

Summary

The aim of this thesis is to explain the significant presence of Independents (non-party representatives) in the Irish political system. This topic was chosen because parties have a monopoly on parliamentary representation in almost all liberal democracies. Ireland is an exception to this pattern, as Independents have been elected to every session of parliament since the foundation of the modern Irish state. There have been very few academic analyses of Independents carried out in relation to any political system, and this study therefore makes a significant contribution to the political science discipline. Important contributions are also made to the specific areas of candidate emergence, campaign effects, voting behaviour, and electoral systems. This thesis sheds light on the background of Independent candidates and why they choose to run for office; it provides a detailed analysis of the effects of campaign activities; and it assesses the consequences of an electoral system that has been under-studied.

My two main units of analysis are Independent candidates and voters for such candidates. The data on candidates stems from both a survey of local election candidates and election statistics, while the data on voters is from a national election study.

Given the lack of published data on the role and nature of Independents, a typology of Independents is provided. This is devised from a qualitative analysis of candidates' campaigns from contemporary newspapers. The purpose of this categorisation is to account for the heterogeneous nature of Independent candidates, who tend to attract a vote contextual to the nature of their candidacy. As such, a typology of Independents goes some way to explaining why people vote for them.

To explain the significance of Independents, four main questions are asked: why individuals choose to run as Independents; what effect their campaigns have; why people choose to vote for such candidates; and what role the electoral system plays in affecting the behaviour of both these candidates and voters alike. In explaining the motives of candidates, both the sociological and rational models are assessed. The influence of campaigns focuses on how they affect candidates' vote. Several theories of voting behaviour are used to determine why people vote for Independents, in particular the ideas of party identification and the sociological model. The role of the electoral system is considered by focussing on its mechanical and psychological effects.

The main findings are that although Independents are a heterogeneous category, there are still some general catch-all reasons accounting for their significance. Independents are not more expressive in their motives in running for office than party candidates, and their socio-economic background varies little from the latter. Independents also demonstrate evidence of a strategic nature, as the pattern of their emergence displays an element of rationality. Campaigns are important to Independents, more so than for party candidates, as they have a significant effect on the vote accrued at elections.

The vote for Independent candidates appears to be a product of a localistic political culture, but also has an element of a protest behind it. It is not the case that the electoral system creates this Independent vote, but it certainly facilitates its expression, as it establishes conditions that encourage the flourishing of a culture conducive to an Independent vote.