

Political Studies Book Note

Michael Marsh, Richard Sinnott, John Garry and Fiachra Kennedy (2008) *The Irish Voter: The Nature of Electoral Competition in the Republic of Ireland*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 309pp, £16.99, 978 0 7190 7732 6

This book reports on the first full election survey in Ireland providing an analysis of the how and why of Irish voting behaviour. In successive chapters it explores the social and then ideological bases of party competition, and finds none. This is followed by a sophisticated account of the nature and extent of party attachment which, if considerably weakened in recent decades, still remains at the root of major party support. All this, supported by an analysis of the impact of immediate issues, leader effects and local campaign efforts, is familiar to those who follow Irish politics, enable students of electoral behaviour to situate Irish practice in comparative perspective.

Where the book makes an important new theoretical contribution is in its careful dissection of the relative impact of candidate and party in influencing voters' decisions. This is possible because the country's STV electoral system invites voters to make these distinctions and they do. The authors give us a valuable chapter on the extent and patterns of the voters' use of their preferential ballot and then another on the importance of individual candidates in driving voting decisions. These analyses advance our appreciation of voter decision-making and will surely raise important questions for those who study voting behaviour in other settings.

If this wasn't enough, there is a sophisticated analysis of non-voting which the authors suggest is either circumstantial or voluntary and their analysis points to both facilitation and mobilizations forces working on the institutional as well as individual level. The arguments they advance are important, with significant implications for those concerned with declining turnout rates. This is another genuine contribution to the comparative literature which, like the interpretation of candidate vs. party effects, ought to command the attention of anyone interested in voter behaviour. 75 tables and 15 figures report the data (the survey questionnaire is conveniently reproduced in an Appendix) but one of the books distinctive features is surely its clear and accessible writing.

For students of Irish politics this book is bound to become a benchmark study that confirms what many suspected but also points to patterns that are subtly changing the dynamics of the Republic's electoral politics. But this is not a book for Irish specialists alone. With its important theoretical insights and sophisticated empirical analyses of general phenomena, it will quickly become a major starting point for comparativists and students of other democratic electoral politics.

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