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The Alternative Vote has long been on the fringes of the electoral reform debate in Britain.[1] Its adoption was advocated by the Royal Commission on Electoral Systems in 1910 and by the Speaker's Conference on Electoral Reform in 1917. It was incorporated in Representation of the People Bills in 1917 and 1930, but after passing the House of Commons on each occasion the proposal was killed by the Lords. Currently the Liberal-SDP Alliance advocate the use of the Alternative Vote in by-elections and in some large constituencies in general elections, and the Scottish National Party advocate it as part of their electoral reform programme. Its adoption might well be considered seriously in inter-party discussions on electoral reform in a future hung Parliament.

The Alternative Vote is widely seen as having three outstanding features. First, in single-member constituencies it gives a more 'legitimate' result than does the first-past-the post system by producing a winning candidate who has the backing of an overall majority of votes rather than just a simple majority. Second, it allows allied parties to compete with each other while cooperating through the exchange of second preferences. Third, it can strengthen the middle ground of politics by rewarding parties that can attract a wide range of second preferences from across the ideological spectrum.

Against this, it is often presented as a complicated, cumbersome and potentially protracted process.[2] It can (say its critics)

encourage an undesirably large number of candidates to enter the contest; it may stimulate party factionalism by encouraging rebel candidates to run in tandem with the party's official candidate; it can require a large number of counts to produce a winner, who may well be the same person who led on the first count; equally it is capable of producing bizarre outcomes, with a candidate who has few first preference votes leap-frogging to victory on the strength of second, third and fourth preferences.

Critics further claim that the Alternative Vote involves an inevitable 'Hobson's choice' over the question of whether or not the voter should be obliged to indicate a full list of preferences for his ballot paper to be valid. When the rules demand the use of all preferences, the element of compulsion may be resented and abstentions, spoilt papers careless voting and 'donkey voting' (the marking of preferences in the order in which the candidates' names appear on the ballot paper), are likely to be common. When, on the other hand, the voter is free to use as many or as few preferences as he wishes, the practice of 'plumping' (that is, indicating only a first preference) can undermine the basis of the system. Indeed, if a significant proportion of voters 'plump', the system becomes little different from spot voting.

Those who seek evidence on which to assess competing claims about the Alternative Vote inevitably look to Australia, which is the only country that has used the Alternative Vote for national general

elections over an extended period. There is available to students of the Alternative Vote a substantial body of literature that provides information about the nature and consequences of the operation of the system in Australian national elections since 1919, and in some State elections before that.[3]

As with any evidence that is drawn from a single country, however, the question inevitably arises of how far the features that emerge from the operation of the Alternative Vote in Australia are consequences of the Alternative Vote per se, and how far they are produced by distinctive Australian circumstances. One particular aspect of the Australian experience that complicates attempts to draw general conclusions about the Alternative Vote is the fact that in Australia the indication of a full list of preferences is compulsory. Although the system of optional preferences operated in some State elections in the past, has been introduced recently for State elections in New South Wales and is advocated for federal elections by some electoral reformers, the compulsory use of preferences has applied in federal elections since the Alternative Vote was first used in 1919. This factor affects the operation of the Alternative Vote in Australia in fundamental ways, and raises the question of how far general conclusions about the Alternative Vote can confidently be drawn from the Australian experience.

There is, however, some comparative evidence available, in that the Republic of Ireland and some Canadian Provinces have had some

limited experience of the system. [4] In Ireland the Alternative Vote has been used in by-elections since the 1920s, and is essentially a by-product of the Single Transferable Vote system that is used for general elections to the Dail.[5] When a vacancy occurs between general elections, through the death or retirement of a member of the Dail, a by-election is held with the multi-member constituency being treated as a single-member constituency for this purpose. The 'quota' of votes that a candidate requires in order to win the seat is an overall majority of valid votes. The voter is required to list the candidates in order of preference, but unlike his Australian counterpart the Irish voter is free to indicate as many or as few preferences as he wishes. A vote for just one candidate (signified by an 'X' or 'I') is valid.

The intention of this paper is to provide a point of comparison for the Australian experience by examining the operation of the Alternative Vote in by-elections in the Republic of Ireland. To what extent does the Irish experience sustain the general claims that are made for the Alternative Vote, and the criticisms that are levelled against it? In particular, what have been the consequences in Ireland of the operation of the system of the optional use of preferences?

Candidates and Counts.

In comparison with first-past-the-post, the Alternative Vote is

undoubtedly a potentially elaborate electoral system. With the first-past-the-post system the voter merely indicates the candidate of his choice, and the counting process simply requires the assessment of each candidate's score. The Alternative Vote, in contrast, requires the voter to perform the relatively sophisticated task of listing the candidates in order of preference. The counting of the preferences can be a lengthy process, perhaps extending to several counts as lower preferences are distributed and re-distributed in the search for a candidate with an overall majority.

In Australia, for the most part, the system has not produced protracted contests. In federal elections since 1919 the bulk of contests have been decided at the first count. On average, three-quarters of the constituencies have yielded an overall majority on the first count, and in every election at least half the contests have done so.

Of the contests that have gone beyond the first count, the vast majority have required no more than two or three counts. There has been one nine-count contest (in 1943) and there have been two eight-count contests (in 1943 and 1969). The average number of counts for all constituencies in federal elections since 1919 is just 1.3, however, while for those contests that have gone beyond the first count the average is 2.9 counts.

Over the years the number of contests going beyond the first

count has tended to increase and the av erage number of counts has risen. Nevertheless, even the most recent Australian elections have involved very few protracted counts, and results have emerged reasonably expeditiously.

The same is broadly true of the Republic of Ireland, though a somewhat bigger proportion of contests have gone to a second or subsequent count than has been the case in Australia. The principal features of the 103 Irish by-elections since 1923 are shown in Table I, with the overall period divided into three arbitrary but convenient sub-periods. It can be seen that just over half of the by-elections since 1923 have been decided at the first count. A quarter have been straight-fights, and another quarter have produced a candidate with an overall majority on the first count even though there were more than two candidates in the contest. In addition, there was one un-opposed candidate (in the Dublin University seat in 1933).

Of the forty-eight contests that did go beyond the first count most were decided at the second or third count. There have been some protracted contests. In Dublin South West in 1976 six counts were required, and at Wicklow in 1953 and 1968 five counts were necessary. On seven other occasions a fourth count was required. Otherwise two or three counts have sufficed. The average number of counts for all 103 by-elections is just 1.9, while for the forty-eight contests that went beyond the first count the average is 2.9 counts.

The relatively small number of counts is surprising. In the first place, the Alternative Vote might be expected to encourage a relatively large number of candidates to enter the contest, thereby complicating the voter's task and extending the counting process. Allied parties, or rival candidates from the same party, can compete without fear of splitting the vote, while minor party or Independent candidates can enter the contest in the knowledge that the system will help them to poll (through first or lower preferences) something like their full potention.

By elections might be expected to produce an especially large number of candidates (and thus counts), as by-elections provide minor parties with an opportunity to occupy centre-stage. Certainly, Irish by-elections tend to be national events, with party leaders being involved in the campaign. Any minor parties or Independents that enter the contest are thus able to acquire a lot of publicity.

Again, other things being equal, the optional use of preferences might be expected to increase the number of counts required to produce an outcome. If a significant number of electors fail to complete a full list of preferences, an overall majority may not emerge until the contest is reduced to just two candidates (and may not be forthcoming even then). Given this, and the general assumptions about the potentially protracted nature of the counting process under the Alternative Vote system, why have there been such a relatively small number of counts in Irish by-elections?

TABLE I

Republic of Ireland By Elections 1923-82

	1923-44	1944-65	1965-82	1923-82
Contests	35[a]	43	25	103[a]
Average candidates per Contest	2.5	3.4	4.3	3.3
Average counts	1.2	2.0	2.6	1.9
Decisive Ballot: First[b]	29	20	6	55
Second	5	10	6	21
Third	1	8	8	17
Fourth		4	3	7
Fifth		1	1	2
Sixth			1	1
Total beyond first count	6	23	19	48
Outcome changed[c]		6	6	12
Party victories:				
Fianna Fail	9th	22	14	45th
Fine Gael	23	11	9	43
Labour	1	3	1	5
Clann na Poblachta		3		3
Clann na Talmhan		1		1
Independent	2	3	1	6

Source (and for subsequent Tables): Election Results and Transfer of Votes Stationery Office, Dublin, for each Dail since 1948.

a. Includes two two-seat contests.
b. Includes one un-opposed
c. That is, the candidate who led on the first count failed to win the seat.

There are two main factors. First, in contests where there are a large number of candidates the Irish electoral rules allow the Returning Officer to exclude two or more candidates at one time, provided that (a) the combined vote of these excluded candidates is less than that of the next lowest candidate, and (b) the excluded candidates have all 'saved their deposits' by achieving a third of the quota (in effect, a sixth of the poll in by-elections).

Specifically, the Electoral Rules outlined by the Electoral Act 1923 declare that [6]:

> "If the total of the votes of the two or more lowest candidates together with any surplus not transferred, is less than the number of votes credited to the next highest candidate and the number of votes credited to the lowest candidate is greater than one-third of the quota, the returning officer may in one operation exclude those candidates and transfer their votes in accordance with Rule 7 (1)."

Nominally the requirement that candidates must have achieved a third of the quota before being eliminated is a considerable hurdle, but it is not strictly observed in either general elections or by-elections. In practice, Returning Officers tend to eliminate whenever they can any fringe candidates who have only a handful of votes, always provided that a multiple elimination cannot affect the outcome. Thus at Rosscommon in 1964, and at North-East Cork in 1974 and 1979, the bottom two candidates were eliminated together after the first count, while in Dublin West in 1982 the bottom seven candidates were all eliminated after the first count. This practical provision

(and its pragmatic application) avoids a large number of counts, some involving the transfer of just a few votes.

The second (and more basic) reason for the absence of a large number of counts in Irish by-elections, however, is that in Ireland the Alternative Vote has not encouraged a multiplicity of candidates to contest elections. The average number of by-election candidates over the whole period is just 3.3. In recent years there have been some multi-candidate contests, with ten candidates in Dublin West in 1982, and seven in Dublin South-West in 1976. These are the exceptions, however, and even over the last twenty years the average number of candidates in by-elections is still just 4.3.

In its turn, the relatively small number of by-election candidates reflects the fairly tight 'two-and-a-half' party system that Ireland has experienced for the bulk of the period. Table II shows the number of by-elections contested by the parties in each of the three sub-periods since 1922. It can be seen that before 1944 the party-battle was almost exclusively between Fianna Fail and Fine Gael (and there precursors), with Labour and 'others' contesting by-elections only intermittently. Almost all of the by-elections in the 1920s, and half of those in the 1930s, were straight-fights between the two main parties.

In the post-war period Labour has contested most by-elections, and a fourth party has emerged from time to time to broaden the

battle. In particular, Clann na Talmhan contested a number of seats in the 1940s, while in the 1950s Clann na Poblachta fought most by-elections, won two of them and threatened at one stage to achieve major party status. Sinn Fein has operated on the fringe of the party system throughout, but has contested only a small proportion of by-elections. It has entered more contests recently, as have a variety of other republican and socialist groups.

Before 1965 there were relatively few Independent or non-party candidates in by-elections, but there have been rather more in the last twenty years. There were four Independents in the 1982 Dublin West contest, three at Wicklow in 1968, and two in a number of other contests in the 1960s and 1970s. For the most part, however, Independents and party rebels have not been encouraged to contest by-elections by the prospect of being able to attract the lower preferences of committed party voters.

While the use of the Alternative Vote in Ireland has not involved complex contests with numerous counts, the process has become somewhat more protracted in recent years. As noted above, the number of candidates contesting by-elections has increased. As a consequence, the number of straight-fights has declined, the number of contests going beyond the first count has increased, and the average number of counts has risen from 1.2 before 1944 to 2.6 since 1965.

TABLE II

Republic of Ireland By-Elections 1923-82 : Number of Candidates Per Party

	1923-44	1944-65	1965-82	1923-82
Fianna Fail	33	43	25	101
Fine Gail	34	34	25	93
Labour	9	26	19	54
Clann na Poblachta		13		13
Clann na Talmhan	1	7		8
Sinn Fein	2	6	6	14
Ten Other Parties	3	2	8	13
Independents	7	13	25	45
Total	89	144	108	341
Average Candidates Per Contest	2.5	3.4	4.3	3.3

These changes, however, are not dramatic. It is now usual for the contest to go beyond the first count, but it is still relatively unusual for it to extend beyond the third count. On the basis of this Irish experience, then, the process of producing a winning candidate under the Alternative Vote system could not be said to be unacceptably protracted.

The Distribution of Preferences.

In contests that have gone beyond the first count, what has been the consequence of the distribution of second and lower preferences? When the first count fails to produce a candidate with an overall majority, the subsequent distribution of preferences will have one of two consequences. The leading candidate on the first count may be overtaken by a lower candidate who benefits disproportionately from the second preferences of the eliminated candidate's supporters. Alternatively, the first-count leader may retain his position at the top of the poll, but be elected with an overall majority rather than with just the simple majority that he achieved on the first count. In the latter case the distribution of preferences has not altered the outcome of the contest, but it has increased the legitimacy of the result by demonstrating that the winning candidate does have the support of a majority of those voting (measured by the combination of first and lower preferences).

In Australia, in the contests that have gone beyond the first count, the party that led on the first count has normally managed to win the contest after the allocation of lower preferences. In all, since 1919 only about a quarter of first-count leaders have failed to emerge as the eventual winner. As the contests that go to two or more counts constitute only about a quarter of the total, the proportion of constituencies in any one election in which there is a change of leader between the first and final count is only about five

per cent.

A change in the outcome between the first and final count has been even less frequent in Australia in the last twenty-five years than it was before 1960. Almost a third of the multi-count contests before 1960 produced a change, compared with just a fifth since then. The last four elections in particular have seen an increase in the number of contests going beyond the first count, but a fall in the number of contests in which the first-count leader failed to win the seat. The legitimacy of the electoral process may have been enhanced, with justice being seen to be done in those contests in which the first count leader was short of an overall majority, but only occasionally in Australia has the allocation of preferences affected the outcome of the contest.

Of the 103 Irish by-elections, forty-eight have gone beyond the first count, and of these just twelve produced a change in outcome between the first and final counts. Six of the twelve were in the period before 1965 (when there was a total of seventy-eight contests), and six have been since 1965 (when there have been just twenty-five contests). Thus in the last twenty years there has been an increase in the proportion of contests going beyond the first count and an increase in the proportion of those contests in which the first-count leader failed to win the seat.

The twelve contests in which the outcome changed between the

first and final counts are listed in Table III. Usually when the first-count leader has been overtaken he has had less than forty per cent of the first preference votes (and in four of the twelve cases he had less than a third of the first preference votes). The eventual winner was placed second on the first count in every case except Wicklow in 1953. In that contest the Fine Gael candidate was ranked third out of the six candidates on the first count, but overtook the second candidate at the next count and the leading candidate at the fifth and final count.

The most common change of outcome between the first and final count has been for the Fianna Fail leader on the first count to be overtaken by the Fine Gael candidate. Fine Gael was itself overtaken by an Independent in North East Donegal in 1976, but emerges from Table III with a net gain of six seats. Fianna Fail emerges with a net loss of eleven seats, for in addition to the occasions when it was overtaken by Fine Gael, Fianna Fail was also overtaken twice by Labour and twice by Clann na Poblachta. Thus in all, Fianna Fail has won forty-five of the by-elections since 1922, rather than the fifty-six it would have won on the basis of first preference votes.

The Extent of Plumping

Given that the use of second and subsequent preferences is optional in Ireland, how many voters do indicate more than just a first preference, and what patterns of party support emerge from these

TABLE III

Republic of Ireland By Elections 1923-82: Contests in Which Outcome Changed Between First and Final Counts

	First Count Leader		Eventual Winner		Number of Counts
	%	Vote	%	Vote	
Dublin West 1982	FF	39.7	FG	49.7	3
Cork City 1979	FF	35.9	FG	50.5	3
Dublin South West 1976	FF	38.8	Lab	48.4	6
North-East Donegal 1976	FG	31.7	Ind.	42.3	3
Kildare 1970	FF	41.3	FG	50.6	2
Wicklow 1968	FF	37.2	FG	47.9	5
Mid-Cork 1965	FF	36.2	Lab	54.5	3
Wicklow 1953	FF	27.9	FG	52.6	5
East Limerick 1952	FF	41.6	FG	51.5	3
West Donegal 1949	FF	47.4	FG	50.9	2
Tipperary 1947	FF	32.1	C-P	43.5	4
Dublin County 1947	FF	28.8	C-P	52.4	3

voters' stated preferences? There is no survey evidence of the Irish voters' intended, or recalled, use of preferences, so the researcher is obliged to rely on an analysis of the election returns.[7] A precise analysis of preferences, however, can be made only at the second count, when it is solely the second preferences of the eliminated candidate's supporters that are being redistributed. At

the third and subsequent counts the ballots that are distributed will be a mix of second, third and subsequent preferences, and in these cases it is not possible to trace the original source of the ballots.

The evidence is further limited in Ireland in that of the forty-eight by-elections that went beyond the first count, four have to be discounted because (as noted above) more than one candidate was eliminated after the first count. In these cases the particular source of the redistributed ballots cannot be identified.

Thus there are just forty-four contests in which the second preferences of the eliminated candidate's supporters can be identified. A third of these forty-four eliminated candidates were Independents, a third were Labour and a third were from a range of half-a-dozen other parties. No Fianna Fail candidate, and only one Fine Gael candidate, was eliminated at the first count. The evidence about the destination of second preferences is thus limited, but some tentative observations can be made.

It might be expected that in Irish by-elections a relatively small number of voters would choose to 'plump' for one candidate rather than indicate a range of preferences. Irish voters are used to indicating a range of preferences, as the Single Transferable Vote system in general elections requires the voter to use more than one preference even if he is limiting his choice to just one party's candidates. The main parties tend to contest all by-elections, so

that electors have as wide a party choice in by-elections as in general elections. At the same time, as each party normally puts up just one candidate, the voter is faced with a much less formidable task in by-elections than in general elections. Over the years parties have entered into electoral alliances and Cabinet coalitions and thus have encouraged their supporters to think in more than simple partisan terms.

The proportion of plumpers per party is shown in Table IV. In the case of the five parties that provide only one or two examples each, the evidence is clearly of only limited value. There are sufficient Independent, Labour and Sinn Fein examples, however, to enable a general picture to emerge.

On average just under a fifth of those who voted for candidates eliminated after the first count did not indicate a second preference. There have been some spectacular variations from this average figure. Forty per cent of Labour voters at Carlaw-Kilkenny in 1960 did not indicate a second preference, while in Dublin South in 1924 almost half of the Independent's supporters did not do so. At the other extreme, only 5.6 per cent of Labour voters in East Limerick in 1952, and just 3.5 per cent of Independent voters in Dublin South West in 1976, failed to indicate a second preference. Despite these extremes, however, only rarely has the proportion of plumpers been greater than 25 per cent or less than 12 per cent.

TABLE IV

Republic of Ireland By-Elections 1923-82: Extent of 'Plumping' By Party

	Voters Indicating only a First Preference: Average % (and Number of Contests)			
	1923-44	1944-65	1965-82	1923-82
Labour	36.4 (3)	17.6 (8)	16.4 (4)	21.0 (15)
Sinn Fein		22.8 (3)	16.3 (3)	19.6 (6)
Clann na Poblachta		14.9 (2)		14.9 (2)
Clann na Talmhan		7.3 (2)		7.3 (2)
Others[a]	76.9 (1)	24.3 (2)	21.2 (1)	36.6 (4)
Independents	42.4 (2)	16.9 (5)	13.1 (8)	18.2 (15)
Average	45.2 (6)	17.6 (22)	15.0 (16)	20.3 (44)

a. That is, Fine Gael, Aontacht Eireann and Republican.

The supporters of Independent candidates have been slightly less likely to 'plump' than have party supporters. This is especially evident if the aberrant 1924 Dublin South contest is discounted (when almost half of those who voted for the Independent candidate failed to record a second preference). Clearly, given that the Independent candidates have been acknowledged outsiders in almost all of the by-elections they have entered, those who have voted for the Independent have sought also to demonstrate a party preference.

It is perhaps surprising that the supporters of Sinn Fein have been just as likely to indicate a second preference as have other voters. Sinn Fein supporters might have been expected to decline to vote for any of the pro-system parties. In fact, Sinn Fein supporters have seen their participation in by-elections not merely as an opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to the cause, but also as an opportunity to influence the outcome of the battle between the main parties.

It is perhaps also surprising that as many as a fifth of Labour supporters should fail to cast a second preference, especially in face of Labour's links with Fine Gael over the last forty years. Labour's average figure, however, is inflated somewhat by the large proportion of plumpers in three particular contests - Dublin County 1924 (37.2 per cent), Kildare 1931 (35.5 per cent) and Carlaw-Kilkenny 1960 (40.4 per cent). If these three cases are excluded, the average of Labour's plumpers drops to 15 per cent. Even so, 'as many as' a sixth to a fifth of Labour voters have generally chosen not to indicate a second preference, despite the fact that Labour has had an 'understanding' with Fine Gael for most of the time since the 1940s (and had agreements with other parties before that).

For all parties, plumping was more common earlier in the period than it has been in the last twenty years. It is debatable whether the very high level of plumping by the supporters of Labour and Independent candidates in the 1920s and 1930s was a consequence of

the particular bitterness of the party battle at that time, or of the smaller number of candidates contesting by-elections in that period, or of the voters' un-familiarity with the system (or of a combination of all of these factors).

In the one by-election in which Fine Gael was bottom on the first count (South Kerry in 1944), almost a third of Fine Gael voters failed to record a second preference. In this contest, however, there was no Labour candidate, and the choice facing Fine Gael voters was between Fianna Fail and the small farmers' party, Clann na Talmhan. The other parties for which there are only one or two examples have generally recorded slightly lower than average levels of plumping.

Minority Representatives.

What have been the consequences of the fact that, on average, about a fifth of Irish voters in by-elections have indicated only a first preference? The principal consequence has been that the winning candidate has not always emerged from the final count with an overall majority.

The concept of an 'overall majority', of course, is a flexible one. In the context of preferential voting it can mean at least three distinct things - a majority of the total electorate; a majority of those who turn-out and vote; a majority of those who have indicated a sufficiently long list of preferences to be still participating in the

final count.

In Australia the requirements of compulsory voting and the compulsory use of preferences mean that an overall majority of votes is equivalent to an overall majority of the whole electorate (while the compulsory registration of electors in Australia means that 'the whole electorate' is broadly the same as the 'adult population'). The only qualification to this is that in every election spoilt papers (or, in Australian terms, 'informal votes') produce a distinction between 'total votes' and 'valid votes'.

In Ireland voting is not compulsory, so there is an initial distinction between the electorate as a whole and those who turn out to vote. Further, the optional use of preferences means that while the winning candidate will emerge with an overall majority of those who participate in the final count, he may not achieve an overall majority of those who participated in the contest. Indeed, the extent of plumping is such that (as is shown in Table V) almost half of the contests that went beyond the first count failed to produce a winner with an overall majority. Given that approximately half of the contests did go to at least a second count, about a fifth of all the Irish by-elections have failed to yield an overall majority.

In some cases the winning candidate was well short of an overall majority. In North East Donegal in 1976 the Independent candidate won the seat with the support of only 42.3 per cent of those who

voted, and in Tipperary in October 1949 Clann na Poblachta won with the support of just 43.5 per cent.

In many ways it is results such as that in Tipperary in 1947 (and to a lesser extent Wicklow in 1968 and Dublin South West 1976) that get the Alternative Vote a bad name. In these cases the election extended to four, five and six counts, and at the end of this protracted exercise the winning candidate still did not have an overall majority. When the first-count leader is overtaken by a candidate who is himself unable to achieve an overall majority, the question is raised of whether (as at Tipperary in 1947) a final tally of 43.5 per cent of the poll, representing an accumulation of first, second, third and perhaps fourth preferences, is a more 'legitimate' winning total than 32.1 per cent of exclusively first preference votes.

TABLE V

Republic of Ireland By-Elections 1923-82:

Absence of Overall Majority

	All Contests	Preferences Counted	Absence of Overal Majority N	As % of All Contests	As % of Prefs. Counted
1923-44	35	6	4	11.4	66.7
1944-65	43	23	7	16.3	30.4
1965-82	25	19	11	44.0	57.9
1923-82	103	48	22	21.4	45.8

The failure of the Alternative Vote in Ireland to produce winning candidates with overall majorities has become more evident in the last twenty years. Before 1965 most contests were settled at the first count, and of those that did go to two or more counts only about a third failed to produce an overall majority. Since the 1960s, however, almost half of Irish by-elections have resulted in the return of a minority representative. Given that one of the principal claims made for the Alternative Vote is that it produces a more legitimate outcome than the first-past-the-post system, this is not a trivial statistic.

Surprisingly, the number of minority representatives has increased in recent years, even though the practice of plumping has declined. This seeming contradiction is explained by the increase in the number of candidates contesting by-elections. The 'extra' candidates will tend to draw votes away from the leading candidate and thus reduce his chances of achieving an overall majority. At the same time the number of 'incomplete' ballot papers will tend to rise as the number of candidates increases. A voter who indicates all of his preferences in a triangular contest might be prepared to indicate three or four preferences in a six-candidate contest, but be reluctant to indicate a full list of preferences.

Maintaining an Alliance.

How has the optional use of preferences, and the consequent extent

of plumping, affected the Irish parties' ability to deliver their supporters second preferences to an allied party? With the Alternative Vote, parties that are in alliance have a choice between two broad strategies. They can oppose each other in all or most seats, but agree to a mutual exchange of second preferences so that if one of them is eliminated from the contest the other will benefit from the transferred votes. Alternatively, the allies can divide the constituencies between them, using an agreement to exchange second preferences only as a 'safety net' for any seats that they do both contest.

In Australia the Liberal and National parties have, for the most party, preferred the latter strategy. Although the Alternative Vote was introduced at the federal level specifically to allow the two non-Labour parties to contest the same seats without splitting the anti-Labour vote,[8] they have competed with each other in only a minority of contests. They have exchanged preferences in the relatively small number of seats in which they have both stood, but for the most part have preferred 'non-aggression pacts' to the mutual exchange of preferences. To that extent they have not capitalised on the opportunities for 'cooperation within competition' that the Alternative Vote provides.

In Ireland, in contrast, allied parties have tended to compete with each other in most constituencies. A number of inter-party alliances have operated in Ireland over the years. The most lasting

has been that between Fine Gael and Labour, which has persisted since the 1940s. The parties have shared office in the coalitions of 1948-51, 1954-7, 1973-7, 1981-2 and 1982 to date, and in combination have provided the only alternative to Fianna Fail government. Electoral cooperation between Fine Gael and Labour, however, has been of only limited success.

Until 1944 the most usual type of by-election was the straight-fight between Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, but since the 1940s, most by-elections have been triangular battles or multi-party contests. In all, Fine Gael and Labour have competed with each other in two-thirds of the by-elections since 1944, and in three-quarters since 1965. They have been just as likely to compete with each other in the periods when they have been in office as in other periods. There is no evidence that in the minority of contests in which Labour and Fine Gael did not compete with each other this was because of an inter-party agreement to avoid confrontations.

Given that Fine Gael and Labour normally do compete, to what extent do they deliver their voters' second preferences to each other? One study of the distribution of preferences under the Single Transferable Vote in Irish general elections provides some evidence of this.[9] In the 1950s and 1960s about half of the second preferences of Fine Gael voters went to Labour, while more recently the proportion has been about four-fifths.

Labour voters have been somewhat less inclined to give their second preferences to Fine Gael. In the 1950s and 1960s under 40 per cent of Labour second preferences went to Fine Gael, though the proportion rose to around two-thirds in the 1970s.[10] There has been a tendency for Labour transfers to Fine Gael to drop after each period of coalition government, suggesting that Labour (as the junior partner) has found the coalition experience to be less rewarding than has Fine Gael.

Despite the persistence of the Fine Gael - Labour alliance, a consistent fifth to a quarter of Labour voters over the last forty years have given their second preferences to Fianna Fail. Given that another fifth of Labour voters, on average, have chosen to plump rather than indicate a second preference for their coalition partner, the limits of their mutual attraction are clear.

Labour - Fine Gael cooperation was least effective in the 1961 general election, when only a third of Labour voters' second preferences went to Fine Gael, and just a fifth of Fine Gael's went to Labour. A large proportion of Fine Gael voters indicated only a first preference, but over half of Labour voters' preferences went to Fianna Fail and the minor parties. This low point in the alliance may (as Michael Gallagher suggests)[11] represent an intensified reaction against the parties' 1954-7 coalition experience. After 1964 the delivery of second preferences became more effective, although the alliance was not formally repaired until 1970. . Even,

then, however, the delivery rate of second preferences was well below that normally achieved by the Liberal and National parties in Australia.

This evidence from general elections is broadly supported by the evidence from the operation of the Alternative Vote in by-elections. Labour has been eliminated after the first count in fifteen by-elections since 1923, and on each occasion there was a Fine Gael candidate available as a possible destination for the second preferences of Labour voters. Table VI lists these fifteen contests and it can be seen that Fine Gael has normally received half to two-thirds of Labour voters' second preferences. The only five occasions when the Fine Gael candidate received less than half of Labour second preferences were before 1961, and it has been in the more recent by-elections that Fine Gael has benefited most from Labour preferences.

That said, the limits of the alliance are clear. In Dublin County in 1947, and East Limerick in 1952, Labour voters gave more second preferences to Clann na Poblachta than to Fine Gael, and in Dublin North in 1957 the Independent attracted more Labour second preferences than did Fine Gael. Fianna Fail has also received a fifth to a quarter of Labour second preferences in most contests. The consistency is quite remarkable in that in no by-election since 1923 has the proportion of Labour second preferences going to Fianna Fail been less than eleven per cent or more than twenty-six per cent. In none of the contests did Fianna Fail manage to attract more Labour

TABLE VI

Republic of Ireland By-Elections 1923-82: Destination of Second Preferences of Labour Voters[a]

By Election	Parties' Share of Labour Voters' Second Preferences (%)					No Second Pref.
	FG	FF	C-P	SF	Ind	
Dublin County 1924	30.2	23.8			8.7	37.2
Leix-Offaly 1925	29.7	34.0				36.3
Kildare 1931	40.9	23.6				35.2
Dublin 1947	12.4	11.3	56.6			19.8
Waterford 1952	66.2	20.6				13.2
East Limerick 1952	35.5	20.9	37.9			5.6
Cork East 1953	67.0	19.6				13.4
Cork 1954	62.3	18.9				18.8
Dublin North 1957	28.0	12.6		9.6	40.6	9.2
Carlow-Kilkenny 1960	33.0	26.6				40.4
Kildare 1964	53.9	25.2				20.9
Waterford 1966	52.5	24.6				22.9
South Kerry 1966	60.5	22.5				17.0
Longford-Westmeath 1970	66.2	21.3				12.5
Kildare 1970	64.7	22.1				13.2
Average	46.9	21.9	47.3	9.6	24.7	21.0

a. That is, the fifteen by-elections in which the Labour candidate was eliminated after the first count.

preferences than did Fine Gael, but on some occasions before 1952 it was not far behind. Given the consistent proportion of Fianna Fail sympathisers and 'plumpers' among Labour voters, Fine Gael has never been able to gather more that two-thirds of second preferences from its coalition partner in any by-election.

CONCLUSIONS

Does the Irish experience with the Alternative Vote sustain or undermine the several claims that are made about the system? It is clear that some of the common criticisms of the Alternative Vote that were noted at the beginning of the paper are not confirmed by the operation of the system in Ireland.

The Alternative Vote has not encouraged a large number of candidates to contest Irish by-elections, and only very rarely have there been protracted contests involving five or more counts. There has never been more than one candidate from each party (other than in the two-seat contests of 1925), so that intra-party discord has not been fuelled by conflict between rival candidates. While some by-elections have been won by candidates who were in second place on the first count with only about a third of first preferences, there have been no truly eccentric outcomes, with a candidate who received a very small number of first preferences, but a large number of lower preferences, leap-frogging to victory from fourth or fifth place on the first count.

In these respects the Irish experience has reflected that of Australia. In addition, the optional use of preferences has meant that the Irish elector (unlike his Australian counterpart) has been freed from the obligation of having to 'vote for' candidates he finds objectionable.

Has the Irish experience also supported the positive claims that are made for the system? The potential ability of the Alternative Vote to strengthen the political centre has not been demonstrated by the Irish experience. Fianna Fail is normally seen as the 'centre party' of Irish politics, flanked by Labour to its left and Fine Gael to its right, dominating the middle ground through its ability to draw support from across the social and ideological spectrum. Thus Basil Chubb comments that:[12]

> "By [the 1960s Fianna Fail] had become a catchall party, still able to draw upon a great reserve of instinctive loyalty, primarily from small farmers, but able also to attract votes from all other classes. Long years in office had helped establish it in the minds of many as the normal government party and the only party capable of ensuring the 'stability' of single-party government."

Fianna Fail may be a catch-all party in the sense of being able to attract votes from a wide social spectrum, but the clear evidence from by-elections is that it is anything but a catch-all party in the sense of being able to attract the second preferences of other parties' supporters. Indeed, Fianna Fail has been the 'most-isolated' party, less likely to attract second preferences than anyone else. In the forty-four by-elections for which it is possible to trace the destination of second preferences, Fianna Fail has received the largest share only once - in Cork City in 1946, when it secured 36.5 per cent of the preferences of the eliminated Independent candidate's supporters, compared with Fine Gael's 22.1 per cent and

the Socialist candidate's 15.9 per cent.

In each of the triangular contests between Fianna Fail, Fine Gael and Labour, the Fianna Fail candidate has been the least popular home for the other parties' second preferences. In the other types of triangular and multi-party contests also, it has been the Fianna Fail candidate who has usually attracted the smallest share of second preferences. Presumably Fianna Fail's position as the dominant party, with a core of first preference votes that has enabled it to be far more often in office than in opposition, has helped to undermine any broad attraction it might otherwise have, and has encouraged the other parties to unite against it.

The short-lived Clann na Poblachta perhaps offers a better indication of the opportunities that the Alternative Vote offers to a centre party. Clann na Poblachta did extremely well from second preferences in the 1940s and 1950s. As a party with a centre-left base it was the main beneficiary from Labour voters' second preferences in Dublin County in 1947 and East Limerick in 1952, and from Sinn Fein voters' second preferences in Dublin South West in 1959. It also secured a large proportion of second preferences from Clann na Talmhan voters in Tipperary in 1947 and North Mayo in 1952, and from the supporters of the National Progressive Democratic Party in Dublin South-Central in 1958., In two of these six cases (Tipperary 1947 and Dublin County 1947) Clann na Poblachta's tally of second preferences allowed it to win the seat despite having received

only around a quarter of first preference votes. The party's demise in the 1950s, however, left open the question of whether it would have been able to sustain over an extended period this ability to draw second preferences from across a wide ideological spectrum.

The opportunity that the Alternative Vote provides for allied parties to compete with each other has allowed Labour and Fine Gael in the last forty years (and other allied parties in the 1920s and 1930s) to contest most by-elections in tandem, and win some contests through the transfer of second preferences from the eliminated partner. The exchange of preferences between Labour and FineGael has been far from complete, however, and neither party has been able to rely upon its supporters being willing to give their second preferences to their ally. The evidence from by-elections, as from the Single Transferable Vote in general elections, is that even when relations between the parties have been at their most harmonious (as in the 1970s), Labour has not been able to deliver more than about two-thirds of its second preferences to Fine Gael. It can be assumed that with compulsory preferences the transfer of support between partners would have been higher than this, though a sufficiently high proportion of second preferences have consistently gone to non-partner parties to suggest that even with a system of compulsory preferences allies would have been able to deliver no more than about three-quarters of their supporters' second preferences to each other.

If an 'overall majority' is defined as a majority of those who

turn out to vote (as opposed to a majority of those who have indicated sufficient preferences for their ballots to remain in the final count), the Alternative Vote in Ireland clearly has not achieved the election of representatives who can claim to have the support of an overall majority of voters. The consequence of the optional use of preferences has been that enough voters have 'plumped' to prevent any candidate being able to achieve an overall majority of votes in a large and growing number of contests. In all, a fifth of by-elections since 1923 have failed to produce a candidate with an overall majority, and over the last twenty years the proportion has been almost a half. It is now much more likely than not that any contest that goes beyond the first count will produce a 'hung' result, so that on the basis of the Irish experience the Alternative Vote with the optional use of preferences has to be seen as a 'sometimes majoritarian' system.

If the operation of the Alternative Vote in Irish by-elections over the last sixty years has any clear lesson for electoral reformers in Britain and Australia, therefore, it is that while some of the common criticisms of the system are not sustained by the Irish experience, the optional use of preferences does undermine at least two of the supposed merits of the Alternative Vote - the efficient mutual delivery of second preferences between allied parties, and the election of 'legitimate' MPs who can claim to have the support of an overall majority of electors.

FOOTNOTES

1. This paper emerges from a study of the operation of the Alternative Vote in Australia, Canada and the Republic of Ireland. I am grateful to the Australian Studies Centre, the Carnegie Foundation, the British Academy, and the University of Strathclyde for contributing to the costs of the study. I am grateful to Michael Gallagher and Campbell Sharman for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

2. For general analyses of the Alternative Vote see J.F.S. Ross, Elections and Electors, London 1955; E. Lakeman, Power to Elect, London 1982; E. Lakeman, How Democracies Vote, London 1970; V. Bogdanor and D.E. Butler, Democracy and Elections, London 1983.

3. For a review of the literature on Australian elections see M. Goot, Political Consequences of the Electoral Laws, Australasian Political Studies Association Conference 1983.

4. See H. C. J. Phillips, The Alternative (Voluntary Preference) Vote in Canada: Implications for Australia, Australasian Political Studies Association Conference 1980.

5. See C. O'Leary, The Irish Republic and its Experiment With Proportional Representation, South Bend, Indiana, 1961; J.F.S. Ross, The Irish Election System, London, 1959.

6. Electoral Act 1923, Third Schedule (as amended by Sections 36 to 40 of the Electoral Act 1963), Paragraph 7(11).

7. For survey evidence about the use of preferences in Australia see D. Aitkin, Stability and Change in Australian Politics, Canberra 1978, pp. 71-87.

8. See, for example, B. D. Graham, The Formation of the Australian Country Party, Canberra 1966, p. 93.

9. M. Gallagher, 'Party Solidarity, Exclusivity and Inter-Party Relationships in Ireland, 1922-1977: the Evidence of Transfers', Economic and Social Review, 1978 pp. 1-22; M. Gallagher 'The Impact of Lower Preference Votes on Irish Parliamentary Elections, 1922-1977', Economic and Social Review, 1979, pp. 19-32. For a comment on the distribution of preferences in Irish local government elections see J. Coakley and M. Wolohan 'The Irish Local Elections of June 1979, Adminstration 1982, pp. 84-106.

10. I am grateful to Michael Gallagher for up-dating the figures from his articles.

11. Gallagher, Economic and Social Review, 1978, p. 17.

12. B. Chubb, The Government and Politics of Ireland, London 1971, p. 81.