Preference Voting under PR-STV 1948–2011

Richard Sinnott and James McBride

Given the seismic shifts that transformed the Irish electoral landscape in February 2011, it is tempting to focus solely on the massive changes in the distribution of first preference votes recorded in that election. However, such an approach would grossly underrate the role of second and subsequent preferences in allocating seats and in uncovering fundamental aspects of Irish voting behaviour. In using these preferences to proceed count by count and elimination by elimination towards the final outcome, proportional representation by the single transferable vote (PR-STV) generates unparalleled additional evidence on how voters relate to the candidates and to the parties. In analysing this evidence, it is important to note several features of the Irish electoral system. In the first place, and contrary to a not uncommon view, in PR-STV each voter has only one vote. Secondly, that vote is transferable, according to the preference order indicated by the voter. Thirdly, although from the point of view of the act of voting, PR-STV is simple and transparent, the mechanics of transferring votes are quite complex. Because the complexities can affect the interpretation of the transfer evidence, the mechanics of PR-STV are addressed in some detail below.

The evidence generated by the transfer of votes can be thought of in terms of three behavioural variables. The first is party loyalty. This manifests itself when votes are being transferred from a candidate of a given party in a situation in which there is a continuing candidate from the same party in contention. In these circumstances a loyal vote or a loyal transfer is one that goes directly from the eliminated or elected...
candidate to his or her party running mate. The second variable is party plumping. This arises when there is no running mate available to receive the transferable votes. In this situation a party plumper opts to make his or her vote non-transferable rather than transferring the vote to a candidate of another party. The third variable measures inter-party transfers. These arise when a candidate of a given party is being eliminated and there is no running mate available to receive transfers but there is a continuing candidate of another party that is or has been in actual or potential, explicit or implicit alliance with the party of the candidate whose surplus or elimination votes are being distributed.

Before proceeding to the analysis of these variables, we must examine the transfer process, not for its own sake but because the evidence it produces, although voluminous, is incomplete and open to misinterpretation. There are four procedures involved in the transfer of votes and each gives rise to varying degrees of loss of information regarding the size and/or the direction of the transfer taking place. The simplest transfer arises from the elimination of a candidate with the lowest number of votes on the count in question. On the face of it, this aspect of the count should produce comprehensive information about transfer patterns, in that all of the votes of the eliminated candidate are examined and distributed to the continuing candidates or to the category of non-transferable votes. However, the now widespread procedure of multiple eliminations compromises the analysis in so far as it deprives us of vital information regarding the origin of the transfer in question. Given this indeterminacy, all cases of multiple eliminations are excluded from the analysis that follows.

The process is more complex when the votes to be distributed are the surplus votes of a candidate elected on the first count. In this case all the papers of the elected candidate are examined for continuing preferences, papers that do not indicate any preference among the continuing candidates having been first put to one side. This latter step means that the calculation of the proportions in which the surplus is to be distributed to the continuing candidates automatically produces a zero rate of non-transferability. In fact this zero rate is an artefact that is due to the omission of non-transferable votes at the outset.

The process becomes more complicated still when the task is to distribute the surplus votes of an elected candidate that have accrued on a count subsequent to the first count. In this case only the votes in the last parcel received are examined (that is, the votes received by the elected candidate on the count on which he or she was elected). If the number of transferable papers in the last parcel exceeds or equals the