures. The cabinet normally meets once a week at 10am on Tuesday mornings when the Dáil is in session, and each Wednesday when it is not. The Agenda for each Government meeting is confidentially available online to Ministers, their Private Secretaries, Secretaries General and other approved high level users. The documents relevant to each Agenda item are also available online. The Main Agenda is finalised on the previous Friday morning. The Supplementary Agenda is finalised at 4.00 p.m. on the evening preceding the meeting. O'Malley and Martin (2018, 253) report that while the cabinet is still an important forum a large amount of the policy discussions and potential conflicts are discussed in advance of the cabinet in other places. The cabinet's job is to take a decision on the broad principal of a proposal, and examine the 'political implications' of a proposal, i.e, to try and ensure that the proposal will not lead to bad publicity or worse a public revolt against the policy. 'There are a number of reasons for the move away from detailed policy formation and debate at cabinet. One is that less contentious items are cleared in advance by the team of special advisors, especially those of the Taoiseach and Tánaiste. Another is the expansion of the cabinet committee system' (O'Malley and Martin 2018, 253).

Historically, cabinet committees were not used very often before the 1990s. There are, however some examples from the distant past. The first coalition, partly perhaps in an effort to hold the five parties together used cabinet committees quite extensively. There were 6 in 1948, 9 in 1949 and 16 in 1950. In 1949 a cabinet committee of 4 members (Costello (PM), Norton (the Labour leader), McGilligan (Minister for Finance) and O'Higgins) was set up to examine all 'outstanding estimates'. This became known as the 'Estimates Committee' and became powerful, much like an inner cabinet. McCullagh (1998, 63-4) comments 'the Estimates Committee had become extremely powerful – and in doing so usurped some of the functions of the Minister for Finance'. Cabinet committees, when they exist, are set up by each administration and end with that government.

A more recent example is the 2011-16 coalition between Fine Gael and the Labour party – the government that had to deal with the aftermath of the financial crisis. Given the scale of the emergency this coalition had to 'work'. During the negotiations on the

Programme for Government they decided on two institutional innovations. Firstly the Department of Finance would be split into Finance and a new Department of Public Expenditure, politically allowing both coalition parties to have a finance ministry. Secondly, an inner cabinet was set up, the Economic Management Council (EMC). The EMC was made up of four cabinet ministers, the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the two finance ministers. This was understandably attractive to Labour. While they were outnumbered two-to-one in the full cabinet – it would be fifty-fifty in the inner cabinet. Meetings of the EMC would contain these four cabinet ministers, plus their key policy advisors and top civil servants.

The EMC met weekly. Initially, the idea was that it would meet at 8am on the day of cabinet meetings (which started in this government at 10.15 on Tuesdays). This was found to be too crowded an agenda since the Labour and Fine Gael ministers held separate meetings at 9am. Many EMC meetings are reported to have gone on for several hours so the scheduling had to be changed. EMC meetings were moved to Wednesday afternoons – and thus they became the start of the weekly political schedule (Leahy 2013, 111). Leahy (2013, 101) comments: the EMC ‘would turn out to be the engine of government, the forum in which almost all the most important decisions of the new administration would be made, deciding all economic and budgetary policy’. He also reports, not surprisingly, that the EMC was ‘a source of constant unhappiness’ among those cabinet ministers that were excluded (Leahy 2013, 112).

Junior ministers (in Ireland ‘Ministers of State’) are used to achieve portfolio balance between the coalition partners and to stress party interests. There has been a substantial growth in the number of junior ministers. In 1948 only three were appointed, and generally throughout the 1950s to 1970s there were typically 5-7 in each government. The number of junior ministers rose sharply in the 1980s – with typically around fifteen in each government. The number peaked in 2007 and 2008 when twenty were appointed. Their numbers were reduced in 2009 and 2011 from 20 to 15 – this was explicitly presented as part of cost-cutting measures in response to the financial crisis. This retrenchment may well prove to be temporary given the inherent attraction to party leaders of distributing patronage to their parliamentary parties. In 2016 and 2017 18 and 19 junior ministers respectively were appointed.

There is some evidence that the distribution of junior ministers is intended to allow each party to monitor what their coalition partner is doing in the cabinet portfolios that they hold. There seems to be some positive evidence of this watchdog role in the Irish data. Clearly the evidence varies by cabinet, principally it seems according to the sheer size of junior coalition partners. For example if the junior coalition partner is very small – for example the PDs in 1997 had only 2 junior ministers, and the PDs in 2007 got zero junior ministers. This obviously places a practical limit on using junior ministers in a watchdog role. However, when there is a closer balance of strength between the coalition parties, there appears to be more evidence of ‘divided portfolios’. When for example Labour is relatively strong (after the 1992 and 2011 elections for example), 10 of the ministries have a cabinet minister and junior minister from different parties suggesting that in some cabinets they do partially play a watchdog role. However, this should probably not be exaggerated: junior ministers in Ireland have specific policy roles within the department and the junior minister can be overruled by the department’s minister.

Implementing and monitoring coalition agreements

It is clear that the coalition programme is central to the work of the government: senior civil servants increasingly treat the relevant section as a plan of work for their department. The coalition programme plays a key role in the work of the cabinet and the relations between the parties. One former Taoiseach, Albert Reynold’s has been reported as saying about an issue that was causing division in cabinet: ‘if it’s in the programme, then it’s a deal; if not it’s up for discussion’ (private interview conducted by Eoin O’Malley; see O’Malley and Martin 2018, 246). Costello, O’Neill and Thompson (2016) report some very interesting findings concerning the 2011-16 coalition government (Kenny I). First, inclusion of a policy item (a pledge) in the Programme for Government ‘has a very significant impact on the likelihood of pledge fulfilment: 78 per cent of all election pledges that featured in the Programme for Government were fulfilled at least in part, compared to 46 per cent of other pledges’ (Costello et al 2016, 37). Secondly, they report the marginal effects of variables (like controlling the relevant ministry, being in the programme for government, consensus with government party, etc.) on the probability of pledge fulfilment. Controlling for other factors, they found that ‘the likelihood of [pledge] fulfilment increases by 12 per cent if the party goes on to hold the ministry relevant to

that pledge’ (p37). But they found that the inclusion of the pledge in the Programme for Government has an even bigger effect than controlling the relevant ministry. Again controlling for other factors, if the item was in the coalition agreement it was 29 per cent more likely to be fulfilled than if it was not. This is quite strong evidence that the increasingly detailed coalition agreements are a very important commitment device during the life-cycle of coalition governments.

While coalition agreements have been increasingly monitored especially since the innovations of the 1992-97 coalition government, concerning the much greater use of special advisors and programme managers (Mitchell 2000), more recently governments have been publishing annual monitoring reports on the coalition programme. These are very detailed annual reports, some much longer than the original coalition agreement. For example, the 2011 Programme for Government which was the coalition policy document on which the 2011-16 government was based totalled 23,172 words. Five annual monitoring reports were published during the life of this government, ranging in size from 15,793 to 43,774 words (averaging 30,000).

Coalition duration and termination

Considering all of the cabinets (1944-2017) the average duration in Ireland is 971 days, about two years and eight months. This is perhaps shorter than expected but is partly an artefact of how we count cabinets. For example, there are four occasions on which a Taoiseach ‘voluntarily’ retires to facilitate succession in a fairly dignified manner, (De Valera, Lemass, Lynch and Kenny). The governments that they led were not brought down by conflict. The three cabinets which followed the first three of these changes of leader lasted on average for a further 609 days.³¹ Rather than these ‘terminations’ being about insurmountable conflict they are more like changing the team captain at half time. To the best of my knowledge this does not happen a lot in football but it does periodically in Irish politics! In addition, being PM in Ireland seems to be a fairly healthy career choice: to date in the history of the state no PM has ever died in office. The third technical reason for termination – a regularly scheduled parliamentary election has only been the

³¹ We cannot include Kenny’s resignation since the replacement Vardakar I had not yet been terminated at the time of writing.

principal cause of termination on three fairly recent occasions (in 1997, 2002 and 2016). A key reason for this of course is that Ireland is a system of government in which the PM has dissolution powers. The attempted strategic timing of elections is (at least believed) to be an important resource for the PM's party and few PM's have wanted to risk being 'boxed-in' (diminishing the other parties' uncertainty) by governing into the last few months of the maximum term, especially since it is a five-year term.

Governments in Ireland have been terminated by combinations of almost the full range of discretionary mechanisms (except that there has never been a voluntary enlargement of the coalition). To balance this rather rosy picture of the life of an Irish Taoiseach (given above) we should note that it is possible to get kicked out. For example, the resignations of Haughey in favour of Reynolds and Reynolds in favour of Ahern were due to severe coalition and intra-party conflicts. In the first case, Reynolds replacing Haughey, saved the coalition, in the second it did not. The resignation of Ahern (much lauded for his good work alongside Tony Blair in relation to Northern Ireland), was one of the low points in recent Irish politics.

With Fianna Fáil back in government in 2007 in a surplus majority three-party coalition many observers wondered if Fianna Fáil would ever be removed from its dominance of the coalition era. Certainly, none predicted that by the next election in 2011 the Progressive Democrats would no longer exist³², the Greens would lose all of their seats, and Fianna Fáil would be punch drunk from losing nearly three-quarters of its parliamentary party. The 2007-08 cabinet (Ahern III) was ended by the forced resignation of the Taoiseach caused by bad publicity in relation to a complicated series of personal financial scandals for which Ahern appeared to have no plausible answers. Ahern was subsequently expelled from Fianna Fáil. In general though we can see that Irish cabinets are often ended by 'early' elections, and by conflicts within and between the respective coalition partners.

³² The Progressive Democrats were nearly wiped out at the 2007 election holding only two of their eight seats. They joined the three-party coalition with Mary Harney as their sole cabinet minister. In November 2008 the Progressive Democrats held a special delegate conference and voted by 201 votes to 161 to dissolve the party (Murphy 2016, 131-2). Never before has a party in government in Ireland decided to dissolve itself. After the PD's dissolution – their only minister stays on in cabinet as an independent for another two years. By convention this is not regarded as a new cabinet. But it does seem a grey area if one of the 'parties' in the coalition no longer exists!

In terms of measures of ‘relative duration’ three summary findings can be mentioned briefly. First, if we look at average relative duration across the decades there is very little variation to observe. From the 1940s to the 2010s all decades, except one, have average relative durations ranging only from 0.61 to 0.69 (the sole exception is the 1980s – 0.42 – largely because there were five general elections). Second, there is no difference (at all!) between the average relative durations of single-party and coalition cabinets (single-party – 0.59; coalitions – 0.59). Third, as expected there is a significant difference in average relative duration between minority and majority cabinets (0.49 and 0.68 respectively).

Finally, serving in government in Ireland is usually electorally costly. Of the eight parties that have served in Government no party has on average benefitted electorally from governing. Of course there are occasional examples of a party electorally gaining votes after service but overwhelmingly the evidence points to a negative incumbency effect. Of the three parties that have most often been in government, Fianna Fáil’s average loss is 2.8 per cent, Fine Gael’s is 3.3 per cent and Labour’s is 4.4 per cent. The average loss of ‘the government’ (that is all governments) is 6 per cent, with coalitions doing worse (8.9 per cent) than single-party governments (2.8 per cent).³³ And of course almost all government since 1989 have been coalitions. Clearly, parties are willing to pay the electoral price for the opportunity to govern.

Conclusion

While other parties have come and gone the only three ever-present parties, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour (normally in that order of magnitude) so dominated Irish politics in the twentieth century that the party system was often loosely described as a ‘two and a half’ party system. Irish politics decisively changed in 1989 when Fianna Fáil changed tactics and entered its first ever coalition. Before this single-party Fianna Fáil governments were the default outcome of the government formation process. Before 1989 there were 5 coalition governments and 12 single-party governments (1932-1987). Since 1989 there has been almost 30 years of coalition governments. The only partial exceptions to this are the cabinets formed in 2016 and 2017 (both formed according to the same

³³ Authors calculations.

formula, single-party Fine Gael, with three independents in cabinet and an external legislative support arrangement with the main opposition party). These exceptions have largely been justified by the economic crisis, the associated electoral collapse of Fianna Fáil, and more recently by the existential, economic and political threat of BREXIT.

There are signs of party system fragmentation. The effective number of parties (votes) averaged 3 in the earlier period (1932-1987), and rose to an average of 4.4 in the period since 1989. Associated with this there have been significant increases in the levels of electoral system disproportionality: the average was 3.7 (1932-1987) this has risen to 5.8 (1989-2016). These summary indices reflect the declining dominance of the three ever-present parties. In the same earlier period, the combined vote of FF+FG+Lab averaged 88 per cent. The average share of these parties has declined to 75 per cent (1989-2016). Indeed, in the parliament elected in 2016, they only account for 56 per cent of the vote. Another way of looking at this fragmentation is that of the 158 seats allocated in 2016, FF+FG+Lab control 101 seats, while other parties and independents control 57. While it is possible that this greater level of fragmentation could be reversed, multiple opinion polls in recent years suggest that this is unlikely any time soon.

With 7 parties and 23 independents or other groups in parliament after the 2016 election the number of coalition permutations are greater than they have ever been. There are two remaining behavioural constraints: the refusal (so far) of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to share an executive coalition, and the refusal (so far) of all parties to strike a coalition deal with Sinn Féin, the third largest party.³⁴

Irish politicians have in the last 30 years learnt how to make coalitions work. It is no longer a case of forming a coalition but pretending as if it is a ‘normal’ single-party government. These days incumbents will have spent time and a lot of energy in negotiating a detailed programme for government, a document that all regard as crucial for the subsequent life of the government. While not quite a holy grail, it codifies the initial coalition policy bargain, and is a document that can be subsequently invoked as

³⁴ Following the February 2020 election FF, FG and SF controlled respectively 23, 21 and 23 per cent of the seats. FF and FG at least for now continue to rule out SF as a coalition partner. But after about four months of negotiations, the single biggest bargaining constraint has been eclipsed when on 27 June 2020 FF and FG agreed to govern together in a three-party coalition with the Greens. The office of Taoiseach (PM) is to ‘rotate’ between the leaders of FF and FG at the half-way point of the 5 year maximum term.

evidence that there has been too much agency loss and drift away from a party's key policies. Recent governments have explicitly examined performance by producing annual monitoring reports, to determine how much of the coalition programme has been implemented. These documents are sometimes more detailed than the initial coalition agreement. Similarly, parties in coalition have increasingly taken steps to coordinate policy and prevent excessive conflict through the use of cabinet committees, and regular meetings of special advisors to pre-empt trouble. Meetings of the latter have become very important: 'the growth of special advisors has reduced the influence of senior civil servants and shifted the balance of power back in the direction of the minister (O'Malley and Martin 2018: 262).

It seems likely that a probable area of coalition turbulence in the near future may not so much be in the realm of coalition governance but rather of coalition formation and this directly connects to party system fragmentation and the declining electoral strength of the two largest parties. At the 2020 election the respective sizes (first preference votes) of the three larger parties was SF (24.5%) FF (22) FG (21), the Greens got 7% and all the other parties got less than 5 per. The other parties claim they would like FF and FG to merge. But they are unlikely to do so. Hostilities will resume at the next election. In 2020 coalition formation bargaining became more challenging, at least until FF and FG agreed to drop a 100 year old refusal to govern together. Dropping last remaining behavioural constraint – the refusal of both to govern with Sinn Fein – is surely now a question of 'when not if'. Once that happens, 'free style bargaining' will be the new norm.

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