

Political Geometry

The maths and mechanics of how we make our political choices

Instead, voters unconsciously allow one critical dimension to float to the surface. This is the primary dimension and if there is a clear winner on this dimension, a voter is unlikely to dig any deeper. If too close to call, the next most important dimension will be the decider. Rarely does a voter need to rummage around in the third dimension to find an answer. The fourth dimension is the stuff of science fiction.

So how does this perspective on the process by which we make decisions help us to understand the growing volatility in Irish politics?

We have witnessed a number of very significant changes in the primary dimension over the past two decades. The primary dimension that was the Civil War political divide eventually gave way to economic criteria of various shades. Generosity (in distributing our new-found wealth) had the greatest influence on party choice during the good times, followed by fairness (in raising revenue and cutting services) after the crash. With our solvency and sovereignty eventually threatened, a protectionist mindset took hold and a strict left-right dimension to Irish politics was established.

Arguably the mistake Fine Gael made in the run up to the 2016 election was to assume the siege mentality had lifted when so many households were still worried about their incomes and access to essential public services.

Right now, what is the primary dimension in Irish politics? If Fine Gael are ahead of Fianna Fail in the polls, we can probably assume a left-right spectrum is still dominant. With Fine Gael and Fianna both establishment parties and right leaning, the second dimension of Civil War politics then becomes extremely influential. With voters split on this dimension, stalemate is the inevitable consequence.

Something needs to change to break the current stalemate. Either a rising tide will eventually lift all boats and the primary dimension will shift, or the ongoing erosion of tribalism in Irish politics will allow a new second dimension to emerge.

In the meantime, it could be argued it is in Fine Gael's interests to perpetuate a right-left division. When Taoiseach Leo Varadkar and Deputy Paul Murphy are scrapping (a proxy right-left war), it invites the electorate to take sides. In this scenario, the only losers are Fianna Fail and Labour.

Thinking about elections in terms of dominant dimensions is especially useful in explaining how party preferences have flipped in Northern Ireland.

The primary dimension in Northern Ireland is obviously religion. Such a defining dimension could render all others irrelevant, except in this case voters are left with two parties to choose from at either end of the spectrum. To separate the SDLP and Sinn Fein at one end, or the UUP and the DUP at the other, a second dimension is needed.

During The Troubles, the second dimension was a party's attitude to how to achieve a resolution to the conflict. On this dimension, those parties associated with a peaceful solution – the SDLP and the UUP - were preferred. Once the violence ended, a new second dimension emerged as voters moved from choosing parties offering a peaceful solution to those fighting on their behalf for a piece of the solution.

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Which party would fight harder for their constituency in Stormont became the new second dimension. For the SDLP and the UUP, with no advantage on the first dimension and a weaker positioning on the second, their fates were sealed.

In a post-Brexit world, the game changer would be if the Northern Irish economy were required to stand on its own two feet, in which case the second dimension would likely be competence in growing the economy, a dimension on which no party currently enjoys clear competitive advantage.

A financially independent Northern Ireland is extremely unlikely so we can expect Sinn Fein and the DUP to dominate for some time to come, unless something else comes along to change the political geometry in Northern Ireland.

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