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**The Modernization of Irish Political Campaigning:
The 2011 General Election**

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MSc in Politics and Communication

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The Modernization of Irish Political Campaigning: The 2011 General Election

Liam Murphy

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to contribute to the existing debate on global converging campaign trends. This convergence is often termed ‘Americanization’ with the United States being seen as the wellspring of the campaigning practices evident in an ever-increasing number of countries. However, rather than use the minimalistic ‘Americanization’, academics have begun to apply the term ‘modernization’ which accepts that domestic factors can contribute to the manner in which these trends are adopted and adapted. Using the 2011 Irish General Election as a case study, this research sought to identify the extent to which Irish political campaigning has been subject to this ‘modernization’.

The method of investigation used was to interview senior politicians and campaign officials who were responsible for both crafting and implementing the campaign. The interviews aimed to identify the four key characteristics of ‘modernization’, namely, professionalization, personalization, media-centricity and dealignment.

The results of the research were mixed. In line with modernization theory, campaigning has become more professionalized, although traditional campaigning practices have lost none of their importance. There was even less evidence for personalization with substance being rated higher than the style of a candidate, party affiliation for a candidate still running high and a rather unexceptional emphasis being placed on party leaders. The media meanwhile were found to play a massive role in Irish campaigns with a high incidence of strategy coverage and a focus on the horse race and controversy, thereby revealing evidence for modernization. As regards dealignment, while modernization suggests the emergence of ‘catch-all’ parties, Irish parties have always been ‘catch-all’ and still retain reasonably strong internal structures, although the number of ‘floating voters’ has increased exponentially. This research finds that while Irish campaigning is on the road to modernization, it is nonetheless affected by the national context and campaigning remains, to a large extent, quite traditional.

INTRODUCTION

There has been an upsurge of interest in recent times with regard to an apparent convergence of global campaigning practice. Electioneering in different countries around the world has become more alike, with America becoming the accepted source of many of these trends. As such, this convergence of campaigning practices has come to be known as ‘Americanization’ (Swanson and Mancini, 1996:5-6). The term has however been rejected by many for not taking into account the national idiosyncrasies of a given country, idiosyncrasies which inevitably impact on how and what ‘American’ campaign practices are embraced (Swanson & Mancini, 1996:4).

Rather than use the minimalistic ‘Americanization’, academics have begun to use the term ‘modernization’. This holds that electioneering is shaped not only by foreign pressures but also by the nature of a country’s party system, electoral laws and social transformation within a given country, affecting areas such as the media and social cleavages (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Kavanagh, 1995; Norris, 2004; Holtz-Bacha, 2004). This paper therefore uses ‘modernization’ as the basis of its investigation, believing it to be a more accurate description of developments in global campaigning.

While a large amount of research examining the debate surrounding ‘modernization’ has been produced, no study has explicitly done so in the Irish context, therefore leaving a substantial gap in the academic literature. Irish campaigning is a valuable subject of research in this area for a number of reasons. By international standards Ireland is a relatively new country, having only gained independence from Britain in 1922. Only Malta uses the same voting system in national elections, while the party system is among the most static in the world with the dominant political parties having arisen from the Civil War rather than from cleavages created by social issues (Busteed, 1990). Ireland is renowned for being exceptionally candidate-centred with extreme localism (Farrell, 1987:48). Furthermore, the publicly owned broadcaster Radio Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ) had no commercial rival until 1998 (Brandenburg & Hayden, 2002). The 2011 General Election is not only the most recent General Election and so the most appropriate case study to identify trends in ‘modernization’ but it also, more than any other General Election, changed the nature of the Irish party system.

In 2011 Ireland was hit by a political earthquake, the strongest to hit the small island since independence in 1922. What followed was a wave of interest and intrigue which captured not only the Irish, but the European public at large.

Ireland's Celtic Tiger had come to an ignominious end and the country had to be 'bailed out' by the International Monetary Fund, the European Union and the European Central Bank at the end of 2010. There was a very real concern that were Irish finances not handled correctly, not only would Ireland find itself in potentially irreparable economic turmoil, but the tenability of the Euro currency itself might be put in doubt. As such, the results of the election could have colossal ramifications for those at home and abroad.

There were indications that the party political system would be spectacularly altered. For eighty years Fianna Fáil¹ and Fine Gael had been the largest and second largest parties respectively in every election, yet, in 2011 as voters prepared to cast their ballots, polling suggested this natural order was set to be violently disrupted. The political earthquake struck with a ferocity that had been suggested but that no one ever genuinely expected. Fianna Fáil, the majority party in the outgoing ruling coalition, having been in government for 21 of the past 24 years and one of the most successful parties in the history of democratic politics, received only 17% of the vote, retaining only one seat in Dublin. Meanwhile, their coalition partners, the Green Party, were decimated, failing to hold on to any of their seats in Dáil Éireann (the lower house in the Irish parliament).

The 2011 General Election was of tremendous consequence in Ireland and its effect on the political system and how campaigns are approached has yet to be fully revealed. As the most recent General Election, this case study provides the most fertile opportunity for exploring the extent to which Irish campaigns have been modernized. This research has been undertaken to better comprehend 'modernization' and to explore to what extent its characteristics were reflected in the 2011 Irish General Election.

The study is divided into a number of sections. The first section reviews the literature that informs the theoretical basis of this research as well as that which pertains to 'modernization' in the Irish context. This section concludes with a discussion of the framework for analysis and a statement of the research objectives. The second section justifies the methodology used, in this case, semi-structured interviews, before discussing the sampling process, the design of the interview guide and the process of analysis. The third and final section then presents and discusses the findings resulting from the data analyses.

¹ See Appendix B for list of Irish political parties referenced

THEORETICAL SECTION

This section will review the relevant literature pertaining to the use of the term 'modernization'. It will begin with an examination of the appropriateness of the term 'Americanization' followed by an analysis of the finer details of 'modernization' before its four key characteristics, professionalization, personalization, media-centricity and dealignment are identified and expounded upon. A review of the literature relevant to 'modernization' in the Irish context will also be included. This section will end with an examination of the framework for analysis and a statement of the research objectives.

Americanization

No discussion of 'modernization' would be complete without first reflecting on the popularly used term 'Americanization'. This term can be defined as referring 'descriptively to particular types and elements of election campaigns and professional activities connected with them that were first developed in the United States and are now being applied and adapted in various ways in other countries' (Swanson and Mancini, 1996: 5-6). Plasser (2000) argues that the spread of American campaign practices was integral to appreciating why a global survey of over 500 political strategists found that 84% felt electioneering in their country was altogether different from only a few years previous. The work of Plasser, Scheucher and Senft (1999: 103) meanwhile revealed that 'in a survey of European consultants, almost two-thirds said that knowledge of the latest U.S. campaign literature is absolutely necessary in order to be a professional political marketer.' In fact, American elections are said to be the arena in which state-of-the-art procedures and techniques are pioneered (Blumler, Kavanagh and Nossiter, 1996: 59). American campaign practice is therefore often put forward as the preeminent electioneering style in the world (Scammell, 1998).

However, the suitability of this term is contested by those who maintain that what may look like simple copy-cat style adaptation, may hide country-specific explanations, modifications and innovations (Swanson & Mancini, 1996:4). Academics have long deliberated over the question of whether the term 'Americanization' is appropriate for describing the global homogenization of electioneering. What has emerged is a different term, 'modernization', which is posited to be more suitable to describe this apparent homogenization (Swanson and Mancini, 1996).

Modernization

‘Modernization’ is not as simplistic as ‘Americanization’ and this paper makes use of the former based on the contention that it is a more appropriate basis for investigation. Swanson and Mancini (1996:6) interpret ‘modernization’ to be the ‘adoption of Americanized campaign methods [that] may reflect a wider, more general process that is producing changes in many societies, changes which go far beyond politics and communication.’ It can therefore be said that while campaign officials from across the globe may adopt techniques developed and employed in America, they do so only when they are appropriate to the national setting and when adopted, their execution remains distinctive to that country (Norris 2000/2004; Plasser and Plasser, 2002:16-17; Negrine and Papathanassopoulos, 2007:103-5). According to ‘modernization’, electioneering is shaped not only by foreign pressures but also by social transformation within a given country that affects areas such as the media and social cleavages (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Kavanagh, 1995; Norris, 2004; Holtz-Bacha, 2004). Swanson and Mancini postulate that the more modernized a nation becomes, the more probable it is that advanced campaigning practices will be embraced and tailored for the national context (1996:6).

This is not to say that there is no literature that questions the inevitability of this convergence. Norris (2004) points out that the organization of media in a country (e.g. the operation of a public broadcaster) and the instituting of electoral law pertaining to any number of areas (e.g. the legality of paid advertising) can affect the adoption of campaign practices. Similarly, Negrine and Papathanassopoulos (2005) note that certain countries have stronger party systems which still maintain strict control over candidate nominations, unlike in the United States. However, the overwhelming academic consensus holds that there is a convergence in global campaigning trends and that their proliferation is becoming increasingly evident.

The Characteristics of Converging Campaign Trends

From the literature identified above, it is evident that there has been intense academic scrutiny regarding the source of converging campaign trends. ‘Americanization’ asserts that those practices pioneered and exercised in the United States have been embraced by other nations either selectively or sweepingly. ‘Modernization’ in contrast contests that while these campaigning methods are sourced in the United States, their implementation is a consequence of domestic processes resulting from social transformation. As such, ‘modernization’ is deemed more appropriate to inform this research. Before examining the

debate in a particular national setting, it is imperative that the characteristics of converging campaign trends are explored.

Professionalization

The first characteristic associated with converging campaign trends is *professionalization*. Political parties have begun to focus less on mobilizing the electorate and more on persuading the voter. The preferred mode of interacting with the electorate is now through the media (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000: 11-12) rather than through more traditional means such as gathering a mass of volunteers, staging public meetings and trekking door-to-door (Butler and Ranney, 1992:280). There has also been an apparent 'scientification' of electioneering that sees a greater role for specialists from the private sector (e.g. the public relations, advertising and marketing professions). As a result, party officials have ceded much of the influence they once held over campaigning to these specialists (Swanson and Mancini, 1996:14). The influence of these professionals has led to research, opinion polling, focus groups and consequently 'spin' becoming intrinsic to any campaign (Scammell, 1998).

Personalization

The second characteristic is the *personalization* of campaigning. This means that the emphasis of a campaign, both from a media and voter perspective, is on particular individual candidates, their physical appearance and communication skills. No longer relying on the party apparatus, candidates have their own structures in place to engage in a campaign using money obtained from their own fundraising efforts. Enigmatic party leaders, the subject of extensive media attention, fill the void left following dealignment by attracting the allegiance of voters once bestowed on political parties (Swanson and Mancini, 1996:10-14). The increasingly focused coverage by the media of party leaders has given modernized elections a 'presidential' feel (Kavanagh, 1995:212).

Yet the importance of television in contemporary society has meant that the physical appearance, presentation and communication skills of candidates at every level has never been so integral to campaigning (Bowler and Farrell, 1996:15-16). Personalization also often drives candidates to represent themselves as anti-establishment and to disassociate themselves from their own party thereby distinguishing themselves somewhat from the dirty business of politics (Troy, 1991). An inevitable concern arising from this personalization is that style will overshadow ability in the minds of voters when casting their ballots (Jackman, 2008).

Media-centricity

The third characteristic that can be noted is the *media-centricity* of campaigning. The role the mass media play in an election is fundamental to the very notion of modernization (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Society transforms as it modernizes with the development of a formidable mass media that remodels the face of political campaigning (Mair, 1997:39). The media plays an intrinsic role in modern campaigning, no longer simply facilitating interaction between voters and politicians (Butler and Ranney, 1992:283). It has the power to change the political fortunes of candidates and parties based on the quantity and kind of coverage it gives (Hallin and Mancini, 2004:32-34).

The driving force of this media power was the emergence of television as the primary source of news about campaigning (Plasser, 2002; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002:10-13). When the television industry becomes commercialized it allows international conglomerates to move into the media market which can mean trends in media structure and operation across different national media markets converge (Swanson and Mancini, 1996:13). This happening therefore supposes that campaigns in different countries adapt in a similar way (Scammell, 1998).

The media has been blamed for making the public more cynical by emphasizing discord and controversy, often making an election into a 'horse race' between opponents rather than covering the more important questions of the day. Norris (2000) argues that the political class are just as much at fault for this and that they court this type of coverage when it is to their own advantage. The media's analysis of elections has also begun to include 'strategy coverage' which looks at the standing of those running and assesses how they might attain or maintain the lead (Capella and Jamieson, 1997:31-33).

Dealignment

A final characteristic that can be identified is *dealignment*. This is a process whereby voters become increasingly nonpartisan thereby causing a deterioration in the strength and structure of the party apparatus (Swanson, 2005). This heralds an end to the traditional mass party, as the more modern a country becomes the less it is subject to stratification. Political parties lose their support base as society ceases to find its basis in the traditional pillars of society such as political parties, trade unions and religious organizations, instead consisting of distinct self-interested individuals. This means that parties lose their base and are forced

to reach out to the wider electorate, emphasizing issues relating to individual wants and needs rather than issues rooted in political and cultural movements (Blumler, 2001:202).

‘Modernization’ in the Irish Context

While no study has been undertaken explicitly seeking to examine the extent to which Irish campaigning has been subject to modernization, there is a vast array of relevant and valuable literature that will hitherto be discussed. The literature is arranged according to the key characteristics of modernized campaigns.

Professionalization in Ireland

As in other countries across the world, modern Irish election campaigns have, in many ways, become more professionalized. As recently as 1970, it was observed that the ‘small and comparatively underdeveloped’ resources of party headquarters meant that candidates were reliant on their own exertions (Chubb, 1970). In the decades since then, substantial financing from the public coffers, in tandem with significant independent fund-raising, has resulted in political parties being considerably better resourced.

Electioneering has become more professionalized with the employment of public relations, advertising, marketing and business skills, techniques and strategy. Irish campaigns have also seen an increased involvement of Irish, British and American experts from the private sector (Scammel, 1998; Collins & Butler, 2007; Marsh, 2010). *The Irish Times* journalist Fintan O’Toole has noted: ‘The use of professional election strategists, who run campaigns across the globe, is now so well established that it is scarcely noticed. American consulting firms are now as central to Irish elections as back-slapping and promises’ (O’Toole, quoted in Collins and Butler, 2007:34). However, it must be noted, the local campaign plays an essential part, perhaps *the* essential part. Irish campaigns witness startlingly high levels of personal contact (Sturm, 1986; Karp et al., 2003) with almost 80 per cent of voters being visited by a candidate or a member of a campaign team during an election (Marsh, 2002:262).

Personalization in Ireland

While campaigning has become more professionalized, particularly at the national level, modern Irish campaigning has, in many ways, cut a different path to other countries (Marsh, 2000; Mair and Marsh, 2004; Marsh, 2004; Marsh et al., 2008). For example, while

personalization is a feature of Irish campaigns, it manifests itself in a manner not found elsewhere, with perhaps an unprecedented focus on the local candidate (Marsh, 2010:183).

This 'endemic' localism (Farrell, 1987:48) is often attributed to the Irish electoral system which exercises proportional representation with a single transferable vote (PR-STV) in constituencies of three to five seats. Only Malta and Ireland use PR-STV for national elections, a fact that perhaps above all else makes Ireland such an attractive prospect for research (Sturm, 1986:69). With more than one candidate from each major party running in every constituency, candidates must campaign not only against those from other parties but also against those from their own, forcing them to stress their individual attributes and achievements above all else (Carey and Shugart, 1995; Collins and Butler, 2007:42).

However, not only does the electoral system encourage localism but Irish voters themselves generally want national politicians to have a local focus and to know their local representative as an individual, seeing this as a beneficial byproduct of the political set up (Marsh, 2010). Furthermore, the importance of a candidate's local roots, community work and character helps to explain the large number of Independent candidates consistently elected to Dáil Éireann (Busteed, 1990: 59).

Yet, while Irish campaigns are indeed personalized, this may be more a consequence of the electoral system rather than any apparent modernization. There is also increased focus on party leaders in modern Irish campaigns, largely attributable to the role the media plays in elections, accentuating as it does this focus on the individual by allowing candidates build up their profile. Party affiliation, although less intense perhaps than in previous years, is still strong and informs to a high degree the voting preferences of the electorate (Marsh, 2000:145).

Media in Ireland

The first party political broadcast in Ireland was aired on Radio Éireann in 1954 (Sturm, 1986:66). Irish television broadcasting came into being in 1961 with the creation of the publicly owned RTÉ and within four years 'party political telecasts were watched by one-third of the population' (O'Leary, 1979: 65). The first televised debate occurred in 1981 (Arnold, 1984: 180) and they continue to feature in Irish elections to this day. Recent times have seen large-scale change in the media system, most notably in 1998 with the arrival of the first (and only) commercial broadcaster, TV3 (Brandenburg & Hayden, 2002). While

Irish broadcasters are regulated by the Irish Broadcasting Authority (IBA), they are not required to deliver equal coverage of all parties. Broadcasters, along with newspapers, generally confer a proportion of coverage on each party equivalent to their size in Dáil Éireann (Brandenburg & Hayden, 2002:189). Furthermore, neither broadcasters nor newspapers explicitly endorse candidates or parties.

The Irish media devote a huge amount of coverage to every campaign with daily press conferences, televised debates and photo-opportunity-friendly tours of the constituencies all consistent features of campaigns (Brandenburg and Zalinski, 2007). The media itself embraces foreign practices with RTÉ in 2007 going so far as to hire the services of an American pollster to host a show dedicated to campaign coverage (Brandenburg and Zalinski, 2007:168). In addition, the Irish media have traditionally engaged in strategy coverage that analyzes the state of the parties, their platforms and what needs to be done to attain or retain a lead in the polls (Sturm, 1986:67).

Dealignment in Ireland

The two parties that have led every government since Irish independence, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, were formed by the opposing sides in the Civil War of the early 1920s. As such, party loyalty was traditionally seen to be very strong. However, as in other European nations, significant dealignment has occurred resulting in an 'available' electorate (Gallagher, 1985:154) of 'floating voters' (Leahy, 2007). The large Irish political parties are all situated in or around the centre of the political spectrum and they all adopt a broadly populist platform.

Irish society does not have any significant cleavages that dictate the structure of the political order so the country could be said to have 'politics without social bases' (Whyte, 1974). For example, while an overwhelming majority of the Irish population is at least nominally Catholic, this does not translate into support for a party with an overtly Catholic-influenced manifesto (Busteed, 1990). Rose (1974:18) writes that 'in Ireland people do not divide politically along class, religious, or regional lines.' Carty (1976:195) meanwhile maintains that 'the three principal political parties...all have socially heterogeneous bases of electoral support and they compete with each other from ideologically indistinguishable positions,' and later adds that 'social characteristics do not structure voting behaviour in Ireland' (Carty, 1981:24).

Irish political parties have therefore always been what Kircheimer (1966) described as ‘catch-all’ parties, divided only by allegiances during the Civil War that was fought over the treaty terms agreed with Britain granting Ireland independence. The larger parties are ultimately associations of many groups (Gallagher, 1985: 152). While party numbers had been on a downward trend, recent restructuring and recruitment drives have kept party numbers up, reaching an historic high in the case of Fine Gael, yet the commitment of these new members is suspect, with involvement translating to the attendance of perhaps only a couple of meetings per year (Weeks, 2010:156).

Framework for Analysis

This chapter has so far laid out the debate surrounding the use of the term ‘modernization’ to describe the seeming convergence of global campaigning practices and discussed literature relevant to the Irish context. This study intends to contribute to the debate by applying the theory to Ireland’s General Election 2011. The researcher hopes to supplement and enrich the existing literature on the topic by examining the extent to which Irish campaigning practice has followed trends in global electioneering and therefore the extent to which it has been subject to ‘modernization’. The study will operationalize the theory by seeking to identify the four key characteristics of modernization outlined above, namely professionalization, personalization, media-centricity and dealignment, in the Irish setting. This will be done through the analysis of interviews, which include questions informed by the theory pertaining to these four characteristics, conducted with senior politicians and campaign strategists involved in the election.

Research Objectives

Utilizing the concepts mentioned, this research explores how those responsible for designing and implementing campaigns in Ireland perceive the extent to which Irish campaigns have been subject to modernization. While previous studies have touched on areas relevant to this line of research, none have explicitly analyzed the phenomenon of modernization in an Irish context.

Thus, the overarching research question for this study is: ‘To what extent can trends of modernization be identified in the 2011 Irish General Election?’

This investigation will contribute to the research on modernization by focusing on a country, namely the Irish Republic, which has hitherto not been targeted specifically for such a study.

The unique Irish context will provide new and fertile ground from which to extract findings that will further our understanding of how and why campaign practices are converging across the world. This research will also add to the literature relating to Irish politics and provide explanations for the manner in which campaigns have developed, making them comparable to other national contexts. The researcher believes that documenting and analyzing the knowledge and opinions of those who craft and implement campaigns is essential to both achieve real understanding of the topic and to aid future research in this area.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This section will discuss the research design and methodology of this study. It analytically appraises and justifies the decision to select the qualitative method of interviewing and endeavours to give a cogent explanation of the methodological choices made and the process undertaken.

Research Design Strategy

The qualitative method of interviewing was selected as the researcher felt this to be the most suitable method to tackle the stated research question. Furthermore, considering the nature of the research question, it was both suitable and preferable to acquire the viewpoint of those who plan and run campaigns, namely senior campaign officials and politicians. As such, semi-structured 'elite interviews' would be required which would facilitate vibrant dialogue because of the interviewees' proficiency in their field (Flick, 2006:165).

An interview 'aims to map and understand the respondents' world...the objective is a fine-textured understanding of beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations in relation to the behaviours of people in particular social contexts' (Gaskell, 2000:39). Moreover, in an elite interview, an interviewee's divergence from or strange interpretation of a question can represent a clarification, an augmentation or something wholly new with regard to the object of study (Dexter, 1970:6). Consequently, while responses may not conform to what the researcher might expect, it generally yields valuable information for analysis (Deacon et al., 1999:69-70). Hertz and Imber (1995:311) point out that this form of interviewing enables the researcher to adapt the interview by following up on particular aspects of what an interviewee has divulged.

There are of course disadvantages and difficulties with interviews. The material being generated in this study, for example, relates to the past (it would have been preferable to conduct the interviews while the campaign was unfolding or promptly thereafter). In addition, Gaskell (2002:44) notes that the interviewee may ignore particular information, considering it to be common knowledge. It is also imperative that the researcher is conscious of their own effect on the interview, taking steps not to, for instance, ask leading questions (Haralambos and Holborn, 2004). Meanwhile, Ostrander (1995:146) points out that experts are prone to engage in meaningless chatter and reveal only what they deem appropriate and correct as opposed to their genuine thoughts and feelings on a matter.

Bearing in mind these disadvantages and potential pitfalls, the researcher contemplated other methods, none of which were reasoned to be more suitable. Focus groups were viewed as inappropriate in light of the elite status of the interviewees, all of whom would have demanding work schedules, meaning it would be troublesome to get them in one place at the same time.

The researcher acknowledges that this study may have profited had a content analysis of newspaper coverage of the campaign been carried out. This is the principle historical account of the election, produced and published as it occurred. Analyzing this coverage would relieve the researcher of the need to depend on an interviewee recollecting past events. Nevertheless, content analysis, by assigning quantitative values to the transcripts would not consider the environment in which the coverage was produced nor the complexities of latent inferences. In addition, critical discourse analysis of campaign advertisements could have explored why campaigning took the form it did and what the consequences were for the study.

Research procedure

Sampling

In order to undertake this research, ‘purposeful sampling’ was used to select eleven senior campaign officials who had been engaged in the 2011 Irish General Election. The researcher had supposed that acquiring the consent of eleven relevant individuals to be interviewed would be problematic, but as it turned out, all those asked to participate replied promptly, expressing their willingness to be involved. The contact details of all individuals were acquired online using party and personal websites, as well the professional networking website LinkedIn.

Gaskell (2000:41) explicates that the value of a study is judged not by the quantity but rather the range of perspectives collected and documented. This was accomplished by including at least one representative from six Irish political parties (Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, Labour, Sinn Féin, The Green Party and The Socialist Party) as well as an individual who worked on an Independent campaign and a private sector professional who was working for one of the parties. The caliber of interviewee was exceptionally high with the party officials holding the title of either General Secretary, Deputy Director of Elections, Director of Publicity, National Organizer or Campaign Manager. The politicians interviewed were either party leaders or present or former government ministers. It was vital that politicians be interviewed in that they still play an integral role in developing campaign strategy in Ireland.

An appropriate time and date was arranged with each interviewee, with all concerned proving very accommodating. As the researcher was based in London until the end of June, it was deemed appropriate to fly back to Dublin to complete the first five interviews which had been set for the last week of the month. This was considered the most suitable course of action as the researcher had encountered serious problems in the pilot study using Skype, with one interview cutting out 18 times due to a poor Internet connection. The remaining interviews were completed in the first and second weeks of July in Dublin.

An ethics checklist was completed in advance of the research being carried out and no ethical concerns arose. All involved were content for their responses to be documented using an Mp3 voice recorder. The researcher followed appropriate protocol by informing the interviewees that the Mp3 device could be turned off at any stage (Warren, 1000:91-2), something which was requested of the researcher several times while an interviewee received a phone call or was addressing a colleague. Each individual was given a summary of the project before the data was collected (Deacon et al., 1999:74) and interviews lasted between thirty minutes and an hour. The interviewees were notified that they could read the transcript in advance of it being analyzed and make changes. They were also emailed a copy of the topic guide for the interview beforehand. Verbal consent was recorded on the Mp3 device prior to each interview taking place.

Design of Interview Guide

It was essential that a comprehensive interview guide was produced that drew from the relevant academic material on the topic. It was also necessary to utilize approachable wording (the pilot study had highlighted certain words and phrases which caused difficulty)

and to abstain from including leading or negative questions while keeping in mind that it was a model and need not be expressly accorded to (Kvale, 1996).

A pilot study had highlighted certain words and phrases that caused difficulty and needed to be explained. It had also revealed the need to ask broad questions that allow the interviewees to express themselves fully. The researcher had found himself guilty of asking leading questions and of sticking too rigidly to the guide. Furthermore, the pilot exposed some gaps in the guide and that not all topics were covered. The researcher believes that these difficulties that were identified did not repeat themselves in the study proper and that it benefited greatly from having completed this pilot.

The analysis aims to discover the extent to which trends of modernization can be recognized in Ireland, using the 2011 General Election campaign as a case study. This considered, it was pertinent to structure the interview guide around the literature on the four distinguishable trends i.e. professionalization, personalization, media-centricity and dealignment. While the following discussion may repeat information contained in the previous section, it is imperative that the theoretical basis of the interview guide is fully understood.

Regarding *professionalization*, the interview guide included lines of inquiry referring to the ‘scientification’ of electioneering (Swanson and Mancini, 1996:14). The guide then suggested probing about the apparent decline of traditional means of campaigning such as gathering a mass of volunteers, staging public meetings and trekking door-to-door (Butler and Ranney, 1992:280). Questions that made reference to the increased centralization of campaigning and the tension between symbolic and practical professionalization (Holtz-Bacha, 2007) were also included.

The second trend identified is the *personalization* of campaigns. As such, the importance of physical appearance, presentation and communication skills of candidates (Bowler and Farrell, 1996:15-16) was investigated. Questions relating to the ‘presidential’ nature of Irish campaigns (Kavanagh, 1995:212) and the extent to which candidates portray themselves as anti-establishment (Troy, 1991) were also included.

The third trend is *media-centricity* and as such the interview guide included questions relating to the role of the media in the campaigning process. These included those relating to the role of television (Plasser, 2002), whether the media can be blamed for making the public more cynical by emphasizing discord and controversy, often making an election into a ‘horse race’ and whether it engages in ‘strategy coverage’ (Capella and Jamieson, 1997:31-33).

The final trend is *dealignment* which sees a weakening of the political party (Swanson, 2005). Drawing from the literature, the interview guide contained questions relating to the impact of social cleavage on campaigning (Blumler, 2001:202) and how societal changes have effected Irish elections (Negrine, 2008). The issue of party attachment (Mancini, 1999) was also referenced.

Thematic analysis was selected as the most suitable method to interpret the data collected, having been tested in the aforementioned pilot study. A criticism often leveled at thematic analysis is that it is said to represent an ‘anything goes’ methodology (Antaki et al., 2002). That said, ‘it provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006:78). The coding that took place was informed by the six-stage process put forward by Braun and Clarke (2006) which led to several themes becoming apparent, with some being amalgamated, resulting in four broad themes, all of which had two sub-themes. Where quotations were used, they had been deemed to be particularly indicative of either an individual’s opinion or a broader theme that was arising from the transcripts.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

This section discusses the findings accruing from the thematic analysis applied to the eleven interviews conducted for this research. Four primary themes relevant to the research question were identified, all of which have two sub-themes.

Greater Professionalization

Size Matters

Modern campaigns are said to have become increasingly professional. This has led to an apparent ‘scientification’ of electioneering that sees a greater role for individuals from the private sector (e.g. from the public relations, advertising and marketing professions). As a result, party officials have ceded much of the influence they once held over campaigning to these specialists (Swanson and Mancini, 1996:14).

Almost all interviewees agreed that, in general, campaigning in the 2011 Irish General Election saw a high level of ‘scientification’ and the involvement of private sector

professionals. Frank Flannery Co-Deputy Director of Elections for Fine Gael noted that while Fianna Fáil had traditionally been the most prominent user of professionalized campaigning techniques, 2011 was an abnormal year in this respect for the party, blamed as they were for the economic crash. Darragh O'Brien, Fianna Fáil's Leader in the Seanad (The upper house in the Irish parliament) explains:

“Of course we would have had as a party, private sector professional support in relation to message, but look, to be frank with you, we were disorganized. Because of the crisis the country was in, our backs were up against the wall...You're not going to put everything into a campaign when you know you're going to lose.”

Yet Fine Gael, who had perhaps most to gain from Fianna Fáil's troubles, demonstrated the application of these modernized campaigning trends. As Mark Mortell, Co-Deputy Director of Elections for Fine Gael and a senior executive at private communications firm Fleishman Hillard explains:

“[Fine Gael] used specialist political polling companies, US-based, to help us, with an Irish partner to the work on the ground here. A well-known American polling company, Greenburg and we use Amárach on the ground here to do the fieldwork and focus groups...That happens in most electoral cycles and peace time as well. It's been hugely important and very, very good and significant in our strategic planning...Market research has been a vital component throughout the whole thing, as it has been in business too, so we're just applying the same principles.”

Modernization theory suggests that these outside professionals assume much of the responsibility in campaigning, yet Mortell points out that the relationship is far more balanced, with those from outside working in conjunction with “senior politicians...the party leader obviously, people who work at party headquarters and people who would work closely with the leader,” while the Director of Elections was appointed “from among the coterie of senior politicians.”

The Labour Party meanwhile, now the second largest party in Dáil Éireann following the 2011 General Election, has traditionally ranked third, behind the larger Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael parties. Unable to outspend the other two parties, it has reached out beyond Ireland's borders for assistance in campaigning. David Leach, National Organizer for the Labour campaign in 2011 explains how the party approached the election with its more limited resources:

“We did some polling... and we had an advertising agency. We don’t use political consultants in the same way, perhaps, Fine Gael does...but what we do is we get free help and we give free help to fellow social democratic labour parties around the world...like the American Democrats and we would share techniques...because the Right tends to have more money to spend on these things but our budgets obviously are much smaller, so we tend to share expertise for free, where we can...for example, in debate preparation, we had the same guy who ran the debate prep for Gordon Brown before the British General Election run our debate prep.”

According to Eamon Ryan, Leader of the Green Party and also Bart Storan, Campaign Manager for the Independent candidate Stephen Donnelly who ran “a one hundred per cent volunteer campaign,” lack of finance for smaller parties and Independents means they often must rely solely on volunteerism (although this can be of high quality) and that they have to forgo comparatively detailed research. Yet some of the traditionally smaller more ideologically extreme parties such as Sinn Féin and the Socialist Party made a point of not employing outside expertise. Seán MacBrádaigh, Director of Publicity for Sinn Féin expounds on this by saying:

“We have zero involvement of outside people...Financially it probably wouldn’t work out either but it’s primarily a political reason...we work very much on the basis of volunteerism and conviction politics...There would not just be resistance to outside experts, this is not an argument against professionalism because everyone in Sinn Féin tries to become more and more professional at what they do...but for us it would be very very important that the people doing the advising, crafting and delivering of that message actually believe in the ideology and the philosophy and the politics of Sinn Féin.”

Furthermore, according to MacBrádaigh and Socialist Party leader, Joe Higgins, no party worker can take home more than the average Irish wage, a stipulation which no doubt discourages the advances of those in the private sector.

While in line with modernization theory, campaigning has become increasingly professionalized with the involvement of personnel from outside the party apparatus and the adoption of techniques and strategies utilized in the private sector, due to financial and ideological reasons, smaller parties have refrained from doing so.

An integrated campaign

So what then is the relationship between another aspect of professionalization, the centralization of resources and strategy in a head office and more traditional modes of campaigning in Ireland, such as gathering a mass of volunteers, staging public meetings and trekking door-to-door (Butler and Ranney, 1992:280) when in modernized campaigns the preferred mode of interacting with the electorate is through the media (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000: 11-12)? How is Ireland, which is renowned for its traditional local campaigning, affected by this centralization that increasingly places the media rather than the candidate between politics and the public?

Seán Haughey, outgoing Minister of State for the Department of Education and Skills in 2011, echoes the sentiments of all interviewees when he asserts the importance of traditional campaigning in Ireland:

“At the end of the day, nothing beats a party worker or a party candidate calling to somebody’s door, meeting them face to face and asking them for their vote. And despite all our sophistication as an electorate, I think the electorate still expects that. That’s the political culture in this country.”

So intrinsic to Irish politics is this form of campaigning that established politicians and even Government Ministers are expected to engage the public in person. Eamon Ryan, the outgoing Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources in 2011 speaks of his own situation which mirrored that of other cabinet members:

“Even if you’re a government Minister you need to be seen, people know who you are at that stage, they know what you stand for, they have a sense of you, whether they like you or not. But you’d be surprised at how important it is still to keep in regular contact...The only way you can undermine, get a competitive advantage, in a sense, is by direct contact with people. And you should never, in Irish politics, you can’t really lose that.”

While this traditional campaigning style, evolved as it is from Ireland’s unique political culture, remains integral, the encroaching forces of modernization are also evident. Modern campaigns involve the centralized control of strategic choices, resources and media relations. This centralized headquarters would also dictate a standardized party message and provide stylized election material to candidates. Joan Burton, Minister for Social Protection and Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, like all other interviewees bar Socialist Party Leader Joe Higgins, who only sees a practical application, maintains this is “intensely practical, but

also...rated by political opinion-formers and journalists as to how good the quality of the campaign was.” According to Mark Mortell, Co-Deputy Director of Elections for Fine Gael the media is responsible for this modernization:

“The media market has moved on. The electorate...are used to being spoken to in digestible soundbites, they are used to being addressed in a particular way by commercial brands and businesses...the professionalization has been an evolution that you either go with and adapt and change or get left behind.”

In fact, Co-Deputy Director of Elections for Fine Gael, Frank Flannery, goes further than any of the other interviewees in saying that “localism has very little to do with an Irish General Election...you win or lose the election if you get the message right.”

Yet almost all interviewees agree that an effective campaign in Ireland should be what General Secretary of Fianna Fáil Seán Dorgan terms “an integrated campaign” which melds traditional campaigning with centralized coordination of resources, strategy and communications. As regards Irish campaigning therefore, the evidence gathered suggests that no single approach will work. It is also clear that there is mixed support for modernization in that while the centralization of resources, strategy and communications, a feature of modernization, has come to have both practical and symbolic relevance in Ireland, the nation still refuses to let go of more traditional forms of campaigning.

Personalized Political Campaigning

Substance trumps Style

Modernization theory asserts that campaigns have become more personalized which means that, due primarily to the rise of television, there is an upsurge of emphasis on physical appearance, presentation and communication skills. Charismatic party leaders garner enormous media coverage and give campaigns a ‘presidential’ feel. A byproduct of this development, however, is that there can be a focus on style over substance.

There was unanimous agreement among all interviewees that presentation and communication skills were enormously important, with the proliferation of media training in terms of messaging and presentation, especially for key spokespersons, most certainly a feature of campaigning. The attractiveness of a candidate, which is said to matter more with the rise of television, was deemed not to matter at all with Bart Storan, Campaign Manager

for the successful Independent Stephen Donnelly campaign dryly observing: “Have you seen Stephen? He is not a good looking man. I would have given a lot for a full head of hair, I’ll tell you.” Yet it was always important to be as Joe Higgins put it “neat and presentable.” David Leach gives an account of one candidate buying four of the same turquoise jacket which made her wholly identifiable wherever she went, thereby demonstrating that style can indeed help. Leach goes on to say that for candidates, every doorstep represents a job interview and to dress accordingly.

Yet all interviewees agreed that as Bart Storan put it, “style certainly helps but without substance you are nothing.” This appears to be particularly true of the 2011 General Election which as Seán Dorgan puts it, “was very much a substantive election.” This election was different because of the economic turmoil the country was languishing in, meaning that people were terribly concerned about their wellbeing. Academic literature shows that the importance of policy in this election was significantly higher than in previous years (43% versus 25% in 2007) (Marsh and Cunnigham, 2011:185).

Style is also of little importance when it comes to party leadership. Modernization theory suggests that campaigns will increasingly focus on charismatic party leaders who garner enormous media coverage, thereby giving campaigns a ‘presidential’ feel. While all interviewees agreed that leaders must perform well at set pieces, especially the televised debates, only 7% of voters cast their ballot based on a party leader (Marsh and Cunnigham, 2011:185). Joe Higgins maintained that a leader is only important if he makes “spectacular mistakes” or if he is “spectacularly persuasive.” Frank Flannery argues that it is particularly important for the leader of the opposition to “look the part” while Joan Burton believes key spokespeople to be just as important as the party leader.

Many of the interviewees put forward Enda Kenny, the current Taoiseach, as an example of a leader who was pilloried by the press for being a bad performer, yet led his party into government nonetheless. Mark Mortell provides an explanation for this by saying: “I think it’s quite interesting that sometimes just the authenticity or the empathy or the compassion is what people are looking for, rather than a very polished, smooth, perfect performer.” Seán MacBrádaigh of Sinn Féin, which for the first time had its party leader, Gerry Adams, contesting an election in Ireland, while noting that it was indeed an advantage to have a strong leader, maintains that Ireland is too parochial, too small, to have presidential-style political leaders.

Once again therefore, we observe mixed results in support of modernization. While communication skills, presentation and being well turned out are all essential in Irish politics, this is no substitute for substance which trumps style every time. Furthermore, while a leader's role is an important one, there is not the emphasis on stylish, charismatic presidential leaders that is found in many other countries.

A loose federation of sole traders?

Personalization is said to drive candidates to represent themselves as anti-establishment and to disassociate themselves from their own party in an effort to distinguish themselves somewhat from the dirty business of politics (Troy, 1991). In Ireland, because of the multi-seat constituencies, candidates must distinguish themselves from other members of the same party, often expending more energy campaigning against party colleagues than other candidates (Collins and Butler, 2007:42). Mark Mortell recounts a conversation with John Bruton on this subject where the former Taoiseach said: "You have to remember Mark, a political party is to all intents and purposes a loose federation of sole traders."

Seán Haughey agrees, maintaining that it varies from election to election whether a candidate embraces to a greater or lesser extent the party label. In 2011, the Fianna Fáil brand was seen by many as toxic, blamed as the party was for the economic crash. Darragh O'Brien noted how many within his party didn't even put the party logo on their election material. However, both O'Brien and General Secretary of Fianna Fáil Seán Dorgan insist that party affiliation is even more important when the party is in trouble, that all Fianna Fáil had in the election were voters loyal to the party "who would stick by you through thick and thin." David Leach, National Organizer for Labour, while agreeing that party affiliation can be of benefit to a candidate when his/her party is under pressure, also felt Labour candidates got a competitive advantage from the party brand. However, he adds a caveat, noting that the candidate has to "be qualified" and have reached "a minimum level" before the party brand becomes an advantage. The personal factor is too important for large swathes of people to vote blindly for a party.

It was also an advantage for candidates from the traditionally smaller Left-leaning parties (Sinn Féin and The Socialist Party) and Independents to portray themselves as anti-establishment in this election above all others because of the cynicism arising from the economic collapse. As Bart Storan Campaign Manager for the Independent Stephen Donnelly campaign puts it:

“I do think that there is an anti-establishment vibe and I do think that you can profit out of that and we certainly played that card in 2011. In 2011 I think there was more of it because the whole system had quite obviously crumbled around our ears.”

Yet Seán MacBrádaigh explains that a balance must be found between being anti-establishment and convincing the public that your party’s platform is realistic. While Sinn Féin did exceptionally well in the 2011 General Election, winning around a 10 per cent share of the vote, Frank Flannery, Co-Deputy Director of Elections for Fine Gael believes that this growth will be limited:

“Sinn Féin haven’t yet developed any realistic politics, they are in oppositional politics, pure oppositional politics and at the end of the day people don’t vote for that.”

This sentiment is echoed by Green Party Leader Eamon Ryan who believes that people will always vote for Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and Labour:

“They are big establishment parties and Irish people are conservative people that want establishment. What they secretly want is stable government.”

Analysis of this sub-theme has yielded little support for modernization. While in Ireland the personal factor is very important, with candidates often competing in constituencies with members of their own party, party affiliation is still indispensable. In 2011, the one exception was the reluctance of some Fianna Fáil members to identify themselves as party members, although this was highly unusual. For Sinn Féin, particularly in this election, it proved advantageous to be anti-establishment but generally this is not the case, Ireland having one of the most static party systems in the world (Weeks, 2010:138). It can also be said that anti-establishment sentiment is expressed in the high number of Independent candidates elected in 2011 as well as in previous elections, but this is, according to Bart Storan, largely to do with local considerations rather than a larger anti-establishment sentiment.

The Role of the Media

Media Power

The role the mass media play in an election is fundamental to the very notion of modernization (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). The media plays an intrinsic role in modern campaigning (Butler and Ranney, 1992:283) and has the power to change the political fortunes of candidates and parties (Hallin and Mancini, 2004:32-34).

Joan Burton, Minister for Social Protection and Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, agrees with this assertion, believing the media campaign to have been the “predominating factor” in every Irish election for the past twenty years. She believes it was particularly significant in 2011 because there was a cold weather spell when the election was called, making it difficult to canvass. Frank Flannery meanwhile maintains that the media is even more important in Ireland than in countries like the United States because there is no paid advertising meaning parties and candidates must rely on the public media debate to get their message out. The absence of paid advertising, according to Bart Storan, “gives the little guy a chance.” Eamon Ryan points out that as regards broadcasters’ campaign coverage, Irish media are dominant with no input from foreign-owned stations. The Irish media do give proportional coverage to all parties, yet David Leach of the Labour Party believes it is not the amount, but the type of coverage that a party seeks to affect:

“We’re a big party. We’re going to be on the six o’clock news. The question is what is shown of us on the six o’clock news. It’s the game. They can kill you.”

Despite the proportional coverage provided, the traditionally smaller Left-leaning Sinn Féin and Socialist Party have a fraught relationship with the media and have put a greater emphasis on their own party media, whether that be party newspapers, newsletters or social media to get their message out. Joe Higgins, Leader of the Socialist Party rationalizes this by explaining that the media is “big-business owned” while “its agenda is pro capitalist” so “of course it is biased” and tries to push parties on the Left into the centre of the political spectrum. Seán MacBrádaigh notes that Sinn Féin has had a particularly difficult relationship with the media having been censored for many years due to its association with the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and even now where Sinn Féin gets coverage “there’s a constant relation to the north, the conflict, which is fourteen years finished.” Frank Flannery of Fine Gael believes that the media has several prominent opinion leaders that dictate the line taken on particular parties and candidates:

“There’s a definite group-think in the media led strangely enough by the likes of Fintan O’Toole [Assistant Editor of the Irish Times] who have a very highly blown opinion of their own intelligence, quite misplaced, but they take a position that such a guy is for example West of Kinnegad [from the countryside] and can’t be up to much and you can’t shake him off it.”

Meanwhile, Joan Burton, Seán Dorgan and Bart Storan all furiously emphasized the essential role played by local media, especially radio, outside the Dublin area. In relation to this point,

Bart Storan said: “Local radio, I think, is probably the most powerful communications tool in Ireland.”

The rise of online and social media campaigning is perhaps an opportunity to democratize media power. All interviewees expressed enthusiasm for online and social media campaigns, noting that it was particularly useful for communicating with a younger demographic. In addition, several interviewees mentioned that social media has proved useful in feeding stories to the mainstream media, but beyond that it has limited uses, as Seán Dorgan explains:

“Twitter might be important in getting your message across to journalists...but ultimately, in terms of a mass electoral strategy, it’s not there yet.”

This leaves the ball very much in the media’s court. Mark Mortell is critical of Fianna Fáil in that “the media was given excessive influence, excessive power over policy, over decision making...over the past fifteen years” having decided that the media was “the most important element to their survival and success...because getting in the newspaper and on the radio the next day became the most important issue.”

The Irish media now possesses enormous power in Irish elections, thereby presenting clear evidence for modernization. The media has the power to change the political fortunes of candidates and parties. While coverage is proportional, the traditionally smaller Left-leaning parties try to roll out their own media operation to achieve what they see as more balanced coverage. Furthermore, local radio was identified as a powerful medium in Irish campaigning while social media has yet to democratize media power in any palpable way.

Media Output

Capella and Jamieson (1997:31-33) have argued that in modernized campaigns the media engage in ‘strategy coverage’ that looks at the standing of those running and assesses how they might attain or maintain the lead.

All those interviewed agreed that the Irish media engaged in ‘strategy coverage’ in 2011 as well as in previous elections and that some journalists were better at it than others. However, most interviewees had a low assessment of its quality. Frank Flannery, for example, felt the strategy coverage to be “trivial” and “personalized”, believing it very much relied on the preparedness of sources to provide information. He went on to say: “If you want the media to

write a story, just ring up a political journalist and give them a yarn and they'll print it." Seán Haughey maintained that there was extensive strategy coverage but that its proliferation meant there was less reporting of issues and policy, confirming Capella and Jamieson's (1997: 31) concern that there is reduced emphasis on substantive issues. Meanwhile, Joe Higgins, while believing that much of the strategy coverage was "superficial", felt that it had to be taken seriously because the media was going out to every constituency in the country and garnering valuable information.

In relation to another facet of media output in modernized campaigns, all interviewees confirmed that the media focus less on substantive issues and more on the horse race, conflict and controversy which according to the literature is said to result in a 'spiral of cynicism' affecting the electorate (Capella and Jamieson, 1997: 31-33). It has also been argued that those involved in politics are just as much at fault and court this type of coverage when it is to their own advantage (Norris, 2000). Seán Haughey, who lost his seat in 2011, believes that the media can be so cynical, nasty and personal that it would affect his decision to run again next time round. Seán MacBrádaigh also claims that the media have a cynical approach to Sinn Féin, focusing on their ties to the IRA. Frank Flannery notes the "scandalously bad...hopelessly prejudiced, lightweight" coverage of now Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, who had fended off a leadership coup prior to the election and who was seen by many as an unsuitable Taoiseach.

Yet David Leach argues that "news isn't good or bad, it just is." He says that while "55-56% of media coverage is on the horserace...you have got to be in that game" by accepting it and coming out on the right side of it. Leach makes the point that "the media is not there to perform any political function." Eamon Ryan for his part recognized that "there's a natural disposition in media" towards this kind of news and sensationalism isn't anything new. In fact, all interviewees concurred that the parties are just as much to blame in that they court controversy to their own advantage when it suits them.

The prevalence of strategy coverage, however negatively viewed by the interviewees, in tandem with the evident focus on the horse race, conflict and controversy to the detriment of substantive issues, provides definite evidence for modernization in the 2011 Irish General Election.

Dealignment

Strong Party Structures

Modernization theory suggests that the internal structures of a party weaken as citizens become less and less involved. Yet, while all Irish political parties seem to have established working internal structures, it was generally accepted by all interviewees that this is especially true of the largest parties who have long dominated Irish politics, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Seán Dorgan of Fianna Fáil, for example, claims that his party has “55,000 members with 2,500 branches around the country, across each of our constituencies.” Frank Flannery says Fine Gael for its part have 35,000 members, and at some party conventions there can be up to 2,500 members voting to select candidates, “which is more than Labour could get if you put three of their national conventions together.” All Fine Gael members have full voting rights at Ard Fheiseanna (national conferences) whereas Fianna Fáil’s members are represented at Ard Fheiseanna by two delegates from each Cumann (branch) of about 200 members.

It has been argued that these party conferences have no discernible influence on the operation of the party and that the real decisions are made by the party executive (Weeks, 2010:156). Seán Dorgan admits that the party is trying to become less of a “top-down” organization by giving members more power, a point of particular importance for members outside the capital. He elaborates by noting that it is the case with all political parties that “there would be a view that the further away you get from Dublin, that Dublin domination and Dublin rule should be diluted.” That said, there have been occasions when party conferences have played a major role in the direction of the party although this is generally a feature limited to the smaller parties, in which members can play a bigger role, for example, when the Green Party membership voted in 2007 to go into government with Fianna Fáil (Weeks, 2010:156).

Eamon Ryan of the Green Party notes that during the Celtic Tiger, with more resources being given to TDs, parties became increasingly professionalized and surrounded themselves with paid staff. This meant that “what was lost was the voluntary element in Irish politics” thereby weakening internal party structures. After all, as Mark Mortell says, the way a political party’s internal structures are set up “relies to a huge extent on non-employed people.” Seán Haughey believes that the effect of this is that people are not joining political parties at the rates they once did and so the party structure is becoming less important. He maintains that

whereas the party structure was integral to Irish politics, now “the local organization, family and friends of a candidate are becoming far more important.”

Modernization theory suggests that the internal structures of a party weaken as citizens become less and less involved. However, while not as strong as they once were, parties still have sizeable memberships and strong internal structures, although the actual commitment of party members may have decreased significantly (Weeks, 2010:156). This presents mixed evidence for any proposed modernization.

A Crowded Centre

A further trend of modernized campaigns is the emergence of ‘catch-all’ parties that place little emphasis on social class, religion or ideology (Kircheimer, 1966). Such parties attempt to attract the ever-increasing number of ‘floating voters’ in society (Mancini, 1999).

Mark Mortell recognizes that the Irish “political landscape was informed by the Civil War rather than by social issues” with the bigger parties always occupying the centre ground. He says that it is “catch-all parties, traditionally, that form the vast bulk of who gets elected...the centre sucks everybody in.” Joan Burton agrees that “in the last election as in previous elections, the centre was very crowded.” Only Sinn Féin and the Socialist Party sit outside this centre ground with Seán MacBrádaigh and Joe Higgins asserting that their socialist ideologies distinguish them from the rest. MacBrádaigh notes that “Sinn Féin took a conscious decision in 2011 that we could not be all things to all people.” Yet Mortell argues that even Sinn Féin are becoming more centrist, gradually “revising everything.”

Social class in campaigning is more of an issue for the smaller Left-leaning parties, Sinn Féin and The Socialist Party, who accept that their message will resonate better with low to middle class citizens. While the larger parties try to appeal to all classes, most interviewees accepted that there are subtle variations, with Fine Gael, for example, getting more of the upper class and farming vote while the Green Party also poll best among the wealthy, with Fianna Fáil doing better in working class urban areas. Eamon Ryan suggests that Ireland is not a totally classless society and particular parties do better with certain class groups. He says, “it’s not overt, it’s not cultivated, but to pretend that it doesn’t exist would be complete nonsense.” Ryan, along with Seán Dorgan, Seán Haughey and David Leach, admitted that messages would be targeted based on the social make-up of an area. Leach mentioned that Labour’s pledge to reverse the minimum wage cuts, for example, would not be stressed in wealthier areas while Seán Haughey noted that not only would campaigning rhetoric be different but

“even the canvassers you would bring would be different” depending on the area. According to Joan Burton and Bart Storan, Independents can be removed from this equation somewhat in that they more generally than not campaign on specific local issues.

All interviewees confirmed that there is an effort made to appeal to loyal voters that form the basis of a party’s support. Eamon Ryan maintains that parties must appeal to their core contingent of loyal voters first “and then you add to that.” However, as David Leach explained, “party alignment and party-affiliation in this country, it’s very, very low.” There was a general consensus that the name of the game was to attract the huge numbers of ‘floating voters’. Joan Burton says of this group:

“They tend to be influenced by what the Americans would call ‘pocket-book’ issues, economic issues i.e. taxation, spending, the management of the economy, unemployment and then obviously on a regional and local basis, because of the nature of the Irish political system, what the candidate is going to do for their constituency.”

Yet, despite the fact that issues are prominent rather than the focus resting on ideology, issue groups through which citizens come together to influence campaigning on a certain issue are not influential players. That said, Seán Dorgan did note the success of a particular group that wanted a regional hospital to remain open in influencing Fine Gael to promise to do so, even though this pledge was not ultimately honored.

Modernization theory predicts the emergence of ‘catch-all’ parties that have no basis in social cleavages. Consequently, these parties try to appeal to floating voters. However, the Irish political system was constructed from the remnants of the Civil War rather than having been based on social issues and have always largely been ‘catch-all’ parties, occupying a crowded centre. Those parties which sit or have sat outside this centre ground have traditionally not been very successful. There has, however, been a radical weakening of party attachment which was once almost hereditary and Ireland now has a huge number of floating voters. So again, there is mixed evidence for modernization and the manner in which the system has evolved is a product of the forces that created and maintain it.

CONCLUSIONS

This research sought to explore how those responsible for designing and implementing the 2011 General Election campaign in Ireland perceive the extent to which Irish campaigns have been subject to modernization. That is, the extent to which Irish campaigning exhibited features characteristic of global converging campaign trends, with the completion of the study yielding mixed results. While previous studies have touched on areas relevant to this line of research, none had explicitly explored the phenomenon of modernization in an Irish context.

While in line with modernization theory, campaigning has become increasingly professionalized with the involvement of personnel from outside the party apparatus and the adoption of techniques and strategies utilized in the private sector, due to financial and ideological reasons, smaller parties have refrained from doing so. Furthermore, despite this apparent professionalization, the importance of traditional labour intensive forms of campaigning, such as amassing volunteers and trekking door-to-door, is still essential. It was uniformly agreed that it was imperative that this traditional campaigning must be integrated with modern campaign practices such as the centralization of resources, strategy and communications.

In terms of personalization, there is also mixed evidence for modernization. While communication skills, presentation and being well turned out are all essential in Irish politics, this is no substitute for substance which trumps style every time. Furthermore, while a leader's role is an important one, there is not an emphasis on stylish, charismatic 'presidential' leaders, a key feature of modernization. Quite surprisingly, it was found that despite the localism of Irish politics and the importance of the personal factor, party affiliation was still hugely important, something which is said to decrease in importance with modernization. All candidates readily identify themselves as members of their particular parties. A further aspect of modern campaigns is that candidates portray themselves as anti-establishment, yet this study found that while this was an advantage for smaller parties and Independents, particularly considering the circumstances surrounding the 2011 election, the Irish electorate generally respond well to the pro-establishment nature of the larger parties.

The Irish media now possesses enormous power in Irish elections, thereby presenting clear evidence for modernization. The media has the power to change the political fortunes of candidates and parties. While coverage is proportional, the smaller Left-leaning parties try to roll out their own media to achieve what they see as more balanced coverage. Furthermore,

local radio was identified as a powerful medium in Irish campaigning while social media has yet to democratize media power in any palpable way. The prevalence of strategy coverage, although negatively viewed by the interviewees, in tandem with a preference for coverage of the horse race, conflict and controversy over substantive issues, provides definite evidence for modernization in the 2011 Irish General Election.

Modernization theory predicts the emergence of 'catch-all' parties with weak internal structures and no basis in social cleavages. Consequently, these parties try to attract what have been termed 'floating voters'. However, the Irish political system was constructed from the remnants of the Civil War rather than having been based on social issues and the larger parties have always been 'catch-all' parties, occupying a crowded centre. Those parties which sit or have sat outside this centre ground have traditionally not been very successful. There has however been a radical weakening of party attachment which was once almost hereditary. Yet, while not as strong as they once were, parties still have sizeable memberships and reasonably strong internal structures. So again, there is mixed evidence for modernization and the manner in which the system has evolved is a product of the forces which created and maintain it.

It can therefore be said of Irish campaigning that it is on the road to modernization with many of the features of global converging campaign trends readily identifiable. However, electioneering in Ireland has many distinctive attributes and still places great emphasis on traditional campaigning. Modernization has been found to be an appropriate basis on which to explain the development of Irish campaign practice. The manner in which Irish campaigns have taken place has changed considerably in recent years. It will be the responsibility of further research to establish how it develops, explaining what changes and adaptations take place. In addition, while this study chose a General Election as a focus of research, there is scope to look at campaigning in local elections and referenda, which may yield revealing and unique results.

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Appendix A – List of Interviewees

Fianna Fáil

1. Seán Dorgan

Position during 2011 General Election: General Secretary of Fianna Fáil

Current Position: General Secretary of Fianna Fáil

2. Darragh O'Brien

Position during 2011 General Election: TD for Dublin North, Frontbench Spokesperson for Sport

Current Position: Leader of Fianna Fáil in Seanad Éireann

3. Seán Haughey

Position during 2011 General Election: TD for Dublin North Central, Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills

Current Position: Political Activist

Fine Gael

4. Frank Flannery

Position during 2011 General Election: Co-Deputy Director of Elections for Fine Gael

Current Position: Senior Political Advisor to Fine Gael

5. Mark Mortell

Position during 2011 General Election: Co-Deputy Director of Elections for Fine Gael

Current Position: Director at Fleishman Hillard International Communications

Labour Party

6. Joan Burton

Position during 2011 General Election: Deputy Leader of the Labour Party

Current Position: Minister for Social Protection and Deputy Leader of the Labour Party

7. David Leach

Position during 2011 General Election: National Organizer for the Labour Party

Current Position: National Organizer for the Labour Party

Sinn Féin

8. Seán MacBrádaigh

Position during 2011 General Election: Director of Publicity for Sinn Féin

Current Position: Director of Publicity for Sinn Féin

The Green Party

9. Eamon Ryan

Position during 2011 General Election: TD for Dublin South, Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources

Current Position: Leader of The Green Party

The Socialist Party

10. Joe Higgins

Position during 2011 General Election: Member of the European Parliament for Dublin, Leader of the Socialist Party

Current Position: TD for Dublin West, Leader of The Socialist Party

Independent

11. Bart Storan

Position during 2011 General Election: Campaign Manager for Independent Stephen Donnelly Campaign

Current Position: Executive Director at Stand up for Children

Appendix B: List of Irish Terms and Irish Political Parties referenced

Fine Gael (Currently in coalition Government with the Labour Party)

Current Leader: Enda Kenny, Current Taoiseach

Founded: 1933

Ideology: Christian Democracy, Centrism

Position: Centre-Right

English translation of party name: Clan of the Gaels

Fianna Fáil

Current Leader: Micheál Martin

Founded: 1926

Ideology: Irish Republicanism, Liberal Conservatism, Centrism, Populism

Position: Centre

English translation of party name: Soldiers of Destiny

The Labour Party (Currently in coalition Government with Fine Gael)

Current Leader: Eamon Gilmore, Current Tánaiste

Founded: 1912

Ideology: Social Democracy

Position: Centre-Left

Irish Translation of party name: Páirtí an Lucht Oibre

Sinn Féin

Current Leader: Gerry Adams

Founded: 1905

Ideology: Irish Republicanism, Left-Wing Nationalism, Democratic Socialism

Position: Left-Wing

English translation of party name: We Ourselves

The Socialist Party

Current Leader: Joe Higgins

Founded: 1996

Ideology: Democratic Socialism

Position: Far-Left

Irish translation of party name: Páirtí Sóisialach

The Green Party

Current Leader: Eamon Ryan

Founded: 1981

Ideology: Green Politics

Position: Centre-Left

Irish translation of party name: Comhaontas Glas

Dáil Éireann The lower house in the Irish parliament

Seanad Éireann The upper house in the Irish parliament

Ard Fheiseanna The annual national convention of an Irish political party

T.D. An abbreviation of Teachta Dála, a member of Dáil Éireann

Taoiseach Prime Minister

Tánaiste Deputy Prime Minister

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