The challenge of reforming a “voter-friendly” electoral system: Debates over the future of Ireland’s STV

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Postwar electoral reform trends in established democracies

- Over time trend towards proportionality
- (Postwar) over time trend towards preferentialism (Renwick & Pilet)
- (Postwar) few cases of replacing electoral systems
  - But lots of attempts.... Ireland included
Single Transferable Vote
Choice Voting
Irish electoral reform debates

• The proportional dimension
  – Referendums in 1959 & 1968

• The preferential dimension
  – Parliament-led reviews 1996-2010

• Economic crisis (2009--)
  – Focus still on preferentialism
  – Irish Constitutional Convention, 2012-14
Why electoral reform?

• Excessive localism
  – TDs as social workers
  – Little government accountability
  – Poor quality of politicians

• Differing views
  – Political (and media) elite
  – TDs
  – Public at large
Figure 2: Should we replace the electoral system?

Agree: PR-STV should be replaced.

Percent

Strongly disagree 2

3 4 5 6 Strongly agree
A top-down impetus

• Rational choice-based approaches
  – Sub-optimal?
  – Politics of separate spheres (so no “competing principals”)

• Focus shifted from outcome to process
  – Academics ignored on outcomes, but listened to on process (philanthropy funding)
  – British Columbia citizens’ assembly model
  – Irish Constitutional Convention
Outcome

• 38 recommendations
• 18 of which would require constitutional reform (i.e. referendum)
• 9 reports lodged with the parliament
• So far, 3 referendums promised in 2015
“Electoral reform” recommendations

• Amend STV: 5-seat districts as a minimum; remove alphabetical order of candidates
• Establish an Electoral Commission
• Extend polling hours/days
• Greater access to postal voting
• Improve accuracy of electoral register
• Measures to increase electoral turnout
• Education programmes in schools
• Non-parliamentary ministers in government
• TDs should resign their seats on being appointed to ministerial office
• Citizen-initiatives should be introduced
Figure 3: Evolution of attitudes towards electoral reform among members of the Irish Constitutional Convention

Vote to change the electoral system?

- Vote to change Dail electoral system cit
- Vote to change Dail electoral system pol
- Vote to retain Dail electoral system cit
- Vote to retain Dail electoral system pol
Lessons from Ireland?

- Shortcoming of theory focused on elite rational calculation
- Difficult to move against personalization trend
- The process is important
  - A way in for academic experts?