

Deliberative democracy might offer a remedy for the extremely low levels of political trust in Ireland.

Blog Admin

Since the start of the economic crisis, levels of trust in government in Ireland have fallen significantly. Elaine Byrne argues that there has been a notable change in attitudes within the country, particularly in terms of how corruption is defined. One potential solution to the problem might be to encourage more deliberative forms of democracy, which could help to establish a more 'moral' form of politics.



Europe has witnessed not just an economic crisis but a crisis of authority. The Irish experience and its implications for trust in democratic politics has comparative merit. In Ireland, trust in government has plummeted. In the Autumn 2010 Eurobarometer poll, Ireland had, at 10 per cent, the lowest level of trust in government across the twenty-seven European countries surveyed. In June 2008, by contrast, confidence in the government was at 46 per cent.

This collapse in trust coincided with the dramatic demise of the Irish economy when the country experienced the deepest and fastest contraction of any western economy since the Great Depression. So bad, the Governor of the Central Bank, Patrick Honohan, described it as 'the most expensive [banking crisis] in history.' The intervention of the IMF/ECB/EU troika in 2010 demoralised Irish public confidence in the very ability of political action. The entire Irish banking sector was nationalised or part nationalised.

For many in Ireland, the economic crisis was the culmination of successive crises in politics. Irish public life has witnessed a permanent process of institutional self-scrutiny since 1990. In the twenty year period between 1990 and 2010, thirty-two public inquiries have been initiated to examine matters of ethical concern within politics, business, church, police, finance, public service, professions and health. Self-regulated institutional authority has been comprehensively challenged and a sea change in attitudes towards the integrity of power has occurred. Traditional values of blind deference, misguided loyalty and the fear of asking questions have undergone an electrifying and overdue process of clarification. That sea-change has warranted a re-evaluation of how corruption is defined.

Legal vs. moral corruption

The conventional definition of corruption, the abuse of public office for private gain, is reliant on a legal interpretation of the words: abuse, public and gain. This narrow approach neglects public expectations that the conduct of those in public office should equally be characterised by a broader moral compass. The concept of moral corruption has fermented within the public consciousness as a consequence of persistent scandal and an unprecedented extension of the definition of corruption has occurred. Corrupt gain is no longer understood to be just financial but has gradually been extended to include power, prestige, authority and reputation, such as re-election to government.

Yet legislating for behaviour focuses on the legality of an action but not the morality of that same action. When a legal definition is exclusively applied to define personal conduct, legislation replaces the obligations of personal ethical responsibility. Contemporary political life in Ireland has consequently borne intimate witness to the defence that if no laws were broken, by implication, "I have done no wrong."

Although political action may be within the letter of the law, it does not always account for the spirit of the law. This renewed focus on moral concepts of corruption acknowledges that servants of the public trust have an extraordinary set of responsibilities which are accompanied by public expectations. Any suggestion of impropriety becomes corrosive to the public trust. Public expectations of political leaders necessitate that Caesar's wife must be above suspicion, or be able to dispel it, if it arises. Perception

may be an unfair benchmark for behaviour but this is a reality of political life.

New definition of corruption

The Irish corruption tribunals detailed how undue influence in the formulation of policy and legislation by vested interests occurred at the expense of the public interest. The privatisation of the state's publicly owned resources and an economic boom characterised by a property bubble, created financial incentives of staggering proportions and facilitated fraudulent behaviour. Some 35 per cent of the ruling party Fianna Fáil's disclosed donations between 1997 and 2007 were sourced from property and construction interests: i.e. those who directly benefited from the government's intervention in the housing market to initiate marginal changes to stamp duty, tax rates and grants which assisted first-time home purchasers. The state lowered capital gains tax allowed developers to forego their affordable and social housing obligations and promoted a laissez faire planning system.

Key political decisions were insulated from critical debate because they were executed within a closed and cartelised system which facilitated regulatory capture. The Irish policymaking system failed to counteract the property-market bubble, because of the susceptibility of government to interest-group pressures. This is reflected not just by Fianna Fáil's dependence on funding from these quarters, but from an expectant electorate demanding concessions within the housing market. All of this ultimately had devastating consequences for Irish economic sovereignty.

Implications for trust in politics

In the absence of trust, political action is characterised by short-termism which seeks to garner the support of the electorate. This perception of corruption within political leadership ultimately reduces loyalty towards a sense of state by its citizens. The decline of trust means the pillars of representative democracy have become weakened, as marked by ever lower voter turn-out and participation. Trust is greater when there is a general belief that "we're all in it together", and that no group is being disproportionately advantaged or disadvantaged by discretionary state actions or selective receipt of state benefits. [High trust](#) in public services also increases compliance rates in revenue payment and reduces the incidence of welfare fraud, reducing the cost of monitoring.

The Irish case demonstrates the need for new forms of political engagement. Deliberative democracy is one such form. Deliberative democracy emphasises the broad participation of citizens in the direction and operation of political systems. It is an alternative means of reaching collectively binding decisions through reasoned agreement. Citizens have the opportunity to express their views and preferences and justify their decisions within an auxiliary institution which serves as a complementary role to the formal public sphere. Deliberative democracy advocates more involved forms of citizen participation than traditional representative democracy and can act as a potential supplement to, rather than replacement for, other democratic institutions and practices

In an age when liberal democracy is increasingly under stress, deliberative democracy is perhaps one solution to the problem of declining political trust. Together with a new definition of corruption, it might help re-establish a sense that "we're all in it together" and thus, a more moral form of politics.

This article is a contribution to Policy Network's work on [Liberal democracy under stress](#).

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