

LAOIS

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on the History of an Irish County

Editors:

PÁDRAIG G. LANE
WILLIAM NOLAN

Series Editor:

WILLIAM NOLAN



GEOGRAPHY PUBLICATIONS



Plate 24.1 Kevin O'Higgins.



Plate 24.2 Dr. T.F. O'Higgins, brother of Kevin.

Chapter 25

POLITICS IN LAOIS-OFFALY 1922-92

MICHAEL GALLAGHER

'Laois-Offaly is one of the largest constituencies, one of the most representative of industry, agriculture and employment generally. In that constituency more than any other there is a cross-section of the people of Ireland'.

Liam Hyland TD, *Dáil Debates* 348: 936-7, 29 February 1984

'Laois has been described as the political barometer of the country'.

Editorial in *Leinster Express*, 10 February 1973, p. 10

In this chapter we shall examine a number of aspects of politics in Laois-Offaly since independence. We shall ask whether Laois-Offaly has indeed been a 'barometer' of the country, by comparing voting patterns there with the national pattern. We shall examine changing campaigning styles at elections, as documented by the local press. First, we shall look at the political elite of Laois-Offaly, focusing on those candidates who have stood in the constituency, successfully or otherwise, for election to Dáil Éireann.

The Political Elite

From 1922 to 1992 inclusive Laois-Offaly had 25 general elections and three by-elections (in 1926, 1956 and 1984). In total, these 28 contests attracted 108 different candidates, and 33 of these were elected to Dáil Éireann at one or more of these contests.¹ Of these 33, 15 represented Fianna Fáil, 14 Fine Gael² and 4 Labour (see list in appendix 1). We shall examine the backgrounds of both TDs and other candidates, exploring the trends over time.³

Ten of the 33 TDs have achieved cabinet or junior ministerial office, and six of these became cabinet ministers. The first was Kevin O'Higgins, the subject of another chapter in this volume and the next two were his brother and nephew. Dr T. F. O'Higgins moved to the constituency in 1932, having been returned to the Dáil at a by-election

in Dublin in 1929. He became Minister for Defence in the first Inter-Party government in 1948, and Noel Browne, another member of that government, described him as 'probably the most experienced and shrewd politician in the Cabinet', whose advice was respected by the Taoiseach. However, Browne felt that O'Higgins was part of a 'conspiracy' against him on the Mother and Child affair, keeping his colleagues in the Irish Medical Association informed of Browne's difficulties with the scheme both within cabinet and with the bishops.⁴ During his first campaign in the constituency it was said of him that 'his trenchant style of speaking and outspoken views are his most striking characteristics' (*Offaly Chronicle* 11 February 1932), and as the leader of the Blueshirts from August 1932 to July 1933 he was a controversial figure.⁵ In 1948 he moved to Cork Borough, making way in Laois-Offaly for his son, Tom O'Higgins, who was made Minister for Social Welfare in the second Inter-Party government in 1954. He moved to a Dublin constituency at the 1969 election, and later became Chief Justice after being defeated at presidential elections in 1966 and 1973. All three members of the O'Higgins family lived outside Laois-Offaly, and the first minister actually resident in the constituency was Paddy Lalor, who became Minister for Posts and Telegraphs in 1969 after a rather difficult time as a junior minister,⁶ and was later elected a Member of the European Parliament. In 1976 Oliver J. Flanagan was elevated to the cabinet by Liam Cosgrave as Minister for Defence, to general surprise, and in 1992 Brian Cowen was promoted from the backbenches by Albert Reynolds to become Minister for Labour at the age of 32.⁷ In addition to these six, four deputies have held junior ministerial rank: William Davin, Ger Connolly, Ber Cowen and Liam Hyland.

The most successful electorally of Laois-Offaly's 33 TDs has been Oliver J. Flanagan, who was elected 14 times and received many more votes than any other candidate during his career (see appendix 1) – over one in ten of all the votes cast at Laois-Offaly elections from 1922 to 1992. Flanagan scraped into the last seat in 1943, but after that he headed the poll at every election until 1977. At his first three campaigns he ran on the label of Monetary Reform groups, who believed that ending the restriction of the money supply by financial institutions would solve all the country's problems. In 1943 Flanagan promised that 'rivers of money would become available' if the Monetary Reform Association came to power (*Offaly Independent* 19 June), and in 1944 he called for 'the destruction of the bankers, the capitalists and the ranchers', though he hastily added that he was not a communist and named some of the religious organisations to which he belonged (*Leinster Express* 10 June). At this time there was an unpleasant anti-semitic streak in his outlook. He stated that the financial policy of all

Irish governments was 'controlled by Jew-Masonic influence, under which the nation and its people would forever find themselves in debt' (*Midland Tribune* 19 June 1943), and in the Dáil a month later he asked why Emergency Orders were directed against only the IRA and not against Jews: 'Until we rout the Jews out of this country it does not matter a hair's breadth what Orders you make'.⁸

He sprang to national prominence in the late 1940s when he alleged that Fianna Fáil ministers were improperly involved in the sale of Locke's Distillery in Kilbeggan, and although he lost the battle, in that the tribunal established to investigate the allegations delivered some scathing judgements on him,⁹ he seemed to win the war. He was somehow able to create the impression that he had been vindicated by the tribunal, and he received the highest vote in the country at the 1948 election. Flanagan sat as an independent for the next four years, and in 1952 followed James Dillon, with whom he shared an office in Leinster House and who had become his political mentor, into Fine Gael. He was made a parliamentary secretary in the second Inter-Party government in 1954, and attained this rank again in 1975 in Liam Cosgrave's coalition government, entering the cabinet a year later. By this time Flanagan was seen not as a dangerous radical but as a dyed-in-the-wool conservative on moral issues, where he strongly espoused the view of the Catholic church. While his views were close to Cosgrave's, he was quite out of tune with the thinking of Garret FitzGerald, who became Fine Gael leader in 1977, and spent the rest of his Dáil career on the backbenches.

Although after his 1948 triumph he had declared that his large vote had vindicated his stand on Locke's and shown that 'jobbery and corruption must end' (*Midland Tribune*, 14 February), the accusation of jobbery was one sometimes laid against him. At the very next election, in 1951, he promised that he would secure jobs for as many of his friends as he could, saying that 'he had placed his friends in good jobs in Clonsast and Portarlinton, and as warders in prisons, and everywhere he could get in his foot', and claimed that while Fianna Fáil controlled Offaly County Council, he controlled Laois County Council (*Offaly Chronicle*, 30 May 1951). In the 1960s he returned to this theme, declaring that while he knew Fine Gael was opposed to jobbery, 'personally I am a great believer in putting a friend into a good job and a secure position if it can be done' (*Irish Times*, 8 November 1965). Some years later he got involved in a dispute with the then Senator Garret FitzGerald, who advised him to resign from Fine Gael after he had proclaimed his belief in jobbery. Flanagan rather condescendingly offered FitzGerald a 'neophyte's pardon', explaining that when FitzGerald had been in the Dáil for 25 years, he would have

a better idea of how to win votes (*Irish Independent*, 8 and 9 February 1968). The memory of this exchange cannot have boosted Flanagan's already slim chances of being appointed to government when FitzGerald became Taoiseach in the 1980s.

After his second victory, he declared presciently that only old age would remove him from Dáil Éireann (*Leinster Express*, 10 June 1944), and 43 years later he retired through illness. His last appearance in Leinster House was a dramatic occasion, as he came from his sick bed to vote in the adjournment debate in December 1986, four months before his death. The scene was recorded in her diary by Gemma Hussey, the Minister for Social Welfare:

Then, ten minutes before he [the Taoiseach] was to conclude, all heads turned up to the lobby and there was Oliver J. Flanagan, being helped in by Tom O'Donnell and Brendan Griffin on a walking frame. He looked appalling, poor man ... So everyone felt very uneasy indeed, I suppose because we all knew we were in the presence of death, not to put a tooth in it. Anyway, we all filed solemnly past Oliver and shook his hand ... and we all felt rather shook. Tom Fitzpatrick [the Ceann Comhairle] paid a nice tribute to him at the end, to prolonged applause.¹⁰

Flanagan was a member of Fianna Fáil in the early 1940s, but soon fell out with the party and displayed real animosity towards it – which was fully reciprocated – from his very first election campaign. He was noted from the start for his phenomenal level of constituency work, and in the early years he used to cycle round the constituency to attend his clinics; indeed, he conducted his first campaign on a bicycle, wearing a 'Here comes Oliver' placard on his front and a 'There goes Flanagan' placard on his back. He bombarded ministers with parliamentary questions, on national as well as local subjects. The secret of his electoral success was identified early by one of his Fianna Fáil opponents, who commented that the main cause of his huge vote in 1948 was not his contribution to the Locke tribunal, nor his monetary reform policy, 'about which I would say 99 per cent of his followers know nothing and care less, but rather ... the simple elementary fact that as a public representative in Dáil Éireann and in the County Council of which he is a member, Mr Flanagan is a hard, unsparing and unflagging worker and advocate of his disciples' interests'.¹¹ To some extent he remained an independent throughout his career: a profile published in 1987 noted that he was 'never a good party man', and had never really tried to build up the constituency party organisation, with which he was indeed increasingly in dispute.¹²

The second most successful Laois-Offaly candidate was Labour's William Davin, returned at every election from 1922 to 1954 inclusive. Davin combined his political career with the role of Dun Laoghaire pier master from 1921 to 1943, and North Wall station controller from 1943 to 1953, but his seat was never in any real danger, and he maintained close connections with the constituency, especially his native Laois. He became a parliamentary secretary in 1954, at the same time as Oliver J. Flanagan, but died two years later. Although highly regarded within the constituency, he made less of an impact within the Labour Party. In 1935 some comments that he made criticising aspects of the trade unions attracted the ire of the party's national executive, which said that if they had been made off the cuff they could be regarded as 'a characteristic piece of febrile irresponsibility', but that since they had been delivered from a script, they were more serious, and it condemned them.¹³

Patrick Boland is the most successful Fianna Fáil TD from the constituency in the period covered, having been returned at each of the 10 elections from June 1927 to 1951 inclusive. Like another long-serving TD of that period, Patrick Gorry, also a farmer, he made little national impact. Most of the other TDs to have been elected several times have been promoted to a ministerial job. Ger Connolly (returned at each election since his first contest in 1969) served for over 7 years as a junior minister; one profile described him as very popular, colourful, and 'as inoffensive as he is unassuming' (*Leinster Express*, 21 November 1992). Tom Enright of Fine Gael sat in the Dáil for 23 years between 1969 and 1992, being perhaps unfortunate never to be offered a ministry despite a solid record of contribution to parliamentary debates. Some of the other TDs for the constituency have also been notable figures. Dr Patrick McCartan, who was returned in 1918, 1921 and 1922, was to run for the presidency in 1945, while Laurence Brady, elected as a Republican TD in 1923, allegedly fired the first shot in 1916 when he shot a donkey near Abbeyleix.¹⁴

Measuring the parliamentary activity of TDs is difficult, but we can at least quantify the contribution of TDs to Dáil debates and the number of parliamentary questions asked. Table 1 presents figures for the period from 1963 to 1987, and shows that different TDs have had different priorities. In the 1963-69 period the two Fine Gael TDs were the most active parliamentarians, Tom O'Higgins being a particularly frequent speaker in debates and Oliver J. Flanagan an avid tabler of questions. Flanagan's activity fell away after 1973, while Paddy Lalor became more active. Tom Enright contributed steadily on both fronts, as did Brian Cowen after his election in 1984, while Ger Connolly was not a major participant in debates but was an indefatigable asker of

Table 1

Dáil activity of Laois-Offaly TDs, 1963-1987

	17th Dáil (1963- 1965)	18th Dáil (1965- 1969)	19th Dáil (1969- 1973)	20th Dáil (1973- 1977)	21st Dáil (1977- 1981)	22nd Dáil (1981- 1982)	23rd Dáil (1982)	24th Dáil (1982- 1987)
<i>Speeches (column inches in Dáil debates)</i>								
Kieran Egan (Fianna Fáil)	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Nicholas Egan (Fianna Fáil)	11	6	—	—	—	—	—	—
Oliver J. Flanagan (Fine Gael)	680	762	675	252	150	44	69	246
Paddy Lalor (Fianna Fáil)	5	195	545	1009	161	—	—	—
Tom O'Higgins (Fine Gael)	347	1080	—	—	—	—	—	—
Henry Byrne (Lab)	—	49	—	—	—	—	—	—
Ger Connolly (Fianna Fáil)	—	—	21	136	107	26	50	275
Ber Cowen (Fianna Fáil)	—	—	28	—	49	0	0	14
Tom Enright (Fine Gael)	—	—	243	187	621	0	20	180
Charles McDonald (Fine Gael)	—	—	—	231	—	—	—	—
Liam Hyland (Fianna Fáil)	—	—	—	—	—	0	17	460
Brian Cowen (Fianna Fáil)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	158
<i>Parliamentary questions asked</i>								
Kieran Egan (Fianna Fáil)	11	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Nicholas Egan (Fianna Fáil)	1	9	—	—	—	—	—	—
Oliver J. Flanagan (Fine Gael)	189	561	765	81	146	6	9	69
Paddy Lalor (Fianna Fáil)	15	0	0	283	10	—	—	—
Tom O'Higgins (Fine Gael)	72	51	—	—	—	—	—	—
Henry Byrne (Lab)	—	13	—	—	—	—	—	—
Ger Connolly (Fianna Fáil)	—	—	188	464	192	13	0	686
Ber Cowen (Fianna Fáil)	—	—	116	—	22	14	0	9
Tom Enright (Fine Gael)	—	—	209	46	176	1	43	300
Charles McDonald (Fine Gael)	—	—	—	2	—	—	—	—
Liam Hyland (Fianna Fáil)	—	—	—	—	—	14	7	246
Brian Cowen (Fianna Fáil)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	298

Note: figures are based on Volumes 203-370 of *Dáil Debates*. Volumes prior to 203 do not separately index speeches and questions, while bound volumes after the period of the 24th Dáil are not available at the time of writing. In the 24th Dáil, Ber Cowen was a TD from 1982 to 1984, and Brian Cowen from 1984 to 1987. Several TDs were cabinet or junior ministers during this period (Paddy Lalor from 1965-1973 and 1977-79, Oliver J. Flanagan from 1975-1977, Ger Connolly from 1979-1981 and in 1982, Ber Cowen in 1982), and ministers do not ask parliamentary questions.

questions, mainly on local issues. The absence of comparable data from other constituencies means that we cannot say whether Laois-Offaly TDs are more active or less active than the average. Of course, such figures should not be used as a measure of how hard TDs work,

since contributions can be made in other ways, particularly by constituency work and activity on Dáil committees.

Just how typical have these active participants in the political fray been of the population whose support they sought?

The most striking difference between the political elite and the population is the great under-representation of women in Laois-Offaly politics (see table 2). Remarkably, no woman even stood at a Dáil election in the constituency until Constance Hannify was selected to run for Fine Gael in 1977, and all but four of the 108 Dáil candidates have been men. Neither Fianna Fáil nor Labour has ever picked a female candidate. Only one of the four female candidates, the Progressive Democrats' Cathy Honan, has even managed to save her deposit, and none has been elected. Laois-Offaly is not quite unique in never having elected a woman to the Dáil, but it is one of a diminishing band of constituencies with this unenviable distinction, and this may be related to the general conservatism of the constituency as demonstrated in 'moral issue' referendums (see below). Whether women in Laois-Offaly have not sought party nominations in significant numbers, or have sought them but failed to be selected as candidates, is not known.

Looking at the occupations of Dáil candidates (see table 3), nearly a third have been farmers. Nearly a quarter can be placed in the 'commercial' category (these are mainly small business people such as shopkeepers, publicans and auctioneers), with about a fifth being professionals (mainly teachers, lawyers and doctors). There is no great difference in the profiles of TDs and other candidates. The number of farmers has declined greatly over the years, reflecting both the national pattern and the shrinking size of the labour force employed in agriculture. Of the 57 candidates who first stood for the Dáil up to 1954, 24 (42 per cent) were farmers, compared with only 10 of the 51 candidates (20 per cent) whose electoral debut came after 1954. The main growth has been not in the number of professionals – as is the case at the national level, at least among TDs – but in the number of candidates who can be classified as non-manual employees.

Table 2

Gender of Dáil candidates and TDs

	All candidates		TDs	
	Number	%	Number	%
Male	104	96.3	33	100.0
Female	4	3.7	0	0
Total	108	100.0	33	100.0

Table 3
Occupations of Dáil candidates and TDs

	All candidates		TDs	
	Number	%	Number	%
Manual employee	6	5.6	1	3.0
Non-manual employee	19	17.6	6	18.2
Commercial	25	23.2	10	30.3
Farmer	34	31.5	9	27.3
Professional	22	20.3	7	21.2
Other	2	1.9	0	0
Total	108	100.0	33	100.0

Table 4
Educational background of Dáil candidates and TDs

	All candidates		TDs	
	Number	%	Number	%
First level only	6	5.6	5	15.2
Second level	22	20.4	11	33.3
Third level	17	15.7	8	24.2
Not known	63	58.3	9	27.3
Total	108	100.0	33	100.0

Data on candidates' educational backgrounds is missing in most cases (see table 4), but what information is available shows that most have had at least second-level education, and that TDs have usually had more education than unsuccessful candidates. As would be expected, the proportion of candidates and TDs with at least second-level education is higher for the post-1954 period than for the 1922-54 period.

Examination of the age profiles of TDs and candidates points to the relatively youthful age at which political careers begin. Those candidates who have become TDs first stood for the Dáil in their mid-thirties, and were only 36 when first elected to the Dáil, about a year younger than for TDs across the country.¹⁵ The youngest was Oliver J. Flanagan, a mere 23-year-old when he became a TD, and seven others became TDs in their twenties, with a further 14 in their thirties. Only three (Eugene O'Brien, Eamonn Donnelly and Nicholas Egan) were over 50 when they first became TDs.¹⁶ At any given election, the average age of the candidates has been 43 years.

In the country as a whole, the most common route to the Dáil is through membership of local government, with family connections to a

previous TD another useful credential, and this pattern applies in Laois-Offaly as well. In the early years participation in the 1916 rising or the War of Independence was almost essential for an anti-Treatyite to succeed: the first 6 TDs representing the Republicans or Fianna Fáil (John McGuinness, Laurence Brady, Patrick J. Gorry, Patrick Boland, Thomas Tynan and Eamonn Donnelly) all had such a record, and as late as 1954 a new TD (Nicholas Egan) was a veteran of the independence struggle. Matters were different on the pro-Treaty side. Once the 4 pro-Treaty TDs elected in 1921 had retired (Patrick McCartan), moved elsewhere (Kevin O'Higgins), or been defeated at the polls (Joseph Lynch and Francis Bulfin), nearly all of the most visible representatives of the pro-Treatyites were men with no record in the independence struggle – the only exceptions were Dr T. F. O'Higgins and Senator Patrick Doyle – and in some cases (Patrick J. Egan and William Aird) a past association with the Redmondite Irish Parliamentary Party.

Membership of local government helped from the start, and has become more important over the years. Since 1933, in fact, every new TD bar one (Tom O'Higgins) has been a member of either Laois or Offaly County Council before being first elected to the Dáil. Even in the 1920s, before routine patterns of political recruitment had become established, most TDs did have some local government experience. For example, James Dwyer was vice-chairman of Laois County Council when he won the 1926 by-election, Patrick Boland was vice-chairman of Offaly County Council when he was first elected to the Dáil in June 1927, and William Aird was the chairman of Laois County Council when he became a TD in September 1927.

The other main route into the Dáil is through a familial link with a previous TD, and this route has been followed by 5 of the 33 Laois-Offaly TDs. Dr T. F. O'Higgins was the brother of Kevin O'Higgins, and then passed the Fine Gael seat on to his own son in 1948. Charles McDonald, elected in 1973, was related to Oliver J. Flanagan through marriage. More recently, there were two archetypal cases of the handing on of a seat from father to son, when Brian Cowen succeeded his father Ber at the 1984 by-election and Charles Flanagan succeeded Oliver J. at the 1987 election.

The pool of Dáil candidates displays elements of both continuity and circulation. Among those 75 candidates never to have been TDs, more than two-thirds (52 of them) have stood once and only once, with just 5 venturing before the electorate more than three times (see table 5). Nearly 60 per cent of the candidacies of these individuals have resulted in a lost deposit.¹⁷ These candidates have on average received only 2,372 first preferences each time they stood, whereas the 33 to have

been TDs have won an average of 6,396 votes at each contest. These 33 individuals have won almost 80 per cent of the votes cast at Laois-Offaly elections between 1922 and 1992, have stood on average at five contests each, and have been elected on average 3.8 times each – much the same as the national average.¹⁸ The period from 1977 to 1992 illustrates especially clearly this picture of a solid core of established politicians maintaining their position at election after election while being challenged by a ambitious pack of would-be TDs whose composition changes constantly as unsuccessful candidates retire from the fray and are replaced by new but rarely more successful aspirants. During this period, which saw seven general elections, 27 candidates stood for election for the first time, yet only four new TDs were elected, and three of these replaced retiring or deceased TDs: Liam Hyland took over Paddy Lalor's seat in 1981; Brian Cowen and Charles Flanagan replaced their fathers in 1984 and 1987, respectively; and in 1992 Pat Gallagher broke the pattern by ousting Fine Gael's Tom Enright. Change in the political participants has been among the challengers, not among the incumbents. Defeat has not been a major occupational hazard for Laois-Offaly TDs: over the 1922-92 period, the careers of only 12 have ended this way, with a further 10 retiring, 3 dying, and 3 moving to other constituencies.

Voting Patterns

In many ways voting patterns in Laois-Offaly have indeed reflected the national trend, as the quotes at the head of this chapter imply, though not to the extent that one could conclude 'As Laois-Offaly goes, so goes the country'. Since 1922, when no anti-Treatyites stood in the constituency, Fianna Fáil has been the strongest party in Laois-Offaly at all but 6 elections (those of June and September 1927, 1954, 1961, 1965 and 1973); Fine Gael received the most votes on the last 5 of those occasions, while Labour won a plurality of the votes in June 1927.

The absence of representatives of the anti-Treaty forces from the

Table 5
Number of times each candidate has stood for Dáil

	All candidates		Candidates who have been TDs		Candidates who have never been TDs	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
1 only	56	51.9	4	12.1	52	69.3
2 or 3	28	25.9	10	30.4	18	24.0
4 or more	24	22.2	19	57.6	5	6.7
Total	108	100.0	33	100.0	75	100.0

1922 election, as a result of the 'Collins-de Valera pact', meant that their support was underestimated in 1923, and there was some surprise when Republican candidates took two of the five seats at the 1923 election, outpolling Cumann na nGaedheal. Cumann na nGaedheal won the by-election in 1926 brought about by the disqualification of one of those Republican TDs, but the next general election, in June 1927, was something of a disaster for the party. Its vote fell, while that of Fianna Fáil rose, and two of its three TDs lost their seats. There was agreement that the party organisation in the constituency, especially in Offaly, had deteriorated. The *Leinster Express* (18 June 1927) concluded that Cumann na nGaedheal had done badly, 'but it could hardly be otherwise, as they really had no organisation at their backs', while the *Offaly Chronicle* (1 September) noted that 'the party's machinery here was not very strong ... [and] the arrangements in the Offaly end were noticeably incomplete'. In Birr, the home base of one of the party's TDs, Francis Bulfin, the machinery was 'practically inoperative' (8 September). In addition, doubts were expressed by the pro-government *Offaly Independent* about the calibre of Cumann na nGaedheal's standard-bearers: 'Some of the candidates put forward, it must be said, were neither popular nor desirable' (18 June 1927). In contrast, Fianna Fáil's preparation for elections was described as 'always second to none' and 'perfect' (*Offaly Chronicle*, 8 September 1927).

In response, Cumann na nGaedheal made a determined effort to improve its appeal at the election that followed in September. A Captain Brophil was sent down from party headquarters in Dublin to beef up the organisation. The unfortunate Bulfin failed to be reselected as a party candidate, and the other defeated TD, Patrick J. Egan, opted for a backroom position. Two new candidates were brought onto the ticket; one of them was William Aird, a high-profile Portlaoise businessman with Redmondite credentials. In addition, two former independent candidates, Michael Cahill and William Cobbe (a Protestant farmer), now rowed in behind the party. These efforts worked. Reports spoke of the energetic party campaign in the constituency, and its vote practically doubled, taking it well ahead of Fianna Fáil, with Aird heading the poll.

However, this new vitality proved short-lived. Aird was to die in 1931, still in his thirties, and by the time of the early 1930s elections the Cumann na nGaedheal organisation seemed to have reverted to its earlier lethargic state. In 1932 the *Offaly Independent* (27 February) contrasted the active concern of Fianna Fáil agents to ensure that all supporters were on the electoral register with Cumann na nGaedheal's 'inattention' to this detail, and the following year it reported that in

some districts the Cumann na nGaedheal organisation had become 'quite supine' and characterised by 'inertia' (11 February 1933). While Fianna Fáil had 'an ample supply of cars', 'transport for Cumann na nGaedheal was somewhat limited' (*Offaly Chronicle* 2 February 1933). All this is in line with what is often seen as the traditionally superior nature of the Fianna Fáil organisation compared with its Fine Gael counterpart, which has been described as 'generally debilitated'.¹⁹

Besides, the Cumann na nGaedheal policy of bringing into its ranks former Redmondites and Unionists – one pursued at national level, and unkindly described by Fianna Fáil as 'the alliance of a dog with its fleas'²⁰ – had its costs as well as its benefits. A number of TDs left the party during the 1920s, alleging that it was failing to follow in the footsteps of Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith and was becoming too responsive to the agenda of its new friends. In Laois-Offaly, at least one local notable followed the same route: Joseph Bulfin, an Offaly county councillor, defected from Cumann na nGaedheal to Fianna Fáil, explaining that 'he was always a consistent follower of Griffith's policy, but he found that the present Government had wandered away from it' (*Midland Tribune*, 6 February 1932). While Cumann na nGaedheal's opening to former Unionists and Redmondites paid short-term electoral dividends, it has been argued that in the long term its moderate approach made it seem to have 'an ambivalent, reactive and at times even an apparently negative position on the national issue', and as such damaged the party's long-term prospects.²¹

Looking at support for the two main parties in Laois-Offaly and nationally over the 1923-92 period shows that the parties' fortunes locally have generally mirrored national trends, but local factors have clearly also played a part. In Fianna Fáil's case (fig. 25.1), support patterns in Laois-Offaly and in the country as a whole were very similar in the early years, and though in the 1940s Fianna Fáil locally was adversely affected by Oliver J. Flanagan's vote-winning exploits, by 1961 the two lines were back in reasonable synchronicity. Since 1961, though, they follow quite different trajectories; nationally, Fianna Fáil support oscillated until the early 1980s before beginning a sharp decline, while in Laois-Offaly the graph has been steadily upwards. While in 1973 Fianna Fáil was weaker in Laois-Offaly than in Ireland as a whole, by 1992 Laois-Offaly was the party's second strongest of the 41 Dáil constituencies. Somehow Fianna Fáil in Laois-Offaly has been almost immune from the waning support experienced almost everywhere else, and the strength of its organisation and team of candidates in Laois-Offaly must be a major part of the explanation.

Fine Gael's gains and losses in Laois-Offaly have been in the same direction as at national level, though often in more exaggerated form

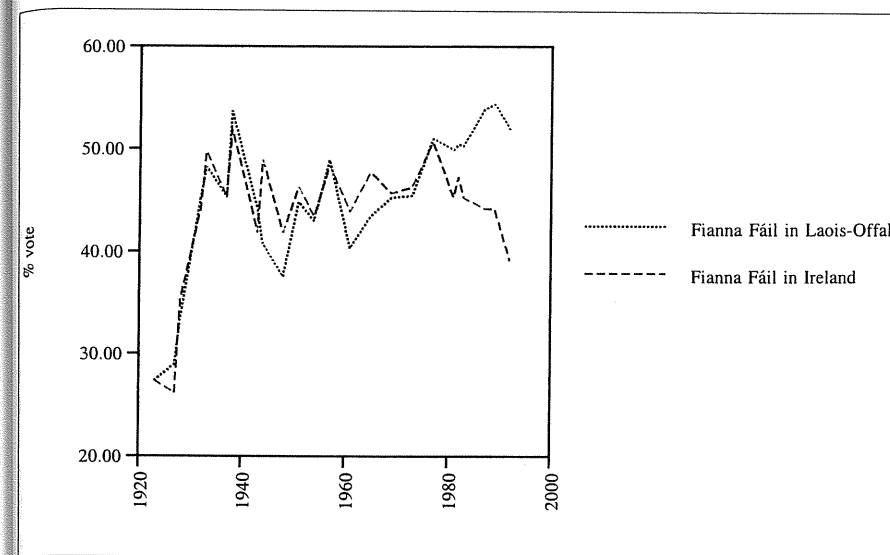


Fig. 25.1 Fianna Fáil strength in Laois-Offaly, and in Ireland, 1923-92.

(fig. 25.2). Fine Gael's fortunes were greatly affected by the Flanagan phenomenon. His arrival on the scene in 1943 clearly drew a lot of support from the party, and its strength in Laois-Offaly lagged well behind its national strength until he joined the party ticket in 1954, transforming Laois-Offaly from one of Fine Gael's weakest areas into its

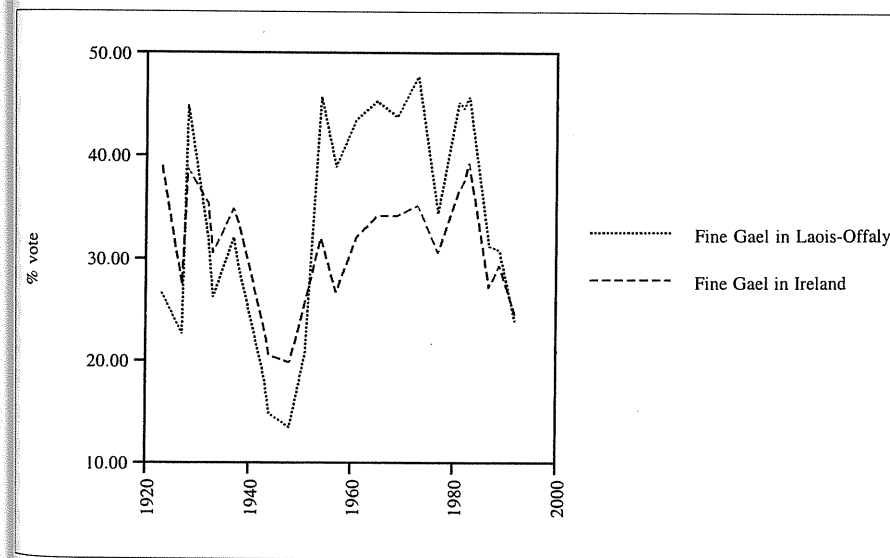


Fig. 25.2 Fine Gael strength in Laois-Offaly, and in Ireland, 1923-92.

fifth strongest constituency. Fine Gael's strength in Laois-Offaly continued to be well above its national level of support, and despite the feeling at both national and local level that Oliver J. was something of a mixed blessing for the party, the precipitate decline in its support in the constituency since his retirement tells its own story. In 1992, Fine Gael's strength in Laois-Offaly fell below its national strength, and it won only one of the five seats, both for the first time since 1951. As for Labour, Laois-Offaly was one of its strongest constituencies up to the 1940s – it averaged over 20 per cent of the votes at each of the first nine general elections – but since then it has struggled. A brief revival in the early 1960s saw Har Byrne elected in 1965, but the story in the 1970s and 1980s was one of a string of lost deposits before Pat Gallagher finally regained a seat for the party in 1992.

Over the period as a whole, all the main parties have fared slightly better on average in Laois-Offaly than in the country generally, with minor parties and independents making relatively little impact. The Laois-Offaly party system, if we can think of it in isolation, has been less fragmented than the Irish party system. In June 1927 the neo-Redmondite National League, which won over 7 per cent of the votes nationally, did not even run a candidate in Laois-Offaly, presumably because the local former supporters of the old Irish Parliamentary Party had by this time been co-opted into Cumann na nGaedheal, while neither the small farmers' Clann na Talmhan, which ran three candidates in the 1943 and 1944 elections, nor Clann na Poblachta, which ran three in 1948, enjoyed any success. Only two individuals have been elected on a label other than Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael or Labour – these were John Finlay of the National Centre Party (which was to merge with Cumann na nGaedheal to form Fine Gael) in 1933, and Oliver J. Flanagan in 1943, 1944, 1948 and 1951 – and both of these subsequently joined and were elected for Fine Gael.

We can examine this more systematically by measuring the degree of correspondence between the parties' support in Laois-Offaly and in Ireland as a whole. Table 6 shows that for both major parties, the two patterns are strongly correlated; put simply, when they do well in Laois-Offaly, they do well across the country, and vice versa. This suggests that these parties' fortunes in Laois-Offaly are determined primarily by national factors, though local ones can certainly make a difference. In Labour's case, the relationship is very weak, indicating the dependence of this smaller party's fortunes, in a single constituency, on the appeal of its leading candidate, which will mean that its local and national fortunes are more likely than those of the major parties to diverge. Turnout patterns in Laois-Offaly and nationally have been practically identical; in both Laois-Offaly and the country as

Table 6
Correlations between parties' support nationally and in Laois-Offaly, at elections 1923-92

	Fianna Fáil support nationally	Fine Gael support nationally	Labour support nationally	Turnout nationally
Fianna Fáil support in Laois-Offaly	0.76**			
Fine Gael support in Laois-Offaly		0.76**		
Labour support in Laois-Offaly			0.14	
Turnout in Laois-Offaly				0.98**

Note: The figures are Pearson's correlation coefficient (*r*). The higher the figure, the closer the resemblance between the two variables; a value of 1 would indicate complete correspondence. There were 24 elections during this period. ** denotes significant at the .001 level.

a whole, turnout peaked in 1933, at a level of over 80 per cent, and has been dropping steadily since 1977, with turnout in 1992 being at the lowest level since the 1920s.

We can attempt to identify the underlying nature of party competition in Laois-Offaly by looking at the way the various parties' fortunes have waxed and waned in relation to each other. If it is the case that when party A gains, party B loses, we might infer that the two parties are 'fishing in the same pool', i.e. they are in competition for the same bloc of voters. We can assess this by correlating the parties' percentage votes in the constituency over the 24 general elections of the 1923-92 period. The figures, presented in table 7, suggest that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are not exactly in head-to-head competition within the constituency. Correlation of the two parties' support records produces a coefficient of +0.19; that is to say, when Fianna Fáil does better, there is a slight tendency for Fine Gael to do better also. Fianna Fáil's main rival seems to be Labour, for when Labour does well, Fianna Fáil generally does badly, and vice versa. Fine Gael's strength is inversely related to support for groups outside the three main parties, and indeed it is true that many such groups and parties – the Farmers' and National Centre parties in the 1920s and 1930s, and the Progressive Democrats in the 1980s and 1990s, not to mention Oliver J. Flanagan in his four elections as an independent – were appealing mainly to social groups that could have been expected otherwise to back Fine Gael. The table also shows that when turnout is higher, Fianna Fáil, and to a lesser extent Fine Gael, tend to fare better. The main difference between the pattern in Laois-Offaly and the national pattern is that at national level Fianna Fáil and Labour support are only weakly related,

Table 7
Correlations between parties' strength in Laois-Offaly, at elections 1923-92

	Fianna Fáil support	Fine Gael support	Labour support	All others' support
Turnout	0.52*	0.31	-0.34	-0.39
Fianna Fáil support	—	0.19	-0.65**	-0.37
Fine Gael support		—	-0.30	-0.85**
Labour support			—	0.03

Note: The figures are Pearson's correlation coefficient (r). The higher the figure, the closer the resemblance between the two variables; a value of 1 would indicate complete correspondence. There were 24 elections during this period. ** denotes significant at the .001 level; * significant at the .01 level.

while Fianna Fáil support is strongly and negatively related to support for groups outside the three main parties. In this respect Laois-Offaly is not exactly a barometer of the country, with the direct link between the fortunes of Labour and Fianna Fáil one distinctive feature of the constituency's politics since 1922.

Table 8 shows that, as would be expected, Fianna Fáil has been the strongest party in Laois-Offaly over the 1922-92 period taken as a whole. Although it has supplied only 35.8 per cent of the candidates, it has received 44.7 per cent of the votes and won 48.0 per cent of the seats. Both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have won slightly more of the seats than their share of the votes would justify, but this 'bonus' is not large, and all parties have been reasonably fairly represented in relation to their votes.

Table 8
Party fortunes at elections 1922-92

	% of candidatures	Average number of first preferences received per candidature	% of votes received	% of seats won
Fianna Fáil	35.8	5,889	44.7	48.0
Fine Gael	30.8	5,091	33.2	35.4
Labour	15.4	4,159	13.6	12.6
Progressive Democrats	1.1	4,441	1.0	0
Farmers' parties	2.9	2,849	1.7	0.8
Republican parties	2.9	1,189	0.8	0
Others	11.1	2,141	5.0	3.1
Total	100.0	—	100.0	100.0
Number of cases	279	279	1,317,627	127

Just as it helps a candidate to be a nominee of one of the major parties, especially Fianna Fáil, so, as table 9 shows, does it help to have some elective status before running for the Dáil.²² Of the 95 candidates who stood when lacking any electoral base, only 10 were elected, and more than half lost their deposits. County councillors and Senators do significantly better than this, and TDs and ministers fare better still. All ministers have been re-elected, while among TDs the great majority have been re-elected and only one (Eugene O'Brien in 1933) has lost his deposit. The number of votes needed to secure election in Ireland is small by international standards, and in fact in Laois-Offaly at general elections a mere 6,000 first preferences have always sufficed. The 5,973 first preferences received by Charles McDonald in November 1982 represent the highest ever polled by an unsuccessful candidate (ironically, this was almost twice as many as McDonald received in 1973, the only time he was elected), and the only other candidates to poll more than 5,500 votes and still be defeated are Liam Hyland (in 1977) and Tom Enright (in 1992), both of whom had long periods in the Dáil to console them. At the other end of the scale, 13 candidates have been elected with fewer than 4,000 first preferences, and two of these received fewer than 3,000, the lowest being the 2,636 votes, only a third of the quota, with which William Davin was re-elected in 1948. In recent times, Laois-Offaly has not been dominated electorally by any one candidate; in 1992, Brian Cowen became the first candidate since 1973 to exceed the quota on the first count at a general election in the constituency.

Throughout the period covered, Offaly has had a slightly larger electorate than Laois - in 1926, Offaly's population was 52,592 compared with 51,540 in Laois, and by the time of the 1991 census the gap had widened to more than 6,000 (58,448 in Offaly, 52,325 in Laois). Given that voters tend to support local candidates, we might expect the normal pattern to be that Offaly-based candidates have

Table 9
Votes won, by elective status of candidate

Elective status	Average number of first preferences received	Number of cases	Number elected	Number losing deposit
Minister	8,211	9	9	0
Outgoing TD	6,467	102	87	1
Senator	4,346	11	3	2
County councillor only	4,296	62	18	15
No elective status	2,842	95	10	52
All candidates	4,723	279	127	70

taken most of the votes and that at most elections three of the constituency's five TDs are Offaly-based and two are Laois-based. Deciding where a candidate is based is straightforward in most cases, but a sizeable minority of candidates have been based outside the constituency. Many of these have strong links with one part of the constituency: for example, William Davin, though resident in Dublin throughout his 34 years as a TD, came from Rathdowney and was an active member of the Laoismen's Society in Dublin, while all three members of the O'Higgins dynasty were also resident in Dublin or Meath while TDs yet had strong roots in Stradbally in County Laois. Indeed, only two TDs have had no real roots in the constituency: Patrick McCartan (elected in 1922) and Eamonn Donnelly (1933), both born in Ulster and resident in Dublin. Of the 33 individuals to have been TDs, 16 were born in Laois, 10 in Offaly and 7 elsewhere (3 in the neighbouring counties of Kildare and Westmeath, and one each in Cork, Dublin, Armagh and Tyrone).

Of the 127 Dáil seats filled in Laois-Offaly over the 1922-92 period (124 at general elections and three in by-elections), 48 have gone to Laois-based candidates, 51 to Offaly-based candidates, and 28 to candidates based outside the county. If we classify the last group according to their original or family base within the constituency, the balance swings sharply in favour of Laois: it has 'won' 74 of the seats, compared with only 51 for Offaly and two won by outsiders. Although roughly the same number of candidates have had their base in each of the two counties, Laois-based candidates have fared over 700 votes better on average, which accounts for their greater electoral success (see table 10). At eight elections (the first in September 1927, the most recent in 1965), resident or expatriate Laoismen have taken four of the five seats at stake. This is partly due to the success of William Davin, who as the leading (and often the only) Labour candidate weighs the record in favour of Laois. If we consider only the two main parties, which at virtually every election have both had at least one candidate from each county, the advantage of Laois is less, though the county has still been the base of 52 per cent of TDs of the two major parties compared with only 46 per cent for Offaly. From 1969, all the TDs have been resident in the constituency, and since then Offaly has had the upper hand, being the base of three of the five candidates at each of the next nine elections except for 1973, when Charles McDonald's narrow defeat of Ber Cowen was a victory not only for Fine Gael over Fianna Fáil but also for Laois over Offaly. Perhaps surprisingly, the main population centres in the two counties have supplied little of the constituency's Dáil representation. Only three TDs have been based in Portlaoise, by some way the largest town in County Laois (two of these,

Table 10
County fortunes at elections 1922-92

	% of candidatures	Average number of first preferences received per candidature	% of votes received	% of seats won
Laois	50.5	5,077	54.3	58.3
Offaly	47.0	4,348	43.2	40.2
Outside the constituency	2.5	4,605	2.4	1.6
Total	100.0	—	100.0	100.0
Number of cases	279	279	1,317,627	127

Laurence Brady and William Aird, were one term TDs in the 1920s, and the third is Charles Flanagan, first elected in 1987). Likewise, only four TDs have been based in Tullamore, the main town in County Offaly: two of these were one term TDs in the 1920s, and there were no more until 1992, by which time Fianna Fáil's Brian Cowen had moved to the town and was joined in Dáil Éireann by Labour's Pat Gallagher.

The assumption that voters back local candidates (the so-called 'friends and neighbours effect') is borne out by evidence from elsewhere in Ireland and indeed from other countries.²³ Do candidates in Laois-Offaly fare best near their own home patch, and do Laois voters vote for Laois-based candidates and Offaly voters for Offaly-based candidates? To answer this question reliably requires information not made publicly available, since election results are published only at constituency level, not at the level of individual polling stations. However, as is well known, the political parties are able to keep 'tallies' of the vote at each polling station by studying the ballot papers as they are checked during the counting process, and these have been made available to the author. The only election where any regional breakdown was published in the local papers was the 1926 by-election, at which Sinn Féin was significantly stronger in Offaly than in Laois (41 per cent compared with 34 per cent), Cumann na nGaedheal was a little stronger there (42 per cent compared with 39 per cent), while Labour was much stronger in Laois (27 per cent compared with 17 per cent in Offaly). This surprised contemporary analysts, who had expected Sinn Féin to head the poll in Offaly and Cumann na nGaedheal to be stronger in Laois, and was attributed to the fact that the Cumann na nGaedheal candidate, James Dwyer, though now living in Laois, had stronger roots in south-west Offaly. By 1992, though, this was reversed: both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael were slightly stronger in Laois, while Labour was stronger in Offaly.

We can see the friends and neighbours effect illustrated clearly in table 11, which shows how the 14 candidates at the 1992 election fared. In virtually every case, candidates fared better in their own county than in the constituency as a whole, better still in their own local electoral area (there are 5 of these in Laois and 4 in Offaly), and best of all in the ballot boxes from their own home base. Some, such as Brian Cowen and Liam Hyland, virtually swept the board in their home base. Even the independent Edward Delaney, who won a negligible number of votes in all, received one in every six first preferences at his local polling station. The same phenomenon was apparent at the 1994 European Parliament elections, when Fianna Fáil's Liam Hyland, the only candidate from either Laois or Offaly, won a remarkable 62.3 per cent of all the votes cast in Laois.

Table 12 shows the votes won by the candidates in the two counties, and confirms the pattern of candidates faring better in their home county than in the other county. This is especially pronounced for Fianna Fáil, whose four candidates won very few votes outside their own county. Even the constituency-wide poll-topper Brian Cowen received fewer votes in Laois than the combined independents. Both main Fine Gael candidates, in contrast, polled significantly in both counties. The explanation is less likely to be any different orientation of voters of those two parties than the greater efficiency of the Fianna Fáil organisation and its successful management of the vote. There is evidently very little rivalry among the Fianna Fáil candidates across the county boundary – though of course there is plenty within each county – whereas within the Fine Gael camp both the outgoing TDs, Tom Enright and Charles Flanagan, were to some extent roaming the entire constituency in search of support, with seemingly no areas being 'off limits' to anyone and competition being unconstrained. This cross-county voting is not a new development, as Oliver J. Flanagan was widely believed to win a substantial number of votes in Offaly despite his Laois base. In the case of Labour and the Progressive Democrats, the pattern is less stark because they ran only one candidate, so Labour supporters in Laois had to vote for an Offaly-based candidate. Even so, as the table shows, over three-quarters of all Laois votes went to Laois candidates, and an even higher percentage of Offaly votes went to Offaly candidates.

The importance of candidates' geographical base is also evident when votes are transferred. Although most voters rank candidates first and foremost along party lines, locality is a more important factor for some voters, and it is a major secondary consideration for many party-oriented voters. While we will not attempt to quantify this systematically, a few examples illustrate the point. At the 1992 election,

Table 11
The friends and neighbours effect at the 1992 general election in Laois-Offaly

Candidate	Candidate's home base	Candidate's % of votes in:			
		Whole constituency	Candidate's own county	Candidate's own local electoral area	Candidate's home base
Fianna Fáil					
Ger Connolly	Bracknagh	8.0	12.4	30.1	46.4
Brian Cowen	Clara	18.9	34.8	41.3	69.8
Liam Hyland	Ballacolla	15.6	32.2	47.6	67.3
John Moloney	Mountmellick	9.3	17.1	47.8	52.1
Fine Gael					
Molly Buckley	Tullamore	2.2	3.2	5.6	6.8
Tom Enright	Birr	10.7	14.1	29.5	39.2
Charles Flanagan	Mountmellick	10.9	16.8	19.8	21.9
Labour					
Pat Gallagher	Tullamore	13.0	15.8	28.5	43.0
Progressive Democrat					
Cathy Honan	Portarlinton	6.6	7.9	17.7	32.6
Sinn Féin					
John Carroll	Birr	1.2	1.9	3.6	3.5
Others					
John Butterfield	Tullamore	2.8	3.3	4.0	2.9
Edward Delaney	Ballyskenagh	0.2	0.4	1.3	16.8
Joe McCormack	Portlaoise	0.5	0.9	2.9	3.2

Source: Local party organisation tally figures.

Note: The home bases of Brian Cowen and Charles Flanagan are taken as their original bases, as shown in the table, even though they have subsequently moved to Tullamore and Portlaoise, respectively.

when on the second count the surplus of Brian Cowen was distributed, 76 per cent of the votes went to the other three Fianna Fáil candidates, showing the importance of party as a factor in voters' ranking of the candidates. The importance of geography is shown by the fact that 72 per cent of them went to other Offaly-based candidates and only 28 per cent to Laois-based candidates. On the 10th count in the same contest, the Laois-based Fianna Fáil candidate John Moloney was eliminated, and his transfers too illustrated the way both factors are important, with party clearly being the stronger force: 57 per cent of his votes went to the Offaly-based Fianna Fáil candidate, 17 per cent to the Laois-based Fine Gael candidate, and only 3 per cent to the Offaly-based Fine Gael candidate.

Table 12
Variations in county voting at the 1992 general election in Laois-Offaly

Candidate	Candidate's county	Votes in Laois	Votes in Offaly	% vote in Laois	% vote in Offaly
Fianna Fáil					
Ger Connolly	Offaly	825	3,448	3.3	12.4
Brian Cowen	Offaly	482	9,662	1.9	34.8
Liam Hyland	Laois	8,143	250	32.2	0.9
John Moloney	Laois	4,311	587	17.1	2.1
Fine Gael					
Molly Buckley	Offaly	231	887	0.9	3.2
Tom Enright	Offaly	1,810	3,926	7.2	14.1
Charles Flanagan	Laois	4,224	1,566	16.8	5.6
Labour					
Pat Gallagher	Offaly	2,510	4,391	10.0	15.8
Progressive Democrat					
Cathy Honan	Laois	1,982	1,537	7.9	5.5
Sinn Féin					
John Carroll	Offaly	190	515	0.8	1.9
Others					
John Butterfield	Offaly	248	912	1.0	3.3
Edward Delaney	Offaly	24	104	0.1	0.4
Joe McCormack	Laois	221	10	0.9	0.0
All Laois-based candidates		18,881	3,950	74.9	14.2
All Offaly-based candidates		6,320	23,845	25.1	85.8
Total		25,201	27,795	100.0	100.0

Source: Local party organisation tally figures.

Note: The actual valid vote was 53,670, nearly 700 more than the total in the table. The difference can be attributed to postal votes and to very minor inaccuracies in the tally.

The suggestion that Laois-Offaly is a barometer for the country as a whole has been reasonably true for contests other than general elections, though with significant exceptions. At most referendums – for example, on adopting the new constitution in 1937, on whether to abolish the PR electoral system in 1968, on European integration in 1972, 1987 and 1992 – the vote in Laois-Offaly has closely mirrored the national vote. Similarly, in most presidential elections, the votes in the constituency have been close to the votes for the country as a whole. Even when presidential candidates have had a close link with the constituency, they have fared little better here than elsewhere: in 1966 and 1973 support for Tom O'Higgins was less than 2 per cent stronger

in Laois-Offaly than nationally, and in 1945 the former Laois-Offaly TD Patrick McCartan won only 3 per cent more of the votes in the constituency than nationally. However, on 'moral issue' referendums Laois-Offaly is anything but a barometer of the national mood. It has consistently been one of the most conservative constituencies: in the pro-life referendum of 1983, and the divorce referendums of 1986 and 1995, the more conservative position was supported by about 10 per cent more of the voters than in the country as a whole. For example, in November 1995 the vote against divorce amounted to 59.9 per cent in Laois-Offaly compared with 49.7 per cent across the country, making Laois-Offaly the 10th most conservative among the 41 Dáil constituencies. On 'moral issue' referendums, voters in Laois-Offaly behave much like voters in Connacht-Ulster, and are significantly less likely to support the liberal position than voters in other Leinster constituencies.

Campaigning styles and the local media

Until the advent of local radio in the mid-1980s, the only local media through which campaigns could be fought or reported were provincial newspapers. Four papers have been based in the Laois-Offaly constituency for all or most of our period: the *Leinster Express* (Portlaoise), the *Midland Tribune* (Birr), the *Offaly Chronicle* (Birr), and the *Offaly Independent* (Tullamore). (Some other papers, such as the *Leinster Leader* (Naas) and the *Nationalist and Leinster Times* (Carlow), also carry some coverage of Laois-Offaly politics, but both would have their main circulation outside the constituency.)

The partisan complexion of these papers varied. The *Leinster Express* and the *Offaly Chronicle* took a neutral line in the crucial early years. Neither paper carried an editorial in the 1920s, although both gave particularly generous coverage to Cumann na nGaedheal. The *Offaly Chronicle* introduced editorials for the 1932 general election (though the only advice it gave to its readers was to be sure to vote), but dropped them the following year. The *Leinster Express* did not introduce editorials until 1948, and it too then adopted the anodyne, or prudent, line of simply calling on its readers to vote, in 1961 pleading 'in the name of God and Ireland, come out and vote' (30 September 1961). In 1957 its editorial line could be construed as sympathetic to Fianna Fáil, and in 1969 it criticised both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael for adopting 'red smear' tactics against Labour, but the first time it explicitly gave advice to its readers was in 1977, when it expressed the hope that the outgoing Fine Gael-Labour government would be replaced by Fianna Fáil, as it indeed it was. By this time, though, the editorial page also carried Mick Mulholland's 'Political Notebook', which was unashamedly pro-Fine Gael.

The other two papers nailed their colours to the mast from the start. The *Offaly Independent* took a strongly pro-Treaty line throughout the 1920s. 'It is essential that at the polls on next Monday the electors vote for the Candidates which have been chosen by Cumann na nGaedheal ... it is above Party; it is above class interest. It stands for the country as a whole', it declared in 1923 (25 August). In 1927 it again sang the praises of the government party, said of Fianna Fáil that 'when it is not dangerous Mr de Valera's party is futile' (4 June), and dismissed the Farmers' Party as 'this group of political futilists' and 'a ranchers' group of reactionaries' (21 May). In the tense political atmosphere of the early 1930s, its rhetoric reached fever pitch. In 1932 it proclaimed that 'Unless they [the people] have lost all sense of proportion, and care very little for their own interests and the interests of their country they will vote for the standard bearers of Cumann na nGaedheal' (13 February), and in 1933 it went even further, thundering: 'Electors, in the name of all that you hold sacred, vote on Tuesday next for the parties of Hope and Happiness, the Cumann na nGaedheal and the Centre (Farmers') Party. May God defend the right' (21 January). By the late 1930s, though, while still supportive of Fine Gael, the editor acknowledged that there was 'little difference' in the programmes of the two main parties (4 June 1938), and by 1948 the paper was prepared to praise Fianna Fáil's record in government as well as that of Cumann na nGaedheal, and took refuge in the 'think carefully before you vote and put the country's interests first' approach.

In contrast, the heart of the *Midland Tribune*, although it expressed support for the Treaty in 1923, was never really with Cumann na nGaedheal, and its advice varied from election to election. During the June 1927 election campaign it advised readers not to back 'reactionary Imperialists, disguised however they might be' (14 May), declared 'absolutely no sympathy' for the Redmondite National League, criticised Fianna Fáil's continued abstention from the Dáil (4 June), and lamented the calibre of candidates across the board: 'most people will agree that many candidates were entirely unsuitable for the responsibilities that they wished to assume. The election speeches were disappointing, and some of them absolutely vulgar' (11 June). At the September 1927 election it expressed the hope that the 'Irish-Ireland elements' of the two main parties would get together, since these had more in common with each other than the better sections of Cumann na nGaedheal had with 'recent recruits to that party' (10 September). In 1932 it criticised both main parties. Unusually for a provincial paper it reserved its warmest words for Labour, advising workers to back it in 1927 (4 June), and in 1932 it suggested that all its readers back Labour. Like the *Offaly Independent*, it saw the 1933 election in very black and white

terms, urging voters to return 3 Fianna Fáil TDs and William Davin of Labour, regretting only that 'the combined ex-Unionist, ranching and Imperialist interests' would be strong enough to hold the fifth seat. 'It is now the old question of Ireland versus England. Let Ireland win', it declared (14 January). By 1938, though, it too saw 'very little difference' between the two main parties, and expressed reservations about Fianna Fáil because of a fear that the party might try to abolish the proportional representation electoral system (4 and 11 June).

The local newspapers also convey a good deal of the changing flavour of constituency campaigning. In the early decades the typical report consisted of an account of speeches made by candidates at election meetings, sometimes including details of the heckling that speakers received. The visit of one of the party leaders was a major occasion; for example, when Eamon de Valera visited Tullamore in 1933, he was met outside the town by a torchlight procession and two bands (*Offaly Independent*, 28 January). When he came to Mountmellick in 1954, 'heavy rain fell before and during the meeting, but the large crowd, which included people from all over Laois and Offaly, remained until the meeting ended, at 11.0 pm' (*Leinster Express*, 15 May). A change was noted in the 1956 by-election, when the constituency was swamped by TDs of all parties and ministers. 'Never before in this constituency was there such an emphasis placed on personal canvassing', said the *Leinster Express* (28 April), adding, 'It would appear that the political parties are now more interested in this type of electioneering than in holding public meetings'. In fact, though, door-to-door canvassing had also been employed extensively in the 1926 by-election (*Leinster Express* 30 January), and at the second election of 1927 it was said that Cumann na nGaedheal was cutting back on public meetings in favour of canvassing (*Offaly Chronicle*, 8 and 15 September). By 1961 the *Leinster Express* was looking back nostalgically (8 July) to the days when 'a popular candidate was invariably brought shoulder-high to the platform between lines of lighted torches on the end of long poles; and, as often as not, the nearby hills were lit up with bonfires'. Elections were not without their entertainment aspect. In 1927, the Rathdowney Pipers' Band 'discoursed some appropriate music' at a Labour meeting (*Leinster Express* 7 May), and indeed pipe bands played at many meetings. In 1932 a Labour supporter, dressed as 'Mr Gandhi' went through the streets of Abbeyleix delivering 'a running commentary of a very humorous character on things in general and the election in particular' (*Leinster Express*, 20 February), and in 1933 the government party earned some publicity by sending a donkey through the streets with a poster saying 'Everyone will vote Fianna Fáil but me' (*Offaly*

Independent, 28 January).

The 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s were the heyday of the supplied script, when candidates simply sent in speeches, invariably described as having been delivered to 'a large and enthusiastic audience', although whether the speeches had in fact been written, delivered or even seen by the candidates in question was sometimes debateable. By 1981 the *Leinster Express* commented that even though the two main party leaders, Charles Haughey and Garret FitzGerald, had addressed meetings in the constituency, these had lacked atmosphere. The campaign locally now consisted of 'the respective parties booking advertising space in the newspapers outlining their policies and following this up with an intensive door to door canvass' (6 June). There was a brief revival of outdoor meetings in 1982. In the February campaign Charles Haughey addressed a large meeting in Portlaoise, which 'old stagers' compared with the days of de Valera, and in the November 1982 campaign both parties held final rallies in Portlaoise, which produced some of the fieriest rhetoric ever heard in the constituency. For Fianna Fáil, Albert Reynolds described Garret FitzGerald as 'a cornered rat, a spitting, screaming, scratching cornered rat that would meet its end in the jaws of the cat let out of the bag by ... James Prior'. For Fine Gael, Professor John Kelly, addressing a 'cold and small attendance', said that 'many of those in Fianna Fáil were decent but that there was something about them in totality which aims for what is low, ignorant and backward' (*Leinster Express*, 27 November).

By now candidates were complaining of the lack of response to the door-to-door canvass. Ger Connolly said that people did not want canvassers coming round in the evenings, and that there was certainly no point in canvassing at times when popular soap operas were on television (*Leinster Express*, 27 November 1982 and 10 June 1989). A report of the only after-mass meeting held in Edenderry in 1989 suggested that the unfortunate Connolly was in danger of being knocked down by mass-goers who drove away rather than stay and listen to him (*Leinster Express*, 17 June 1989). The after-mass meeting has in fact been in decline for many years, the *Offaly Independent* noting as early as 1954 (15 May) that only a proportion of the congregations bothered to wait to hear the speakers, and that 'the day of the outdoor meeting is gone at least as far as this part of Ireland is concerned'.

An emphasis on door-to-door canvassing creates the need, under the PR-STV electoral system in which candidates of a party are in competition with each other, to decide which candidate gets to canvass where. All candidates like to stake out a personal 'bailiwick' where

their rivals (i.e. their running mates) are not welcome, and campaigns can therefore feature allegations of vote-poaching in someone else's territory. In February 1982 Charles McDonald, a defeated Fine Gael candidate, described the party's campaign in the constituency as 'a series of independents running for election without an overall drive' and as 'too personalised', and in November 1982, after another unsuccessful tilt at a seat, he wondered why one of the party's TDs, Tom Enright, had been canvassing so close to his own doorstep, suggesting that Enright 'could have been devoting his time more beneficially in parts of Offaly' (*Leinster Express*, 27 February and 4 December). Such comments bear out the picture that we discussed earlier (see table 12) of more open competition within the Fine Gael than within Fianna Fáil. In Fianna Fáil, competition tends to take place only within each county. After the 1992 election, in which Ger Connolly's vote plunged by nearly 4,000 while that of the other Offaly Fianna Fáil TD Brian Cowen rose by 3,000, Connolly commented that 'the vote management in Offaly didn't work out as well as in former elections' (*Leinster Express*, 5 December). Needless, to say, most such intra-party turf wars never reach the columns of the newspapers.

A constant theme in newspaper reports is the dullness of contemporary campaigns compared with a supposed golden age of excitement, coupled with a desire on the part of politicians to emphasise the harmonious nature of their relationships. At the very first contested Dáil election, in 1922, the *Leinster Express* reported that 'the excitement generally associated with election contests was almost entirely absent', apart from an incident in Donaghmore where armed men forced the presiding officer at the polling booth, a former RUC member, to hand over his responsibilities to his polling clerk (24 June, 17 June). In 1923, when the anti-Treatyites entered the fray, a meeting in Cloghan developed into 'a sort of general melee', but this was exceptional. Generally, election meetings 'were remarkable for the good order, and, above all, the good humour, that prevailed', and indeed, 'very little in the nature of excitement marked the election campaign'. 'The enthusiastic spirit that was evident in the old-time election contests' was missing (*Offaly Independent*, 18 August and 1 September). The anti-Treatyites' spokesman at the after-count speeches said 'how glad he was of the good sentiments and good fellowship that prevailed during the campaign' (*Leinster Express*, 1 September 1923).

The most acrimonious contest in the constituency seems to have been the 1926 by-election, when Cumann na nGaedheal meetings in particular attracted hecklers. At one rally in Abbeyleix there were 'several ugly incidents', and a party organiser challenged a heckler to 'a fistic encounter', but this did not prevent the winning Cumann na

nGaedheal candidate referring to the 'good spirit' in which the election had been fought (*Leinster Express*, 20 February and 27 February). The two elections of the early 1930s were tense and sometimes violent affairs across most of the country, but the even temper of politics in Laois-Offaly seemed largely unruffled. In 1932, the Edenderry correspondent of the *Leinster Express* commented (20 February) that 'The numerous agents of all the parties intertwined in the most friendly relations and carried out their duties without the slightest disagreement', and one of the Cumann na nGaedheal candidates, Eugene O'Brien, lent Labour two of his party's cars. Labour's William Davin said that 'no election campaign in which he had been engaged had been fought out in a better spirit' (*Offaly Independent*, 27 February). Even the 1933 campaign produced few sparks, although the *Irish Times* (7 January) reported on a Cumann na nGaedheal meeting in Portarlinton when T. F. O'Higgins was heckled and about 40 Blueshirts moved towards the men making the noise. O'Higgins asked the Blueshirts to stand where they were, and warned the hecklers that the Blueshirts 'are the best, and, if it comes to a fight, the toughest element in the country', though no actual fighting seems to have taken place.²⁴ The 1937 campaign in Tullamore was described as 'the tamest campaign in living memory' (*Midland Tribune*, 3 July), in 1943 the prevailing impression was still of the 'orderliness and good feeling which characterised the election campaign' (*Leinster Express*, 3 July), and in 1948 the *Leinster Express* referred to 'a singularly dull general election' (7 February).

Conclusion

Politics in Laois-Offaly from 1922 to 1992 have in many ways reflected national trends, yet they have also displayed their own distinctive characteristics. There is enough validity in the 'barometer of the nation' metaphor to justify a study of the constituency as a means of gaining insight into the political history of the independent Irish state, yet there is also enough that is specific about Laois-Offaly to justify focusing on the constituency in its own right. As we have seen, the style of election campaigning has changed over the decades, and the composition of the elite has also altered. Yet, in many ways, the main impression is one of continuity, with the structure of competition, and the political alternatives on offer, remaining remarkably stable over this 70-year period. This theme of incremental change within overall stability is one that could also be applied to politics in the Republic of Ireland as a whole from 1922 to 1992.

Appendix 1

TDs for Laois-Offaly elected 1922-1992

TD	First elected	Last elected	Times a candidate	Times elected	Total votes in career
Patrick McCartan (Pro-Treaty SF)	1918	1922	1	1	22,796
Kevin O'Higgins (Pro-Treaty SF)	1918	1922	1	1	6,792
Francis Bulfin (CG)	1921	1923	3	2	14,973
William Davin (Lab)	1922	1954	13	13	88,392
Patrick Egan (CG)	1923	1923	2	1	7,118
John McGuinness (Republicans)	1923	1923	1	1	5,572
Laurence Brady (Republicans)	1923	1923	4	1	15,964
James Dwyer (CG)	1926	Sep 1927	4	3	29,786
John F Gill (Lab)	Jun 1927	Jun 1927	4	1	18,119
Patrick Boland (FF)	Jun 1927	1951	10	10	70,943
Thomas Tynan (FF)	Jun 1927	Jun 1927	2	1	7,080
William Aird (CG)	Sep 1927	Sep 1927	1	1	8,472
Patrick Gorry (FF)	Sep 1927	1948	11	7	48,802
Eugene O'Brien (CG)	1932	1932	2	1	6,453
T F O'Higgins (CG, FG)	1932	1944	6	6	39,721
Eamonn Donnelly (FF)	1933	1933	2	1	12,413
John Finlay (NCP, FG)	1933	1937	3	2	15,833
Daniel Hogan (FF)	1938	1938	6	1	24,850
Oliver J Flanagan (Ind, FG)	1943	Nov 1982	14	14	136,294
Tom O'Higgins (FG)	1948	1965	6	6	33,690
Peadar Maher (FF)	1951	1957	3	3	20,055
Nicholas Egan (FF)	1954	1965	5	4	26,818
Kieran Egan (FF)	1956	1961	4	3	42,106
Paddy Lalor (FF)	1961	1977	5	5	35,501
Henry Byrne (Lab)	1965	1965	3	1	9,586
Tom Enright (FG)	1969	1989	9	8	51,337
Ber Cowen (FF)	1969	Nov 1982	6	5	36,139
Ger Connolly (FF)	1969	1992	9	9	60,080
Charles McDonald (FG)	1973	1973	7	1	28,841
Liam Hyland (FF)	1981	1992	7	6	57,234
Brian Cowen (FF)	1984	1992	4	4	52,410
Charles Flanagan (FG)	1987	1992	3	3	18,335
Pat Gallagher (Lab)	1992	1992	2	1	9,996

Note: The table refers only to these TDs' records in the Laois-Offaly constituency over the period 1922-1992.

References

1. A further 4 of these 108 candidates were elected to the Dáil at another contest. Joseph Lynch, who stood unsuccessfully in 1922, had been elected for Laois-Offaly in 1921; Patrick Belton, who stood in 1923, was later elected to the Dáil from Dublin County; Denis Cullen, who also stood in 1923, was later elected from Dublin North; and Art O'Connor, who stood in the 1926 by-election, had been elected for Kildare constituencies in 1918 and 1921.

2. Two of these were also elected under other labels: John Finlay in 1933 for the National Centre Party, and Oliver J. Flanagan on four occasions as an independent.
3. The main sources for information on the backgrounds of TDs and other candidates are Patrick F. Meehan, *The TDs and Senators for Laois and Offaly 1921-1986* (Portlaoise, 1987), and local newspapers, together with national biographical works such as successive editions of W. J. Flynn's *Oireachtas companion* (various editions, 1928 to 1945) and Vincent Browne (ed.), *The Magill book of Irish politics* (Dublin, 1981).
4. Noel Browne, *Against the Tide* (Dublin, 1986), p. 150.
5. Maurice Manning, *The Blueshirts* (Dublin, 1987), pp 28, 73.
6. Teddy Fennelly, 'Paddy Lalor', pp 87-91 in Teddy Fennelly (ed.), *Laois lives* (Portlaoise, 1991), p. 88.
7. The constituency came close to acquiring another minister in 1938, when the Minister for Education, Thomas Derrig, a Kilkenny TD, surprisingly sought a nomination in Laois-Offaly, but the Laois-Offaly Fianna Fáil convention gave him a mandate to go back to Kilkenny (*Offaly Independent*, 4 June 1938).
8. Quoted in Joseph T. Carroll, *Ireland in the war years* (Newton Abbot, 1975), p. 137.
9. J. J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: politics and society* (Cambridge, 1989), pp 296-7.
10. Gemma Hussey, *At the cutting edge: cabinet diaries 1982-1987* (Dublin, 1990), p. 247.
11. Letter from David O'Shanahan, NT, in *Offaly Independent*, 14 February 1948.
12. Profile of Oliver J. Flanagan by John Whelan in *Leinster Express*, 21 February 1987, pp 24-5.
13. *Irish Times*, 1 July 1935 and 7 July 1935.
14. Meehan, *TDs and senators*, p. 30. However, another source gives a completely different account of the incident in which the first shot was fired: Jim and Brendan Fleming (eds), *1916 in Laois: an account of the activities of the Laois Volunteers up to and including the 1916 rising* (The Swan, 1996), pp 13-14.
15. The source for this and other statements about the backgrounds of TDs nationally over the 1922-92 period is Michael Gallagher, 'Long-term patterns in recruitment to the parliamentary elite in the Republic of Ireland', paper presented in the workshop on 'Long-term studies of political recruitment patterns and elite transformation' at the Joint Sessions of the European Consortium for Political Research, Bordeaux, 27 April – 2 May 1995.
16. According to some sources, Thomas Tynan was 67 or 68 when he became a TD in 1927, but Meehan, *TDs and senators*, p. 32, gives his year of birth as 1879.
17. Candidates whose vote total fails to reach a fixed threshold (one-third of the quota from 1923 to 1989, one quarter of the quota in 1992) forfeit their deposit, which was £100 at elections from 1923 to 1989 and was raised to £300 in 1992. The quota in a 5-seat constituency such as Laois-Offaly is a sixth of the votes plus one. For a full account of the PR-STV electoral system, see Richard Sinnott, 'The electoral system' in John Coakley and Michael Gallagher (eds), *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, 2nd ed (Dublin, 1993), pp 67-85.
18. Seán Donnelly, *Partnership: the story of the 1992 general election* (Rathcoole, 1993), p. 8.
19. Peter Mair, *The changing Irish party system: organisation, ideology and electoral competition* (London, 1987), pp 119-24.
20. Warner Moss, *Political parties in the Irish Free State* (New York, 1968), p. 180.
21. Richard Sinnott, 'Interpretations of the Irish party system' in *European Journal of*

- Political Science* 12:3 (1984), pp 289-307, at p. 304.
22. This is in line with patterns identified in past research: Michael Marsh, 'Electoral preferences in Irish recruitment: the 1977 election' in *European Journal of Political Research* 9:1 (1981), pp 61-74, at p. 67; Michael Marsh, 'Electoral evaluations of candidates in Irish general elections 1948-82' in *Irish Political Studies* 2 (1987), pp 65-76, at p. 68; Michael Gallagher, 'The election of the 27th Dáil' in Michael Gallagher and Michael Laver (eds), *How Ireland Voted 1992* (Dublin and Limerick, 1993), pp 57-78, at pp 57-8.
23. Paul M. Sacks, 'Bailiwicks, locality and religion: three elements in an Irish Dáil constituency election' in *Economic and Social Review* 1:4 (1970), pp 531-54; P. J. Taylor and R. J. Johnston, *Geography of elections* (London, 1979), pp 274-94.
24. Quoted in Warner Moss, *Political parties in the Irish Free State* (New York, 1968), p. 191n.