Accepted Manuscript

Title: Voting for government coalitions in Ireland under Single Transferable Vote

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PII: S0261-3794(10)00016-8

DOI: [10.1016/j.electstud.2010.03.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2010.03.004)

Reference: JELS 1001

To appear in: *Electoral Studies*

Please cite this article as: Marsh, M. Voting for government coalitions in Ireland under Single Transferable Vote, *Electoral Studies* (2010), doi: 10.1016/j.electstud.2010.03.004

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SS-Voters and Coalition Govs

**Voting for government coalitions in Ireland under Single
Transferable Vote**

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Abstract This paper addresses the issue of whether voters indicate a preference for a government rather than, or in addition to a preference for a party, when they cast a ballot under the system of the Single Transferable Vote (STV). It thus contributes to the existing literature on strategic coalition voting by examining whether coalition preferences matter where electors are given the option to rank the parties in order of preference. The question then becomes: does this ranking reflect or signal a coalition preference? Using survey data from two Irish elections, this paper finds that whereas first preferences are closely aligned with coalition choices, Irish voters do not systematically use second preferences to express a view on their preferred coalition formation.

Keywords: Single transferable vote, Ireland, coalition governments, coalition preferences, mixed member systems

1. Introduction

In most multiparty systems, elections result in a coalition government being formed of two or more parties, with these coalition arrangements often decided after the election result is known. Voters can use the ballot box to express their wish for a party, and so effectively trust that party to act as they themselves would do when selecting, or turning down, coalition partners. Parties may also declare their preferred options to their voters, so the choice of party is made with some knowledge of its likely government partners. Even so, the voter generally has little choice beyond that of take-it or leave-it because she typically has only one vote to cast, and must decide whether party A, B, C or D will be the recipient of her favour.

In such a situation, the rational voter might still seek to influence the formation of government by a strategic vote which is determined more by a wish to see a particular government formed than a particular party elected. If the election was effectively about whether C or D might govern with A, the voter might well opt for D if she prefers AD to AB even if A is the preferred party. Some recent papers have provided evidence that this occurs to a significant degree in some complex multiparty systems (Blais et al 2006; Gschwend 2007; Bargsted and Kedar 2009; Meffert and Gschwend, this issue). Blais et al. (2006) argue that their results demonstrate that voters can and do vote for governments and not parties, a conclusion that, if valid across a number of systems, would strengthen the case that elections can be forward-looking influences on events rather than simply, as Schumpeter asserted, means of holding leaders to account (see Hobolt and Karp, this issue).

However, under some electoral systems voters are given more opportunities to influence government formation. In the popular mixed member system voters each have two votes, one for a list and one for a constituency deputy, and they may split their support across two parties. By doing so they may help the representation of a second party (perhaps without hurting the first one) and may be expressing a desire for these two parties to work together in government (Pappi 2007; Pappi and Thurner 2002). The split ticket vote may also reflect other priorities, such as a liking for a particular constituency

candidate (Curtice et al 2009: 145-48) or a tactical decision not to waste the list or constituency vote.

The electoral system that gives voters most scope for expression is the single transferable vote (STV) which is an ordinal voting system that gives the voter the option of ranking candidates (of all parties) in order of preference. This might seem to be a ranking of the parties of those candidates, but where there is more than one candidate of a party the rank order of these running mates does not have to be sequential. In a formal sense the system is a purely candidate centredⁱ one with unlimited choice within party and across party lines, although the evidence indicates that the party labels of candidates are very significant for voters (e.g. Marsh 2000, 2007). However, it is the ballot structure, and the opportunity to rank order candidates, that is most important here. Voters could use their lower preference votes to support candidates who would bolster the chances of a second (or even third) party that they would like to see cooperate with their first choice. Thus lower preferences could signal a preference for a coalition partner and increase the chance for the latter to win the necessary seats to bring about such a coalition. Parties have often encouraged their supporters to behave in this fashion by asking them to support candidates of certain other parties with their lower preference votes. This appeal has been made both in general terms, where leaders ask voters to support the local candidates of a second party, and also more specifically in local election literature highlighting particular candidates (see e.g. Gallagher and Marsh 2008: xxii, xxv.) However, parties do not always do this and are often content to offer no advice to their followers on what to do with lower preference votes once their own candidates have been supported.

Journalistic comment in the media after the election, particularly when the coalition outcome was not widely foreseen, has drawn on polls and election results to ask whether the particular outcome was something that was signalled by voters (Laver 2000: 131-2; see also Gallagher 2008: 95 and Hennessy 2007 on reactions to the Green party's decision to join FF in government). This paper examines some of this evidence to see whether or not voters in general do seem to use their lower preferences to indicate their coalition preference. It does so using two large exit polls, from the Irish 2002 and 2007 elections, each of which sought from respondents three critical pieces of information:

their first preference vote, which other parties were supported, and the government they would most like to see formed. Ireland provides a context in which, as elsewhere, we can imagine voters making calculations about which party they prefer and which coalition outcome is most desirable. It then provides for much more explicit observable consequences of these calculations than we could hope for under most other electoral systems. The data available also allow us to measure these observable consequences. Before these data are analysed it is necessary to sketch the context of the study in more detail, to explain the nature of Irish party competition in 2002 and 2007 and to provide some information about the STV system.

2. The Irish political context

All Irish governments over more than 70 years have included, and been led by either Fianna Fáil (FF) or Fine Gael (FG), the two centrist parties that emerged from the split in the Sinn Féin party that led the movement for independence after the First World War. Until 1989, this meant either a FF government – sometimes a minority government – or a FG dominated coalition including, at least, Labour. This pattern was broken in 1989 when FF entered coalition with the new Progressive Democrat (PD) party, initially the product of a split within FF. This was followed in 1992 by a FF / Labour Party government. When that coalition broke up after only two years, it was succeeded, without an election, by a FG, Labour and Democratic Left government that lost office in the 1997 election. None of these governments were agreed by party leaders in advance of the election, although some earlier FG/Labour coalitions were the result of pre-election pacts.ⁱⁱ By 2002, the need for post election bargaining seemed to be the one certainty, but even this was almost overturned as FF came close to winning an overall majority despite collecting less than 40 per cent of the vote.

Six parties, plus independents, fought the elections of both 2002 and 2007. In each case the incumbent parties were FF and the PDs, although on the first occasion this was a minority government, propped up by a handful of independents. Going into both elections these two parties – the former very large, the latter small – made it clear they would like to reconstitute the coalition, but no formal voting arrangement between them existed on either occasion. The opposition comprised, in decreasing order of size, FG,

Labour, the Greens and SF as well as a handful of independents. While there was no formal arrangement between any of these parties in 2002, Labour and FG came together well in advance of the 2007 election as an alternative government, with a common programme. This arrangement was prompted by their own analyses of 2002 which ascribed their poor results to the lack of a clear alternative to the incumbent government. These two parties tried to include the Green Party in their arrangement, but without success. The Greens made it clear that they wanted the existing government out of office and said they would prefer to join a FG/Labour coalition rather than an alternative led by FF, but the party preferred to campaign on an independent platform. SF remained independent on both occasions, but with SF expected to do well in 2007 there was some talk of the possibility of a FF/SF government, talk that was encouraged by a SF programme that contained some significant changes towards a more centrist position.ⁱⁱⁱ It was thus something of a surprise when, after the election, the Greens entered talks with FF that eventually resulted in those two parties, together with the PDs, forming a coalition. The Green Party's leader, who supported the coalition agreement, nonetheless resigned as leader on the basis that he had undertaken not to enter government with FF. The oversized coalition was further reinforced by some independents, who undertook to support the government in exchange for particular undertakings, generally dealing with spending in their constituencies

The key points here are first, that there are some significant differences between the two elections, particularly with respect to a FG/Labour coalition, and second, that recent history appears to make any one of a number of coalitions possible if the distribution of seats does not rule against it.

In this context, STV provides voters with a voice. At first glance, lower preferences appear to have little influence on the outcome as about 90 per cent of the seats go to the candidates who would win them if only first preferences were counted (see Gallagher 2003, 2007 on the 2002 and 2007 elections).^{iv} However, this is because the patterns of lower preference voting are not so different from the pattern of first preferences (see e.g. Marsh et al 2008: 20-1). It is certainly not intrinsic to the system. Moreover, this 10 per cent – 16 seats – typically proves to be vital in the formation of government. All a voter is required to do for their vote to be declared valid is write the

number '1' next to the name of a candidate. However, the voter may go on to rank one or more of the remaining candidates in order of preference.

The count starts with a validation of each ballot paper and this then permits the calculation of the Droop quota, the number of votes a candidate requires to make certain of election.^v There is then a count of first preference votes. Candidates whose support exceeds the quota are declared elected, and their surplus transferred to other candidates according to the next preference marked. The candidate with the fewest votes is then eliminated and her votes redistributed, again according to the next marked preference. Those without another preference are declared to be non transferable. This continues until all seats are filled, or until no more candidates can be eliminated. In the latter case, all remaining candidates are declared elected despite not reaching the quota. (For more details see Gallagher 2005.)

Voters can signal a coalition preference by supporting the candidates of the parties they want to see in coalition before they give any support to the candidates of other parties. Consider, for instance, the ballot paper facing voters in Kildare North at the 2007 election. This is partially reproduced in Table 1. Eleven candidates contested the three available seats, two from each of FF and FG and one from each of the other forces. In the third and fourth columns we show how a voter might complete the ballot to signal a preference for a government comprising FF and the PDs, the first pattern showing how a FF voter might complete the ballot and the second the vote of a PD voter. The next two columns show the signals of FF and Labour voters respectively who want to signal a preference for a government of FF and Labour. Finally, we show the vote that might be cast by Labour and FG supporters respectively who wish to see a FG/Labour government. In all of these case voters might go on to indicate lower preferences for all of the other candidates.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Of course we would not know from any pattern whether the voter was casting a sincere or a strategic vote. Nor would we know whether party was the criterion used to decide the ranking of preferences, as opposed to some other property of the candidates.

However, we can say that if a PD voter did want their party to go into government with FF then the pattern in column 4 would indicate that wish, whereas a 1 for Ahern and a 2 for any non FF candidate would not.

While the ballots themselves are not available for direct study,^{vi} we know from the anecdotal evidence of those who watch votes being counted that while relatively few people complete a full ballot, most go beyond '1', so most people do take advantage of the electoral system to some degree. We also know, not least from the analysis of the successive counts in each election, that many voters are willing to endorse the candidates of more than one party. There have been extensive analyses of these counts to find out where votes transfer to when candidates are either elected or eliminated and these have been important both for party strategy and for our understanding of how voters make use of the ballot (for 2002 and 2007 see Gallagher 2003, 2007). However, significant problems arise in making sense of the aggregate data (see e.g. Sinnott 1995)^{vii}

A recent analysis by Kennedy (2002) explored the relationship between transfer patterns and the cues given by parties between 1987 and 1997. He concluded that cues had a big impact. The proportion of votes going from party A to party B was almost four times as high when party A/B signalled closeness as when they did not. Kennedy, however, restricted himself to relatively few instances of transfers, basing his conclusions on a small, and arguably completely non-random set of voters.

Surveys can have real value in this field, and arguably provide a much better basis for making reliable inferences about the preference orders of voters across parties. This can be done in a number of ways, which range from asking people about the parties they voted for to inviting respondents to complete mock ballots and so provide a full record of their voting behaviour. Surveys also provide us with covariates of such behaviour, enabling us to establish how far it reflects coalition preferences or indeed other sets of values.

3. Data

All of the data used for this analysis come from the exit polls conducted for the national television station in 2002 and 2007.^{viii} These were relatively large samples –

more than 3000 respondents – collected by Lansdowne Market Research Ltd, one of the major market research and opinion polling companies in Ireland. They proved to be very accurate in predicting the final vote outcomes. These data have a number of advantages for our purposes. First, they contain an indication of preference across the various coalitions that might seem plausible. Secondly, they contain questions not only about first preference vote, but also about lower preferences. These are not unproblematic. Respondents were asked which party they gave their first preference vote to, and were then asked which other parties they voted for. In the case of those who cited more than one other party we have no way of knowing which party ranked second. Given most of the coalition options contained only two parties, this would render the data useless for our purposes if many mentioned more than two parties. Fortunately, very few did so.

From the mock ballots completed for the 2002 Irish National Election Study (Marsh et al. 2008), we would have expected a larger part of the sample to have indicated that they ranked the candidates of more than two parties, but only 24 per cent did so in the 2002 exit poll, compared to 53 per cent in the election study (see Table 2). Moreover, 26 per cent indicated that they voted for the candidates of just one party, compared with only 17 per cent who claimed to do so in the election study. The contrast almost certainly results from the survey instruments used and the context of each poll. A simulated ballot in a more leisurely, in-home, face to face survey was used in the election study as opposed to a quick succession of questions in the on-street exit poll.^{ix}

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

The third advantage is that the large sample size permits us to restrict analysis to those constituencies where all parties ran candidates. This is necessary since a vote consistent with a coalition preference cannot be cast in the absence of appropriate candidates. Together with the previous limitation this still leaves 1,095 cases for analysis in 2002 and 1,777 cases in 2007 (when the smaller parties ran candidates in more constituencies).^x

4. Analysis of coalition preferences

The main question to be answered by this analysis is the extent to which people express a pattern of preferences that is consistent with their preferred coalition. Laver (2000) points out that lower preferences may be strategic rather than sincere. He argues that the rational voter would have due regard for the impact of her vote on the governmental formation process after the election. In essence this should mean that a voter acts to increase the chance of the parties she would like to see in government.^{xi}

However, the assumption that voting for a party (or coalition) might rationally be expected to improve its chances of government could in some case be problematic (see also Alvarez and Glasgow 2005). A voter wishing for a FF/PD government who votes FF may in fact be *decreasing* the chance of a FF/PD government, because a strong FF party might not need a coalition partner. However, such a voter might still support FF, rather than FG, because only with the largest party could they hope to for a majority two-party coalition. Someone who wants a FF/Labour government and votes Labour might be argued to be *reducing* the likelihood of such a government because the attractiveness of Labour for FF might well decline as Labour becomes larger. However, given the degree of uncertainty about post election outcomes we will assume here that while voters may be making a strategic choice – voting for a coalition – their preferences will be consistent with their most preferred coalition.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

We will look first at what voters say about coalitions. This is shown in Table 3. It should be emphasised again that voters were presented only with these coalition options and asked to choose between them. Some coalitions that people might have preferred were not shown. A ‘grand coalition’ of FF and FG always attracts support in polls when that choice is offered to respondents, but it has never formed and remains politically unlikely. The coalition actually constructed in 2007 (FF/PDs/Greens) was also not given to respondents as an option, indicating how unlikely it seemed. The option of FF by itself, the only conceivably single party government at the moment, was included. There were two very striking differences between 2002 and 2007. The popularity of a FG/Labour

coalition was much greater in 2002, having increased from 16 to 27 per cent, while the popularity of the incumbent government of FF and the PDs was only 18 per cent in 2007, down 10 percentage points on 2002. (These calculations apply only to those in constituencies where all parties stood, but are very similar for voters as whole.) Apart from that there is little marked change. Given that FF won about 40 per cent of the vote in both 2002 and 2007, there were relatively few voters, just 13-15 per cent, who would most like to see a FF single party government. The other notable feature of the table is the considerable variation within each year in what was seen as most desirable. Less than one third in either year agreed on an option. This fragmentation is much greater than the fragmentation in the party system itself.

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Table 4 shows the relationship between first preference vote and coalition preference, and it is an extremely close one. Few people cast a first preference vote for a party that is not included in the government that they say they would most like to see formed. Between 80 per cent and 89 per cent of those choosing an option cast a first preference vote that is consistent with their preferred coalition, with typically about 85 per cent doing so. In total about 90 per cent of voters vote consistently. (The figure would be higher if we categorised those voting first for FF and then for another party as being consistent with a desire for FF single party government. Arguably, such a pattern of voting could not affect FF's chance of an overall majority.) We can see that independents pick up support across the board regardless of coalition options, although 43 per cent of those wanting a FF/Ind option voted independent. To a significant degree voting for an independent may be seen to be voting local with no regard for national consequences, at least with the first preference. Only a minority (37 per cent) of independent voters wanted a government comprising FF + Independents.

[TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

Table 5 looks at the second preferences of FF, FG and Labour voters, as expressed in the exit polls, to see how they appeared to respond to the different cues in 2002 and 2007. It should be remembered that party cues on second preferences in 2002 and 2007 were very different for the FG/ Labour relationship, and so we should expect a closer exchange of second preferences between those two parties. The table shows this is the case. FG voters in 2007 were 9 percentage points more favourable to Labour than they were in 2002, while Labour voters were 20 percentage points more favourable, suggesting that voters did respond to the cues offered by their party's leaders. The N is quite small here, particularly in 2002 so care should be taken in drawing inferences from these figures, although the increases are significant statistically at the .05 level. Nevertheless, FG's relative gain from the relationship seems to have been greater than Labour's.

However, a wide spread of second preferences is also evident, reflecting perhaps the variety in coalition preferences. We also see a significant affinity between FG and FF, with around one-in-six voters for each party giving a second preference for the other. This may well represent sincere voting. The parties are similar in policy terms, and both would normally have a prominent TD in a constituency who might attract votes by virtue of his or her reputation for getting things done locally. It might also signal a coalition preference, but with this data we cannot know whether this is the case.

We can now start to put together what we know about coalition options and patterns of party preference. Here we will just be looking at first and second preferences separately, if contingently. We will not at this stage look at combinations of preferences.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

We do this using conditional logit, estimating the odds of a given first or second preference conditioned on coalition choice. The two models are very simple ones. The dependent variables are first and second preferences for a party and the only independent variables in each case are, for each party, whether or not the voter wants to see that party in government, as evidenced by the preferred coalition. Figure 1 shows the impact of coalition preference on first and on second preference votes respectively. The point in

each case shows the odds ratios for 2002 and 2007 combined, and the attached bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence interval for each ratio. (The Sinn Féin (SF) first preference odds ratio, in excess of 80, is not shown.)

Coalition preferences have a big effect on first preference votes, with FF, FG and Independent support more than twenty times more likely when the voter wants that party (or group) in government. There is a much smaller, though still significant, effect on second (party) preferences. Typically the odds of support suggest second preferences are only 2-3 times as likely to be cast for a party the voter wants to see in government as one she does not. When it comes to second preferences, support for the smaller parties seems to be influenced more by coalition choice than support for the larger parties, although individual differences are often too slight to be significant. It would appear that those wanting FF in a government vote first for FF and then for a possible partner rather than the other way around. Of course, this is what could be expected from vote outcomes: FF gets four times as many votes as Labour and 10 times as many as the Greens. In analyses not shown we found that this did not vary a lot between 2002 and 2007. In 2002 FG and Labour did much better from those wanting FG in government, but of course many fewer wanted that. The same is true of second preferences.

In a second analysis we look at the impact on second preferences, of a coalition preference for each party, contrasting 2002 with 2007. Again we employ conditional logit, estimating the odds of second preference support conditioned on the party of first preference and coalition choice. The model is estimated for 2002 and for 2007 separately. The dependent variable is second preferences and the independent variables in each case are again, for each first preference party, whether or not the voter wants to see that the second preference party in government, as evidenced by the preferred coalition. In Figure 2 we display odds ratios and confidence intervals. The first set of two points and bars shows the impact of coalition preferences on second preference, given a first vote for FF. The overall impact is quite modest although all effects are significant. For FF the odds ratio indicating the impact of a coalition preference is less than 2, and it is little more than that in the case of a FG voter. The impact looks somewhat larger in the case of all of the other parties, although the standard errors are larger for these parties and so the confidence intervals are wider. The most striking result concerns Labour voters whose

second preference in 2007 was much more likely to be structured by coalition preference than in 2002, with an odds ration of 5.6 as opposed to 1.7.^{xii}

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Finally, in Table 6, we look at the impact of coalition preference on first *and* second preference votes. The combination of party choices is the row variable and coalition preference is the column variable. The first point to note is that 42 per cent of voters do not have a combination of first and second choice parties that is consistent with *any* of the coalition options. Just over a quarter of these are voters opting for FF and FG, with the rest coming from those voting for two of the smaller parties, those voting for FG and PDs, SF or Independents and those not voting FF who have no second choice party. This is the largest figure in all columns, indicating that most voters do *not* express a set of preferences consistent with any of the coalition options.

[TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE]

However, where party choices are consistent with one of them, then the pattern is much more likely to be the one selected as the best coalition, and in a few cases more likely than all those not selected. For instance, 52 per cent of those wanting a FG/Labour coalition cast a ballot that was inconsistent with any of the other coalition options. But 36 per cent voted for a combination of FG and Labour, which is far more than any other individual combination (the next best was 3 per cent), and more than all other specified combinations combined (14 per cent). However, in the case of each of the government options FG/Labour/Green, FF alone, FF/PD, FF/Labour and FF/Ind, the total of all other vote combinations is larger than the combination consistent with that coalition preference. In sum, the combination of votes cast by 42 per cent of voters was inconsistent with *all* of the coalitions outlined; but 58 per cent did vote in a manner consistent with at least one of the coalitions outlined; overall 31 per cent did so in a way consistent with their own coalition preference and 27 per cent, although they could have done, did not.

[TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE]

It may be unwise to assert that those who gave a first and second preference to, for instance, FF or FG, were not expressing a preference for a government on the basis that they later said they preferred some other coalition. Had the list of options given to respondents been different the choices would probably also have been different, and almost certainly some would have opted for FF/FG had that option been on the list. However, it is possible to say that those who chose, say, FF/PD, but who voted for FF and Independent were not signalling their coalition preferences. On this basis, and leaving aside those who voted for a combination of parties they were not offered as a coalition choice, it might be argued that more than half of all voters who could be safely classified signalled a coalition preference.

5. Discussion^{xiii}

This paper addresses the issue of whether voters indicate a preference for a government when they vote under STV. It adds to recent literature that suggests that in mixed member systems the second vote could often be seen as indicating a preferred coalition, and to further studies which suggest that coalition preference is a better indicator of a single vote than party preference, at least for some voters. The contribution of this paper is to extend the analysis to a system where electors are given the option to rank the parties in order of preference. The question then becomes: to what extent does this ranking reflect or signal a coalition preference?

The Irish case is a useful one because in addition to the ordinal ballot we do see coalitions form, and because the notion that voters might promote a coalition with their lower preferences is part of the political discourse. There is also a data set covering two elections in which there was a striking contrast in the cues given to some parties' voters.

To a certain degree, the evidence here suggests that the preferences of voters do signal coalition preferences and that some voters may well be acting strategically. Voters' first preferences can be predicted very accurately from coalition preference. There is also evidence that the second preference can also be predicted in this way, although the

impact of coalition choice is much weaker and is large only in the case of those giving a first preference to one of the smaller parties. Those who vote for one of the two bigger parties are less concerned about whom that party might go into government with than are those who vote for smaller parties. Given these results it is hardly surprising that the ranking of the first two parties is often consistent with the set of parties a voter would like to see forming a coalition, although again this relationship is far from being a perfect one.

While the data used here are ideal in some ways – a large N, a measurement of coalition preference before the outcome is known, the measurement of the rank order of parties and variation across two elections – there are obvious limitations. The most important of these is probably the measurement of coalition preference. This is indicated by a single choice from a limited set of options, which is less than ideal for two reasons. First, because while this set may be defended as being realistic, it left out the actual outcome in 2007 as well as other possible combinations of three parties. The behaviour of those who vote for a combination of two parties that is not on the list of possible coalitions must be problematic. In general, it can be concluded that most are not voting for any coalitions likely to form (and very few voted PD/Green). At best they might be said to be playing a long game, hoping to boost the chances of such a coalition forming at some time in the future. However, it is also possible that they may simply be casting a sincere vote for the two parties they like best, with no strategic calculations based on likely postelection bargaining. The second reason is that we do not know by how much one option is preferred above others: a rating of different coalitions would be preferable to the ranking available here.

A further limitation is the behavioural operationalisation of party preference, which is thus indistinguishable from vote. Hence we cannot see whether FG voters, who perhaps prefer the PDs to Labour, nevertheless support Labour because they favour a FG/Labour government over any realistic alternative (and FG/PD was never realistic). In the absence of any variable that might provide a basis for assuming what a sincere set of preferences might be for any given voter, we cannot be precise about how far the preferences manifested by votes are sincere or strategic.

What are the implications of this analysis for our understanding of how voters are influenced by thoughts of coalitions? It is hardly surprising to find that the overwhelming

number of people do give a first preference to a party they would like to see in government. There is no reason to see this choice as other than sincere; as STV ensures that votes are not wasted, there is no reason for voters to go beyond their most preferred party when casting their first preference. When it comes to using the second preference to express a view on coalition partners, the results are much less strong, with only a minority clearly doing so by picking two parties from the same potential coalition. It might be considered that parties do not always signal clearly and loudly what their voters should do. When Labour and Fine Gael provided clear signals in 2007, there is good evidence that it had a significant impact on Labour voters. The most striking difference between 2002 and 2007 was the tendency of Labour voters to cast a second preference for FG. However, a large minority of voters seem to favour governments that are unlikely to form and have never done so. In particular many vote FF-FG. As we have indicated before, this may be the preferred government, which is not picked up by the exit polls as this option was not included. It may also be a sincere vote, since these two parties are considered as very close on most issues (see Marsh et al 2008: chapter 3).

For many voters it is also likely that their votes reflect more considerations than simply who governs. Voters care about local matters and local candidates and we can be sure that these factors carry some weight in the voter calculus. Indeed, to the extent that a voter is concerned largely with the effectiveness of a deputy to carry out a local service function and to deliver collective benefits to an area, it is understandable that the candidate might matter more than the party, although most would surely expect a deputy's ability to deliver benefits would be greater the more access that deputy had to government. STV is an electoral system which certainly allows the voter to behave in an entirely candidate centred manner. Many claim to do so, although it is arguably that such self-reported motivations exaggerate the importance of candidate and understate the importance of party (Marsh 2007) Even so, the candidate factor must explain some of the apparently non-strategic voting we have seen in the above analysis.

What are the implications here for other systems? One is methodological. There are imperfections in this data, as we have highlighted, and some of these might be addressed in future studies both in Ireland and elsewhere. In particular, data are required on the strength of preferences across coalition options, and on the values that might

underpin a sincere party ranking. A second is that the Irish case indicates that when voters are given the opportunity to vote in accordance with their coalition preferences, they appear to do so, particularly when the parties send strong signals.^{xiv} We see this despite the fact that a degree of candidate centred voting can be expected to obscure the manifestations of party based patterns of voting. Where the option to rank parties is not taken as an option to rank candidates – as it might not be in Australia for instance – we would expect to see even stronger strategic voting. A third implication is to reinforce the Gschwend's (2007) point that strategic voting does not simply benefit the larger parties: there are also benefits to smaller ones even if it is the supporters of the smaller parties who seem to behave more strategically.

Even so, the message of the vote is not always unambiguous. STV obviously allows voters to suggest which combinations of parties they would most like to see in government, and there is evidence that many use STV in this way, but it also allows voters to bring in a number of other considerations and indeed to choose one party for one reason and a second for another, and it appears that some do so. Hence, like the oracle at Delphi, when the Irish voter speaks it is not always clear what message is being conveyed.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1 Possible ballot patterns in Kildare North, 2007

		Signalling FF+PDs		Signalling FF+Lab		Signalling FG+Lab	
Jeff Aherne	Progressive Democrats	3	1				
Aine Brady	Fianna Fail	1	2	1	3		
Gerry Browne	Independent Labour						
Dr John F Corish	Independent						
Bernard J Durkan	Fine Gael					2	1
Shane Fitzgerald	Green						
Michael Fitzpatrick	Fianna Fail	2	3	2	2		
Cristin McCauley	Sinn Fein						
Catherine Murphy	Independent						
Darren Scully	Fine Gael					3	2
Emmet Stagg	Labour			3	1	1	3

Table 2 Number of parties supported

	Exit Poll 2002	INES2002
1	26	17
2	48	29
3	17	29
4	4	14
5	1	4
6	1	2
7	0	4

Source: RTE/LANSLOWNE Exit polls 2002 Irish National Election study 2002 (see www.tcd.ie/ines).

Note: analysis includes only voters for whom a full range of party options were available

Table 3 Coalition Preference

	2002	2007
Fine Gael With Labour	16	27
Fine Gael, With Labour and Greens	15	15
Fianna Fáil Alone	13	15
Fianna Fáil With PDs	28	18
Fianna Fáil With Labour	9	8
Fianna Fáil With Greens	3	4
Fianna Fáil With SF	6	8
Fianna Fáil With Independents	6	5
None Of These	1	1
Total	100	100
Number of cases	1,202	1,978

Source: RTE/LANSLOWNE Exit polls 2002 and 2007.

Note: analysis includes only voters for whom a full range of party options were available

Table 4 First preference vote by coalition choice 2002-7

	FF	FG	Labour	PD	Green	SF	Ind	Total%	N
Fine Gael With Labour	9	63	20	2	1	2	4	100	650
Fine Gael With Lab, Green	7	39	20	1	21	4	8	100	409
Fianna Fáil Alone	89	3	3	0	0	1	4	100	420
Fianna Fáil With PDs	69	5	2	16	1	1	7	100	662
Fianna Fáil With Labour	55	4	30	1	2	2	6	100	251
Fianna Fáil With Greens	33	3	6	0	46	3	8	100	115
Fianna Fáil With SF	14	2	3	1	2	74	5	100	162
Fianna Fáil With Inds	37	10	5	1	3	2	43	100	175
None Of These	29	14	10	4	17	3	23	100	26

Source: RTE/LANSLOWNE Exit polls 2002 and 2007.

Note: analysis includes only voters for whom a full range of party options were available

Table 5 FF, FG and Labour voters: second party supported

	FF	FG	Labour	PD	Green	SF	Ind	Others	None	Total%	N
FF											
2002		12	8	22	7	7	8	1	36	100	313
2007		18	12	16	6	6	10	1	32	100	598
FG											
2002	17		26	9	7	5	13	1	22	100	161
2007	16		35	6	8	3	8	0	25	100	334
Labour											
2002	16	19		13	12	12	13	5	12	100	95
2007	19	39		3	17	1	10	2	9	100	150

Source: RTE/LANSDOWNE Exit polls 2002 and 2007.

Note: analysis includes only voters for whom a full range of party options were available

Table 6 Coalition preferences and party choices 2002-2007

	Preferred coalition		FF	FF/PD	FF/Lab	FF/ Green	FF/SF	FF/Ind	Other	Total
	FG/Lab	FG/Lab with Greens								
Parties voted for										
FG/Labour	36	15	0	0	4	1	0	5	6	11
FG/Labour/ Greens *	3	19	0	0	5	4	0	2	7	4
FF alone	2	1	34	16	10	7	1	6	4	11
FF/PD	0	0	10	28	2	1	1	2	3	8
FF/Labour	3	3	10	8	26	6	1	8	3	7
FF/Green	1	2	5	4	4	34	1	3	0	4
FF/SF	1	1	5	3	7	3	24	4	4	4
FF/Independent	1	2	11	12	8	2	5	27	0	8
Other combinations	52	56	25	29	34	43	67	43	73	42
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	651	409	421	662	251	115	162	175	26	2,872

Source: RTE/LANSLOWNE Exit polls 2002 and 2007.

Note: analysis includes only voters for whom a full range of party options were available; * any two of these

Figure 1 Effect of coalition preference on first and second preference votes 2002-07, showing odds ratios and 95% confidence intervals

Figure 2 Effect of a coalition preference on second preference vote, by year and first preference, showing odds ratios and 95% confidence intervals

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank the two anonymous referees and the editors for their helpful comments.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ At least it is in Ireland, as the candidates are listed in alphabetic order independent of party. However, in some other instances, such as Malta, candidates are grouped on the ballot by party.

ⁱⁱ These have been the exception rather than the rule. Ireland might be expected to have few such pacts as it does not conform to Golder's (2006) likely conditions: ideologically polarised, disproportional electoral rules with potential partners similar in size. Labour and FG have also not often seen themselves as ideologically bedfellows.

Pre-electoral coalitions are more likely to form between ideologically compatible parties. They are also more likely to form when the expected coalition size is large (but not too large) and the potential coalition partners are similar in size. Finally, they are more likely to form if the party system is ideologically polarized and the electoral rules are disproportional.

ⁱⁱⁱ For instance, the party accepted the need to keep corporation tax low to encourage direct inward investment.

^{iv} This also assumes voters would make the same choice if they had only a first preference vote.

^v This is one more than the number of valid votes divided by the number of seats plus one: in a situation where 10,000 votes were cast and three seats were to be filled it would be 2,501.

^{vi} A partial exception is the record of electronic voting in three constituencies in 2002, analysed by Laver (2004) and discussed below.

^{vii} One is that surpluses and the votes of eliminated candidates, apart from those that arise in the first count, will be 'contaminated' because they will comprise both first preferences and second or lower preferences. Thus we do not know with certainty the

higher preferences of all, sometimes even most, of these voters. Restricting analysis just to first count surpluses, a relative rarity, carries its own problems in terms of representative sampling. A second problem, compounding the first, is that the counting process means that transferred packets of votes may also be unrepresentative. In a later count, when any surplus ensues, the votes that will be transferred on are those that are added last. Some analysts choose to ignore such transfers, but this then reduces the data available. A third problem is that the transfer indicates only the next *available* candidate, not the next marked on the ballot. Typically, analysts will distinguish between transfers under different conditions, such as when a candidate from party A is, or is not, available, but this becomes problematic as the conditions multiply and so the number of cases for any contingent analysis may be quite small.

^{viii} There was also an exit poll in 1997, but this data set was not included in this analysis because of significant differences in the measurement of coalition options. The only option available was the incumbent coalition vs. a FF/PD coalition. However, analysis not shown here does suggest that the inclusion of 1997 would not change the conclusions reached here.

^{ix} Judged against records from electronic voting in three constituencies in 2002 (see Laver 2003), the simulated ballot seems a better instrument. However, we think the data are serviceable if we assume that those who mentioned only one other party as getting their support were indicating their second ranked party when doing so, and eliminate from the analysis all those who mentioned three and more parties.

^x These data do have one further advantage, namely that a survey gives a more representative picture of the voter than the partial account given by looking at transferred votes. Only a small proportion of votes are ever transferred, some of which are transferred more than once. There is no theoretical basis for saying that all votes have an equal chance of being transferred and hence being seen and counted for the purposes of analysis.

^{xi} Laver (2000) points out that the traditional weakness of FF in the transfer market could owe less to an antipathy to the party among non-FF voters than to the strategic

calculations of FG and Labour voters whose chances of being in government would be weakened by a stronger FF.

^{xii} This results contrasts somewhat what might be learned from the transfer patterns in 2002 and 2007, perhaps for reason suggested above. Gallagher (2008: 95) notes that the PD-FF connection was closer in 2007, and this is also suggested by our analysis. However, he finds that while Labour voters preferred Fine Gael to Fianna Fáil in both years, the pattern was not much stronger in 2007 relative to 2002. However, Gallagher also notes that Labour-FG transfers were well below the levels seen in the 1970s, when parties may have been stronger, and options were fewer.

^{xiii} This echoes the result found by Kennedy (2006), who used a different methodology from the one used here, and also from that used by Gallagher- see note 8 above.