

Special elections in alternative vote electoral systems: Exploring turnout and the vote in Irish by-elections 1923-2019

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Stephen Quinlan 

Abstract

Most literature on special elections has focused on first-past-the-post contests and on the performance of governments. Turnout, candidates, and how the electoral system impacts the result have received less attention. This contribution fills these voids by exploring special elections in Ireland, elections conducted under the alternative vote system. Taking a multifaceted approach, it investigates the correlates of turnout, the impact of candidates and the decisive effect of lower preferences, while also testing multiple explanations of government performance. I find Irish special elections live up to the by-election truisms of lower turnout and government loss. Government performance is associated with national economic conditions. By-election victory is more likely among candidates with familial lineage and former members of parliament. Where they come into play, one in five candidates owe their victory to lower preferences.

Keywords

alternative vote, by-elections, government performance, Ireland, special elections, turnout

Introduction

Special elections, by-elections, by-polls or *Elezioni Suppletive* – these contests, held when a seat becomes open during a parliamentary term, are routine in many polities.¹ Feigart and Norris (1990: 185) found over 60 states employ them, with Italy recently introducing them under its 2017 electoral reform. Despite their prevalence, special elections have received less attention than other so-called less important elections like European parliament elections (Marsh, 1998; Okolikj and Quinlan, 2016; Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Schmitt, 2005), midterm polls (Campbell, 1985, 1986; Erikson, 1988; Tufte, 1975) or local and regional contests (Carsey and Wright, 1998; Chubb, 1988; Marien et al., 2015).

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That is not to say they have been ignored. Research has emerged on special elections in Canada (Blais-Lacombe and Bodet, 2017; Loewen and Bastien, 2010), New Zealand (Boston, 1980), the United States (Gaddie et al., 1999; Gibbs et al., 2016; Sigelman, 1981; Smith and Brunell, 2010) and Britain (Butler, 1949; Cook and Ramsden, 1997; King, 1968; Mughan, 1986, 1988; Norris, 1990). Comparative studies, while scarcer, also exist (Anderson and Ward, 1996; Feigart and Norris, 1990; Norris and Feigart, 1989; Studlar and Sigelman, 1987). Two truisms from these forays have emerged: (1) turnout in special elections is lower than in general elections, and (2) governments lose votes (and contests).

Lacunae remain, however. Most studies feature first-past-the-post contests. There has been scant analysis of special elections under the alternative vote (AV) system, despite Australia and Ireland using this system to fill parliamentary vacancies. In AV elections, one seat is contested. Voters have one vote and are presented with a list of candidates, which they rank in descending order of preference. A candidate must achieve a majority of votes to win (quota). The counting of votes begins with the tabulation of voters' first choices, the *first preference*. A candidate who reaches or surpasses the 50% vote quota is elected. If no candidate reaches this threshold, the candidate(s) with the fewest votes is excluded, with the excluded candidates' votes distributed to the voters' next choice (*lower preferences*). This process continues until a candidate secures an absolute majority. While Australia has used AV for its special elections since 1919 and Ireland since 1922, studies of by-elections in these two polities are minimal. And those that exist (Feigart and Norris, 1990; Norris and Feigart, 1989 – Australia; Gallagher, 1996 – Ireland), while informative, were limited in scope and are dated. A multifaceted and contemporary analysis of AV special elections is required.

This contribution fills this void with its focus on AV special elections in Ireland. Ireland provides a rich testing ground as it has held 133 special elections to fill 135 vacancies in the Irish parliament between 1923 and 2019. The study also allows us to tap a unique and hereto underexplored aspect of these contests – the potential for lower preferences (transfers) to shape the outcome. Quinlan and Schwarz (2020) show these have a decisive impact in electing about 1 in 10 candidates in single transferable vote (STV) elections. Still, their influence in special elections has not been empirically investigated, and outside the descriptive work of Bennett (1996) and Jesse (2000), their impact in AV systems is under-researched. In addition, while previous studies of special elections have been dominated by the referendum model (Tufté, 1975), which posits economic and political conditions at by-election time are critical in accounting for government performance, its applicability to Irish special elections is untested. While the relationship between economic conditions and incumbent administration performance is recognised cross-nationally (see, for example, Lewis-Beck, 1988; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2013), some have suggested Ireland may be *sui generis* (Harrison and Marsh, 1998; although recent research contests this – see Lewis-Beck and Quinlan, forthcoming; Leyden and Lewis-Beck, 2017). Thus, Ireland provides a compelling test case to verify this dominant model.

But this article goes beyond bringing an under-researched case to the fore. While the referendum model has dominated, other potential mechanisms such as the surge and decline model (Campbell, 1960), second-order motivations (Reif and Schmitt, 1980) and the governing penalty model (Erikson, 1988) have received less attention. The impact of candidates, prominent in the Irish voting calculus (Marsh, 2007; Marsh et al., 2008), has been largely overlooked (an exception is the descriptive work of Norris, 1990). While beyond two Canadian studies (Blais-Lacombe and Bodet, 2017; Loewen and Bastien, 2010), turnout has received little attention. This contribution addresses these gaps.

This article, using a combination of aggregate- and candidate-level data, has five take-aways. First, special elections in Ireland under AV boast many properties of special elections under different electoral conditions: turnout is on average lower than the previous general election, and candidates of governing parties perform worse, with this pattern especially acute since the 1990s. Second, aggregate turnout patterns in by-elections show the hallmarks of turnout patterns in general elections. Third, government performance is associated with economic conditions – governments lose more votes the worse the economic conditions are, support for the referendum model. No evidence is found to sustain second-order, surge and decline, or governing penalty explanations of government loss. Fourth, candidate characteristics correlate with who wins with former members of parliament and candidates who are part of a familial dynasty more likely to prevail. Fifth, lower preferences impact who wins. Where relevant, one in five Irish special election victors owe their win to transfers.

Why care about special elections?

Special elections can have significant consequences. They may alter the parliamentary arithmetic in meaningful ways. For example, the British Labour Party lost its majority in 1977 following a string of by-election defeats, a fate that befell the Australian Liberal-National coalition in 2018 too. Scott Brown's victory in the 2010 Massachusetts Special Election for US Senate deprived the Democrats of a filibuster-proof majority. And two by-election victories in 1994 by the opposition made it possible for the Irish Labour Party to withdraw from government with Fianna Fáil and form a majority coalition with the opposition Fine Gael and Democrat Left without recourse to a general election.

Special elections can indirectly influence leaders' political calculations. A better-than-expected performance in a 1982 by-election encouraged Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser to call an early general election. British Prime Minister Theresa May, buoyed by victory in the Labour seat of Copeland in 2017, decided to go early too. They have also been the catalyst for leadership changes with Tony Abbott's removal as Australian Prime Minister precipitated by his party's poor performance in a state by-election (The New Daily Australia, 2014). In Ireland, two special election losses for Fianna Fáil in 1979 hastened the end of *Taoiseach* (prime minister) Jack Lynch's leadership.

Special elections may have tactical purposes, sometimes to highlight issues and pressure governments. The most deliberate example was the 1986 en-masse resignation of Northern Ireland Unionists in opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, in an effort to pressure the British government to abandon the accord. Elsewhere, actors attempt to use them to gain a parliamentary advantage. In Ireland in 1982, *Taoiseach* Charles Haughey appointed an opposition member to the European Commission in the hope of winning the ensuing contest to bolster his minority government's position. They have also been used to parachute prominent candidates into parliament. For example, Conservative Brian Mulroney was not a member of the Canadian parliament upon assuming the party leadership in 1983, entering instead through an engineered special election. Meanwhile, parties often use them as a testing ground for candidates. For example, of the 509 unsuccessful candidates standing in Irish by-elections, 95 went on to win election subsequently (~19%; see Table C5, Supplemental Appendix C).

And while these contests' predictive value concerning future general elections remains contested (Silver, 2011; Smith and Brunell, 2010), certain by-elections have set in train

behaviour patterns with long-term repercussions. Fianna Fáil's vote tanked in two by-elections in 2010, foreshadowing the party's meltdown in the 2011 Irish general election. In Northern Ireland, the 1981 victory of hunger striker Bobby Sands heralded the beginning of the 'armalite and ballot box' strategy of Sinn Féin, paving the way for the party's embrace of democratic politics. And in Britain, the 1962 loss by the Conservatives of the Orpington by-election foreshadowed the Liberal Party's re-emergence.

In sum, by-elections often have significant consequences. They can critically impact parliamentary arithmetic. Sometimes they are seeds of future trends and are used by actors tactically. And they may precipitate early elections and leader changes. All these aspects make them worthwhile investigating.

The dynamics of special elections

Turnout

Conventional wisdom that turnout in special elections is lower than the previous general election is based on several explanatory mechanisms. For example, Campbell (1960) posited non-general elections are low stimulus contests characterised by less intensive campaigning, less media coverage, and low information. Consequently, voters less politically interested (peripheral voters in his parlance) are more likely to abstain than in general elections. Second-order theories of elections assume fewer people vote because there is less at stake as a government is not being chosen (Reif and Schmitt, 1980: 9). These mechanisms are linked to individual behaviour and such data for special elections in Ireland are unavailable. What can be explored is what conditions are associated with aggregate-level turnout in special elections moving up or down. Two studies in Canada (Blais-Lacombe and Bodet, 2017; Loewen and Bastien, 2010) found turnout in special elections mirrored patterns associated with turnout in general elections, with the characteristics of the special election in question having less impact. This article follows suit by testing if turnout in Irish by-elections mirrors general patterns of turnout in general elections or if the contextual circumstances of the by-election itself have a stronger association.

The article's starting point is the adage that turnout in Irish special elections will be lower than in the last general election. However, we know turnout cross-nationally has fallen in recent decades (Blais, 2010; World Bank, 2017), although the decline has somewhat levelled off in the recent decennium. This pattern has been observed in Ireland (Marsh et al., 2008; see Figure A1, Supplemental Appendix A). Scholarship has identified generational components to this decline (Blais et al., 2004), with newer Irish generations especially less likely to vote (Quinlan, 2016). In line with this pattern of participation in Ireland (and globally), the expectation is turnout in special elections will have significantly dropped off in recent decades, especially from the 1990s.

Another trend to consider is the historic turnout in the district. Countless studies have shown turnout is, in part, shaped by individual characteristics like age and education (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). As Loewen and Bastien (2010: 96) surmised, incorporating into the equation the district turnout in the previous general election will act as a proxy for sociodemographic differences between districts and control for the expected path-dependent trend that turnout will be higher in constituencies where it has traditionally been higher.

While the two mechanisms above are a means of capturing general turnout patterns, the particular dynamics of the special elections themselves may also matter. If

by-elections are referendums on government performance as the referendum model (Tufté, 1975), the dominant paradigm, implies, holding the government to account may spur higher turnout. Simultaneous special elections, common in Ireland with 54% of the 135 contests held on the same day, may foster higher participation as the media would likely give greater coverage to several contests, leading to voters potentially having more information (Loewen and Bastien, 2010: 96). In addition, more by-elections increase the chances of meaningfully impacting parliamentary arithmetic. Finally, there is the issue of election timing. Research supporting the idea weather (and by connection the season) influences turnout in general elections is mixed (Gomez et al., 2007; Persson et al., 2014). But in low-intensity elections, these factors may be more prominent. Research from local elections in Britain implies turnout is related to elections' seasonal timing (Rallings et al., 2003), with turnout lower in winter months. The mechanism presumes with an inclement climate and no daylight savings leading to darker evenings, it is harder to motivate people to vote and activists to campaign. Transposing this to special elections – it might be surmised turnout could be lower in elections held in winter.

In sum, the expectations concerning turnout can be summarised as follows:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Turnout will be lower in special elections compared to turnout in the previous general election.

Hypothesis 2a (H2a): Turnout will be lower in special elections held from the 1990s onwards.

Hypothesis 2b (H2b): The higher the turnout in the district in the previous general election, the higher the turnout will be in special elections.

Hypothesis 3a (H3a): Turnout will be higher in special elections where the incumbent government holds the seat being contested.

Hypothesis 3b (H3b): Turnout will be higher in special elections when another special election is taking place concurrently.

Hypothesis 3c (H3c): Turnout will be lower in special elections held in winter.

Government performance

The second truism of special elections is governments lose votes and seats. The dominant theoretical framework, the referendum model (Tufté, 1975), devised to explain incumbent performance in US midterm contests, assumes special elections act as 'barometers' (Anderson and Ward, 1996) of sentiments towards the government. The worse the economy is performing, the more votes the government can expect to lose (and vice versa). In essence, the referendum model challenges the premise by-elections are merely local contests and assumes they can be viewed through a national prism, with voters using them to send a message to the government. The referendum model has received strong support in accounting for special election outcomes in Britain (Mughan, 1986, 1988; Norris, 1990), Canada (Blais-Lacombe and Bodet, 2017; Loewen and Bastien, 2010), the United States (Gibbs et al., 2016; Sigelman, 1981) and in cross-national studies (Anderson and Ward, 1996; Feigart and Norris, 1990).

Nonetheless, the existing literature has overlooked testing other mechanisms. For one, the surge and decline framework (Campbell, 1960) ascribes government loss to turnout decline. The idea is voters who were vital to government success in the previous general election fail to vote in the special election. Peripheral voters, who gave the governing parties an advantage, and surge voters, who opted to support them against their traditional political inclination, return to form in the special election. Consequently, the former abstains while the latter returns to their original preference in the by-election, depriving the government of all but its core supporters.

Second-order models of elections, primarily associated with European parliament elections (see, for example, Marsh, 1998; Reif and Schmitt, 1980), posit government loss, but attribute it to the timing of the special election vis-à-vis the previous general election. The assumption is government support will be at its healthiest in the aftermath of taking office but reduces as the cost of governing grows (Cuzan, 2015; Paldam, 1991), reaching an acute low in the government's midterm.

Another mechanism potentially associated with government loss is governments are punished for merely being in power, independent of their performance. Studying US midterm elections, Erikson (1988) advanced the notion of governing penalty for the party controlling the presidency. He supposed this was because voters wanted parliamentary balance, ensuring the opposition party controls Congress. Translating this to by-elections, an opposition win (or gain in support) sends a signal to the government and diminishes their parliamentary position. Another related motivation is voters tire of a government based on its longevity in office – the cost of ruling. Alluded to above, the premise is the longer a government has been in power, the more people it has potentially alienated through governing decisions (Wleziem, 2016). Applying this to special elections, it is assumed the longer the main party of government has been in office, the greater the losses for the administration will be.

In sum, existing research has given prominence to the referendum model. Here, a comprehensive test of several mechanisms is provided. They can be summarised as follows:

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Governments lose votes and seats in special elections.

Hypothesis 4a (H4a): *Referendum model* – Governments lose more votes in special elections when economic conditions at the time are unfavourable.

Hypothesis 4b (H4b): *Surge and Decline model* – Governments lose more votes in special elections the greater the turnout decline vis-à-vis turnout in the previous general election.

Hypothesis 4c (H4c): *Second-order model* – Governments lose more votes in special elections the further away the contest is from the previous general election, with losses particularly severe at its midterm.

Hypothesis 4d (H4d): *Governing penalty* – Governments lose more votes in special elections the longer the main party of government has been in office.

Candidates

Fewer studies of special elections have focused on candidates (an exception is Norris, 1990). This is a notable absence considering some scholars argue we are witnessing the

‘personalization of politics’ (McAllister, 2007) where individuals are to the fore at the expense of party labels. Scores of studies have highlighted how candidates influence elections (Cain et al., 1984; Herrera and Yawn, 1991; Karp et al., 2002). Candidates’ influence in Ireland is especially prominent (Marsh, 2007). The idea is candidates engender a ‘personal vote’ – their experience, qualifications, characteristics or record determine the outcome, independent of party.

But what is important? One feature is candidates’ biological traits and physical appearance (Dolan, 2004; Lenz and Lawson, 2011). Another is the type of responsibilities voters would like to see prioritised by representatives. Research on Ireland has uncovered voters are drawn to politicians who look after the district’s needs (Marsh et al., 2008: chap. 8). Another element is the background of candidates (Marsh, 1981). Candidates who have served in office before are seen as having a distinct electoral advantage. They will have greater visibility having built up contacts and a record. In addition, they will know what it takes to run a winning campaign. Consequently, they would be expected to have a greater chance of winning.

Another characteristic correlating with success is whether a candidate has a family connection to politics – so-called political dynasties, which have been a prominent feature of politics in Ireland (Chubb, 1970) and other states (Dal Bo et al., 2009; Feinstein, 2010). The premise is candidates who are related to outgoing or former members can tap into a familial brand. Bestowed on them are pre-established connections, resources, and visibility, all of which give them advantages in the electoral contest.

To test these two potential associations, the following hypotheses are specified:

Hypothesis 5a (H5a): Candidates who have been previously members of parliament are more likely to win special elections.

Hypothesis 5b (H5b): Candidates who are related to the outgoing member of parliament are more likely to win special elections.

Lower preferences

The AV in special elections introduces an unusual quirk – lower preferences. Until recently, their pivotal impact on election outcomes received limited attention. The most authoritative study comes from Quinlan and Schwarz (2020), who focused on lower preferences in STV. They discovered about 1 in 10 winning candidates owe their election to lower preferences. Studies of their decisiveness in AV systems are rarer, with Bennett’s (1996) and Jesse’s (2000) descriptive studies of Australia exceptions.

Gallagher’s (1996: 39) germinal study of Irish by-elections mentions lower preferences concluding they ‘have not usually had the effect of altering the outcome’. This contribution goes further, providing a quantification of lower preferences’ decisiveness on special elections and defining the conditions under which they are crucial. In classifying decisiveness, the industry standard is followed (see Quinlan and Schwarz, 2020) and assumes lower preferences have a pivotal influence when candidates who do not occupy a winning position on Count 1 win the seat after the counting of lower preferences (see Table A4, Supplemental Appendix A, for example).

Quinlan and Schwarz’s (2020) study points to the conditions in which lower preferences can be pivotal. They found incumbency correlates with lower preference decisiveness, with non-incumbents more likely to rely on lower preferences to win. Underlying

this is the advantage accruing to sitting members who can establish reputations with constituents and have more significant resources at their disposal. Therefore, it is assumed they will have a higher chance of occupying a winning position on Count 1, thus negating a reliance on transfers. In a special election, however, rarely is an incumbent standing. Nevertheless, the advantage might carry over to the party: if the party holds a seat in a district, one expects them to have a more significant presence in the constituency and more considerable resources to draw on. Thus, one might assume candidates standing for the incumbent party in the district, should they win, would be less likely to rely on lower preferences.

Previous research has identified when transfers have been decisive, there is a partisan flavour. Jesse (2000) suggested second and third parties benefit more as they often encourage transfer swapping to counter the strength of the largest party. In support of this logic, Gallagher's (1978: 31) study of STV elections in Ireland found Fine Gael benefited most from transfers. But Quinlan and Schwarz (2020) found transfers, when decisive, were more likely to advantage smaller parties and non-party candidates. Mechanisms assumed to be driving this include these actors are more transfer friendly because they are less likely to invoke negative partisanship (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016; Mayer, 2017), or because partisans of the larger actors use their lower preferences strategically to limit the advance of their chief electoral opponents. In Ireland, Green Party candidates and independent candidates were more likely to owe their victory to lower preferences than Fianna Fáil candidates. Thus, it is plausible to assume this advantage may carry over to special elections and that when lower preferences are decisive, they will benefit smaller parties and independents and disadvantage Fianna Fáil.

One aspect not explored to date is whether transfer decisiveness correlates with governing status. Suppose by-elections are referendums on the government, as the referendum model (Tufté, 1975) assumes. We might expect voters approach the election as a dichotomy – voting for government and for the opposition. Thus, lower preferences may favour the opposition too with voters more likely in this scenario to concentrate their vote in support of non-government candidates.

To test these expectations, the following hypotheses are specified:

Hypothesis 6a (H6a): Candidates of the incumbent party in the district are less likely to be elected by lower preferences in special elections.

Hypothesis 6b (H6b): Candidates of smaller parties and non-party candidates are more likely to be elected by lower preferences in special elections.

Hypothesis 6c (H6c): Candidates of governing parties are less likely to be elected by lower preferences in special elections.

Research strategy

This study is based on special elections held in Ireland between 1923 and 2019. Excluding university seats, 135 vacancies were filled through 133 by-elections. Two datasets comprising information from the by-elections sourced from the database *Irelandelection.com* (2020) were created: one at the aggregate level measuring the characteristics of the 133 contests, and the other at the candidate level, including data on 644 candidates who contested them. Variables measuring party performance in the previous general election,

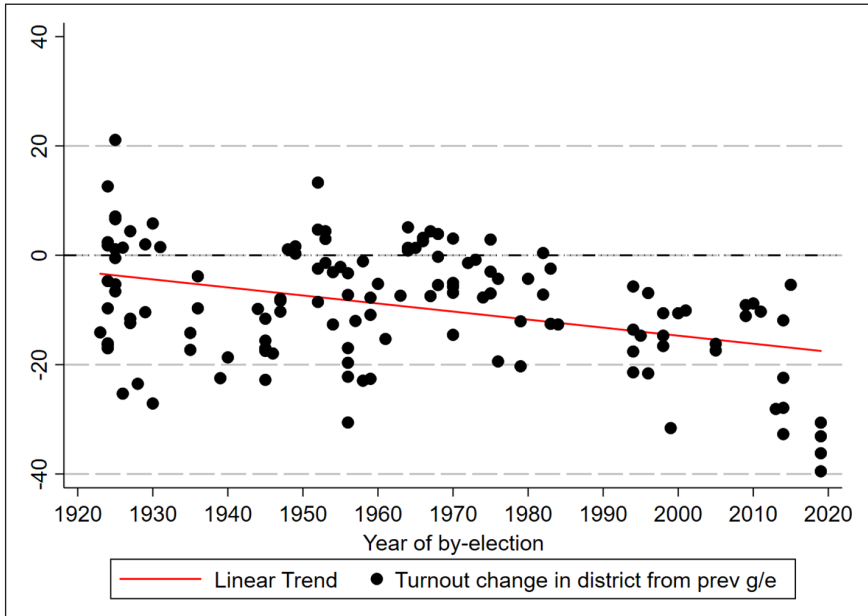


Figure 1. Percentage change in district turnout compared with turnout in most recent general election in special elections in Ireland, 1923–2019 ($N=133$).

government status, election timing, concurrent elections, and economic conditions at the time of the contests are fused to these data. The latter data were sourced from the economic database *countryeconomy.com* (2020). Summary statistics and background information on the special elections are in Supplemental Appendix A.

Due to space constraints, this segment provides an overview of each segment of the analysis and the respective dependent variable. Other variable operationalisations and additional analyses are detailed in Supplemental Appendixes B and C. The analysis comprises four components. First is turnout in the special election at the aggregate level. The dependent variable is the proportion of voters who voted in the by-election. A multivariate ordinary least squares (OLS) analysis tests the hypotheses in this regard. Second are the analyses exploring government performance, also at the aggregate level. A series of multivariate OLS models are constructed. The dependent variable is the change in government vote share in the district between the special election and the previous general election. Third is the analysis of candidates. A logit model is devised with the dependent variable whether a candidate won (coded 1) or lost (coded 0). Fourth is the analysis of lower preference decisiveness. This analysis is confined to elected candidates and contests where more than two candidates participated, yielding an $n=107$. A logit model is constructed with the dependent variable classified as 1 for candidates decisively elected by transfers and 0 for candidates who are not.

Empirical analysis

Turnout

Figure 1 depicts the change in district turnout between the special election and the previous general election. Two takeaways emerge. The first is in the vast majority of cases;

special election turnout is lower than turnout in general elections. Of the 133 contests, turnout in the by-election was lower in 102 (~77%). On average, district turnout is nine points lower in special elections compared with the previous general election ($\bar{x} = 60.1\%$ vs. 69.3%). Thus, the turnout truism of special elections holds in Ireland – support for H1.

The second takeaway from Figure 1 is the difference in turnout between by-elections and general elections is growing over time, with the gaps particularly acute from the 1990s onwards. The average difference in the 1920s ($n=26$) and 1930s ($n=8$) was -4 and -10 points, respectively. But in the three most recent decades, the mean difference is much larger: -15.9 points in the 1990s, -12.4 points in the 2000s and -23.9 points in the 2010s. This is tentative evidence that turnout in special elections in recent decades, in line with turnout generally, has declined.

Next attention shifts to understanding the correlates of special election turnout. Table 1 details an OLS model probing the conditions when turnout in special elections goes up or down.² The model's explanatory value is solid (adjusted R^2 of .69). The primary takeaway is turnout in special elections is associated to a greater extent with general patterns of electoral participation rather than the character of the special election. We see the fixed effects for decades are statistically significant, with turnout in by-elections held in the 1990s and 2010s resulting in lower turnout. For example, turnout in by-elections in the 2010s is estimated to be on average 15 points lower compared to the 1920s. This supports H2a. In addition, we see higher turnout in constituencies that had higher levels of turnout in the previous general election, support for H2b. The only by-election specific correlate achieving statistical significance ($p < .05$) is whether the contested seat was held by the government. In circumstances where it is, turnout is estimated to be on average 3.5 points higher, support for H3a. No evidence is found for simultaneous special elections (H3b) or winter by-elections (H3c) being associated with turnout.³ Of the control variables, the number of candidates contesting has no discernible impact. But turnout in by-elections in Dublin districts see significantly lower turnout compared with by-elections held outside the Capital, to the tune of 13 points on average.

Government performance

Figure 2 plots the change in government vote share in the district in the special election compared to the performance in the previous general election over time. Two patterns emerge. The first is governments lose support more often than they gain it. Of the 133 contests, it lost votes in 79 races (~59.4%). The second pattern is there is a temporal aspect to Irish government performance – they did better in elections held pre-1948 and worse post-1948, with governments especially losing support in contests from the 1990s onwards. Government support declined by a mean 14.8 points in contests held in the 1990s, 20.2 points in the 2000s and 21.4 points in the 2010s, whereas it increased in by-elections in the 1920s (9.4 points) and 1930s (5.8 points).

Table 2 probes this further by distinguishing government performance in contests pre-1948 and post-1948 and by whether a government party held the seat being contested. Looking first at the seat win rate, candidates standing for government parties had a success rate of 48.1% overall, but the win rate for contests held between 1923 and 1947 was 77.8% compared with only 32.9% post-1948. Government losses have especially accumulated in the past 25 years, winning only 3 of the 29 contests between 1994 and 2019 (~10.1%).⁴

Table 1. OLS model exploring aggregate-level correlates of district turnout in special elections in Ireland, 1923–2019.

Dependent variable: District turnout in special election	
Turnout in district in previous general election	0.809*** (0.145)
Decade special election held (reference: 1920s)	
1930s	-0.160 (3.906)
1940s	-6.863* (3.322)
1950s	-2.025 (2.802)
1960s	4.628 (2.990)
1970s	-1.146 (3.118)
1980s	-0.152 (3.430)
1990s	-9.775* (4.077)
2000s	-5.430 (4.521)
2010s	-15.021** (4.928)
Government holds seat	3.477* (1.469)
Simultaneous special elections	0.615 (1.384)
Winter special election	-0.136 (2.318)
Number of days since general election	-0.005† (0.003)
Number of candidates in district	0.086 (0.413)
Dublin district	-13.132*** (1.884)
Constant	12.202 (10.154)
Observations	133
Adjusted R ²	.690
RMSE	7.654
Durbin Watson	1.485

OLS: ordinary least squares; RMSE: root mean square error.

Robust standard errors in parentheses. Root Mean Square Error (RMSE) also referred to as Standard Error of Estimate (SEE).

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Governments perform best in the seats in which they are the incumbents. They have won 59.4% of these contests compared with a 37.7% win rate in non-government held seats, although their win rate in seats where they were incumbents has been 2 in 5 since

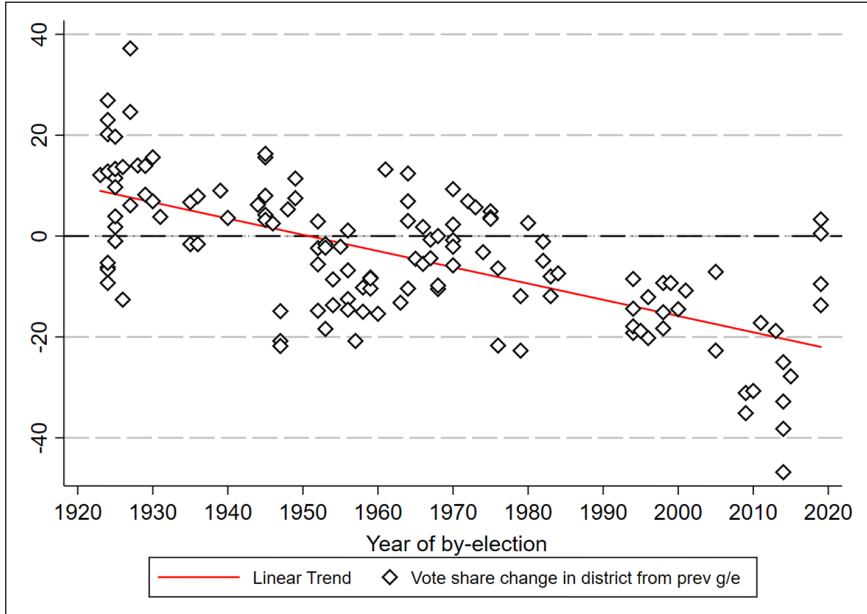


Figure 2. Percentage change in government vote share in the district compared with vote share in most recent general election in special elections in Ireland, 1923–2019 (N = 133).

1948, compared with a win rate of approximately 5 in 6 contests pre-1948. Government vote shares are higher in seats they win (51.9% compared to 34.8% in seats they they lost) and where they are incumbents (53.6% compared to 49.9% in non-government held seats). However, when governments lose, their vote share losses are greater in seats where they are the incumbents – their mean share of the vote declines by 13.6 points compared with an average loss of 8.6 points in non-government held seats. In sum, this offers support to H4: governments tend to lose votes and seats in Irish special elections. Governments have lost more votes and seats in races post-1948, a pattern exacerbated since the 1990s.

Table 3 details a series of multivariate OLS models to tease out what conditions correlate with government performance. Models I and II test the referendum model. The number of cases for this analysis is restricted due to data availability.⁵ Model I shows economic growth is positively associated with government performance. For every 1% increase in gross domestic product (GDP) growth in the year preceding the contest, government support increases by 1.12 points.⁶ Model II, admittedly with fewer cases ($n = 32$), shows national unemployment conditions leading up to the election influence government support. For every increase of 1 point in unemployment 3 months before the contest, government support declines by an average of 1.5 points. Consequently, there is support for H4a and H4b – special elections in Ireland fit the pattern of referendums on government performance.

Next is the surge and decline mechanism. Model III shows turnout change does not reach the conventional levels of significance, implying no support for H4b. Models IV and V examine whether by-election timing, which second-order explanations of government performance assume, matters. The variable measuring the longer the contest is held from the previous general election fails to reach statistical significance at $p < .05$ (although

Table 2. Overview of government performances in special elections in Ireland, 1923–2019.

	Government seat win rate (%)	Mean government vote share (%)	Mean government vote share change (%)	Government seat win rate (%) 1923–1947	Government seat win rate (%) 1948–2019
Government wins seat	48.1	51.9	+3.4	77.8	32.9
Government losses seat	51.9	34.8	-10.5	22.2	67.1
Total	100.0			100.0	100.0
N	133			44	89
	Government seat win rate (%)	Mean government vote share (%)	Mean government vote share change (%)	Government seat win rate (%) 1923–1947	Government seat win rate (%) 1948–2019
Government held seat					
Government wins seat	59.4	53.6	+3.9	85.2	40.5
Government losses seat	40.6	35.0	-13.6	14.8	59.4
Total	100.0			100.0	100.0
N	64			26	38
Non-government held seat					
Government wins seat	37.7	49.4	+2.7	66.7	27.5
Government losses seat	62.3	34.6	-8.6	33.3	72.5
Total	100.0			100.0	100.0
N	69			18	51

Table 3. OLS models exploring the aggregate-level correlates of incumbent government performance in special elections in Ireland, 1923–2019.

Dependent variable: Incumbent government vote share change	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
GDP growth $T-1$ year	1.120*** (0.292)					
Unemployment, $T-3$ months	-	-1.549** (0.508)				
Turnout change in the previous general election	-	-	0.022 (0.109)			
Number of days since previous general election	-	-	-	-0.006 [†] (0.003)		
Special election timing (reference: early term)						
Midterm	-	-	-	-	0.321 (2.270)	
Late term	-	-	-	-	1.165 (3.145)	
Number of days government in power	-	-	-	-		-0.0002 (0.001)
Number of candidates in district	-0.092 (0.528)	0.215 (0.534)	-0.441 (0.637)	-0.543 (0.652)	-0.449 (0.628)	-0.452 (0.637)
Simultaneous special elections	0.108 (2.728)	4.073 (3.574)	-0.687 (1.830)	-0.161 (1.832)	-0.834 (1.930)	-0.519 (1.921)
Government holds seat	-0.993 (2.449)	-6.118 (3.853)	-1.135 (1.934)	-1.110 (1.891)	-1.010 (1.982)	-0.974 (1.999)
Decade special election held						
1930s	-	-	-4.241 (3.547)	-0.712 (3.748)	-4.773 (3.585)	-4.105 (3.513)

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued)

Dependent variable: Incumbent government vote share change	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
1940s	-	-	-7.558 [†] (4.261)	-6.184 [†] (3.508)	-7.878 [†] (4.151)	-6.937 (4.281)
1950s	-	-	-17.752*** (3.031)	-16.178*** (3.009)	-18.218*** (3.266)	-17.788*** (2.954)
1960s	-	-	-12.208*** (3.478)	-8.934* (3.624)	-12.603*** (3.729)	-11.546** (4.254)
1970s	-1.710 (3.736)	-	-11.757** (3.723)	-10.057** (3.554)	-11.900** (3.746)	-11.348* (4.336)
1980s	-0.381 (4.419)	-	-13.468** (4.335)	-12.817** (4.837)	-13.619** (4.351)	-13.369** (4.429)
1990s	-15.051** (4.781)	-11.379** (3.871)	-20.915*** (5.682)	-18.760** (5.878)	-21.172*** (5.523)	-20.929*** (5.703)
2000s	-17.457*** (3.657)	-23.053** (6.470)	-27.981*** (5.538)	-24.191*** (6.260)	-28.270*** (5.467)	-27.602*** (5.732)
2010s	-17.659** (5.862)	-17.510** (4.981)	-27.451*** (7.594)	-22.488** (8.011)	-28.416*** (7.822)	-27.461*** (7.776)
Constant	-6.394 [†] (3.381)	11.264*** (9.269)	11.959*** (2.982)	14.515*** (3.493)	11.630*** (3.342)	11.834*** (3.106)
Observations	63	32	133	133	133	133
Adjusted R ²	.436	.400	.458	.475	.454	.458
RMSE	9.345	8.657	10.239	10.073	10.275	10.238
Durbin Watson	1.643	1.666	1.624	1.680	1.622	1.617

OLS: ordinary least squares; GDP: gross domestic product; RMSE: root mean square error.

Robust standard errors in parentheses. Root Mean Square Error (RMSE) also referred to as Standard Error of Estimate (SEE).

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Logit model exploring the impact of candidate characteristics on likelihood of winning special elections in Ireland, 1923–2019.

Dependent variable: Candidate elected or not elected in special election	
Candidate of incumbent party	1.065** (0.308)
Candidate related to outgoing TD	1.536*** (0.465)
Candidate former TD	1.381** (0.464)
Candidate of incumbent government	0.160 (0.298)
Special election pre-1948	-0.708 (0.445)
Candidate of incumbent government # Special election pre-1948	2.570*** (0.611)
Female candidate	-0.033 (0.386)
Number of candidates	-0.133*** (0.036)
Constant	-1.153* (0.448)
Observations	644
Pseudo- R^2	.239
Log likelihood	-251.53
AIC/BIC	521.05/561.26

AIC: Akaike information criterion; BIC: Bayesian information criterion; TD: Teachta Dála - Member of Parliament in Ireland.

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

it is significant at $p < .1$ – see Model IV). Model V shows governments do not perform any worse (or better) in special elections held in the middle of their term. Thus, there is insufficient support for H4c – government support does not fit the pattern second-order mechanisms assume. Finally, Model VI tests the governing penalty idea. While the coefficient is negative as expected, it fails to reach conventional level of significance, meaning there is no support for H4d.

Altogether most of the time Irish governments lose votes and seats in special elections, with government gains becoming rarer over time, especially infrequent since the 1990s. Governments are more likely to win seats which they hold, with their vote share gains or losses exacerbated in these seats. We find little evidence for surge and decline, second-order or penalty explanations of government performance. Instead, the referendum model provides the most persuasive explanation of the models tested.

Candidates

We turn now to candidate-level dynamics. Table 4 details a logit model of candidate-level data with the dependent variable whether a candidate was elected or not. There is strong

Table 5. Decisive impact of lower preferences in special elections in Ireland, 1923–2019.

In election of candidates in special elections . . .	%	Party	Net seat gain/loss	Government performance	Net seat gain/loss
Lower preferences decisive	20.6	FF	-18	Lower preferences decisive in government gaining seat	2
		FG	+7	Lower preferences decisive in losing government seat	9
Lower preferences not decisive	79.4	LAB	+4	Lower preferences decisive in losing non-government seat	11
		Others	+7		
<i>n</i>	107				22

FF: Fianna Fáil; FG: Fine Gael; LAB: Labour. Table C10, Supplemental Appendix C lists the 22 contests where lower preferences were decisive.

support for H5a. Former members of parliament are more likely to win. The estimated likelihood of winning the seat for non-former members is 20% compared to 41% for candidates previously elected to parliament (see Figure C1, Supplemental Appendix C). There is also support for H5b: candidates related to the outgoing member of parliament are more likely to win.⁷ Estimating the predicted probabilities suggests there is a 25-point difference in the likelihood of these candidates winning compared to candidates unrelated to the outgoing member (see Figure C2, Supplemental Appendix C). Briefly noting the impact of other variables, the aggregate pattern of governing parties doing better in by-elections held pre-1948 holds, as evidenced by the positive coefficient for the model's interaction term. And incumbency matters – candidates of the incumbent party in the district are more likely to win. In sum, familial dynasties, incumbency status, and candidate experiences influence which candidate wins special elections in Ireland.

Lower preferences

Table 5 tabulates the number of candidates decisively elected by lower preferences. We find transfers played a pivotal role in electing 22 candidates or 20.6% of winners in circumstances where transfers come into play (16.2% overall). This is significantly higher than the 1 in 10 candidates elected by transfers in STV elections and demonstrates lower preferences matter. Nonetheless, we should recognise in nearly four of five cases, they had no impact. Like STV elections, their pivotal influence in special elections remains the exception rather than the norm.

At face, Table 5 reveals smaller parties do better when lower preferences are critical. Combining the seats gained by Labour and others yields a net 11 seats. However, Fine Gael, one of the bigger parties, is a net beneficiary too, weakening the smaller/bigger party distinction. But the most striking element is the partisan sway – Fianna Fáil has lost a net 18 contests because of lower preferences and never owed a victory to them. In addition, when decisive, governing party winners rarely rely on lower preferences, with only two of their victories thanks to transfers. However, governing parties have lost 9 government held seats because of lower preferences.

For these observations to stand on firmer footing, a multivariate analysis is required (see Table 6) exploring the conditions in which lower preferences are pivotal. In Model I, elected candidates standing for the party that held the seat going into the special election

Table 6. Logit models exploring in what circumstances lower preferences decisively elected a candidate in special elections in Ireland, 1923–2019.

Dependent variable: Candidates decisively elected by lower preferences	I	II
Female candidate	0.503 (0.752)	-0.215 (0.819)
Fine Gael candidate	1.277* (0.602)	1.174† (0.662)
Labour candidate	2.911** (1.005)	3.756** (1.128)
Independent candidate	1.114 (1.077)	0.858 (1.188)
Candidate a member of party who holds seat	-1.949** (0.641)	-2.022** (0.718)
Candidate a member of incumbent government party	-	-2.677** (0.805)
Number of candidates contesting district	-0.090 (0.101)	-0.175 (0.114)
Constant	-1.612† (0.895)	0.324 (1.267)
Observations	103	103
Pseudo-R ²	.193	.308
Log likelihood	-43.14	-36.97
AIC/BIC	100.27/118.71	89.93/111.01

AIC: Akaike information criterion; BIC: Bayesian information criterion.

Robust standard errors in parentheses; $n = 103$ as four cases excluded where Fine Gael and/or Labour did not contest.

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

were less likely to rely on lower preferences to secure victory, supporting H6a – incumbents, be it candidates or parties, are less likely to rely on transfers to win.

When transfers are decisive, smaller parties rely more on them to win, with Labour candidates more likely to benefit. However, Fine Gael benefits too ($p = .034$). In Model II, when a covariate representing whether the winning candidate is from a governing party is introduced, the Fine Gael effect diminishes but remains statistically significant at $p < .1$. The coefficient for independent candidates fails to reach statistical significance in either model, meaning there is mixed support for H6b. Rather than a big versus small party distinction, when decisive, transfers tend to benefit particular parties.

There is strong support for the premise candidates of the governing party rely less on transfers to win, support for H6c. Estimating the average predicted effects based on Model II in Table 6 by holding all other variables constant shows there is a 70% likelihood Labour candidate victories are due to transfers compared to 18% for non-Labour candidates (see Figure C3, Supplemental Appendix C). Conversely, winning candidates of the incumbent party are less likely to owe their victory to transfers with a 9% likelihood they are pivotal compared with a 30% likelihood for non-incumbent candidates (see Figure C4, Supplemental Appendix C). There is a similarly potent effect for government candidates, who are significantly less likely to owe their victory to transfers

(see Figure C5, Supplemental Appendix C). In sum, the evidence implies lower preferences matter in Irish special elections, and when decisive, candidates of governing and incumbent parties rely on them less to win. And there is a partisan edge to transfers with Fianna Fáil losing out most.

Conclusion

Special elections have received less attention than other ‘less important elections’. In addition, studies of first-past-the-post contests have dominated this literature. This contribution takes a different tack by studying by-elections in Ireland, conducted under AV. Not only does it bring a neglected case and system to the fore, this article probes four aspects of special elections receiving less attention in studies to date, namely:

- the correlates of turnout in these contests;
- multiple explanations of government loss simultaneously;
- the impact of candidate characteristics on the likelihood of victory;
- the decisive impact of lower preferences.

Five key points emerge from the study. First, it confirms the aphorism of turnout decline and government loss in by-elections. Second, turnout in special elections bears the hallmarks of turnout in general elections: turnout higher in places where it traditionally has been and declining in recent decades. The study discovered little association between turnout and characteristics of the by-election contest. Third, economic conditions at the time of the poll correlate strongly with government performance – the worse they are, the more votes governments lose, strong support for the referendum model. However, no evidence is found for government performance being associated with turnout decline, longevity in power or the contest’s timing vis-à-vis the governing cycle, as surge and decline, governing penalty and second-order models, respectively, assume. Fourth, candidate characteristics correlate with electoral success in special elections. Candidates related to the outgoing member of parliament and those who have been members of parliament before are more likely to win. Fifth, lower preferences matter. In circumstances where more than two candidates contested, about 1 in 5 candidates owe their victory to transfers, higher than the 1 in 10 found in STV elections. In addition, lower preferences have a partisan edge, favouring Labor and Fine Gael primarily, but denying Fianna Fáil.

How do these findings fit the broader literature and future research frontiers? The first notable point is how candidate background and experience correlate with the likelihood of victory. While this is hardly earth-shattering considering candidate voting is prevalent in Ireland, its applicability to by-elections is notable, as intra-party dynamics are usually absent. Does this translate to special elections in other jurisdictions? It highlights an under-researched component of special elections – the impact of candidates, and this remains an area ripe for exploration. The second point is the pre-eminence of the referendum model. In theory, Ireland is a challenging case because the link between economics and government support, conventional wisdom cross-nationally, has been subject to challenge. However, more recent evidence shows the association holds up in Ireland (see Lewis-Beck and Quinlan, forthcoming). This article presents additional testimony supporting this link. Moreover, it adds cumulative evidence supporting the referendum model’s applicability to special elections. Perhaps of greater interest is how other theoretical models fell short in explaining government

performance in special elections. One argument advanced in this article is different models have not been sufficiently tested elsewhere simultaneously. Future comparative work might explore whether the referendum model remains the prime prism to view special elections cross-nationally or whether other mechanisms work in particular polities.

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Supplementary information

Additional supplementary information may be found with the online version of this article.

Notes

1. The most common term is by-elections, used in Australia, Britain, Hong Kong, Ireland and New Zealand. In the United States, special elections are the common descriptor. The term by-polls is used in India. *Elezioni Suppletive* is the Italian descriptor. This article refers to special or by-elections interchangeably.
2. For robustness, this model is re-estimated with turnout change as the dependent variable (see Table C2, Supplemental Appendix C). No deviances are discovered regarding the hypotheses tested.
3. An alternative mechanism is summer may be the least favourable time to hold low-intensity elections with the possibility of circumstantial abstention increasing (Blondel et al., 1998). This is tested (see Table C1, Supplemental Appendix C), but no statistically significant correlation is discovered.
4. For robustness, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael-led governments' performances were analysed separately (see Table C6, Supplemental Appendix C). Fine Gael-led governments have a more robust win rate, although most victories come pre-1948. Post-1948 FG led administration win rate is about 1 in 4 while the Fianna Fail led government's win rate is 3 in 8.
5. For robustness, all models in Table 3 are re-estimated with the same *N* as Models I and II (see Tables C4 and C5, Supplemental Appendix C). No deviances are discovered regarding the hypotheses tested.
6. For robustness, other conceptualisations of economic growth are examined (see Table C3, Supplemental Appendix C). Using gross domestic product (GDP) percentage growth year-on-year or GDP growth in the year preceding the contest delivered similar results. Using GDP growth in the quarter preceding the contest failed to reach statistical significance.
7. Of the 39 cases where a candidate contesting was related to the outgoing member, in two out of three instances, the candidate was their child; 18% were spouses, while the remainder were siblings or in one case a nephew (see Tables C11 and C12, Supplemental Appendix C).

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