

Three Conceptions of Civil War Politics

UNTIL 1966, when Fianna Fáil's Jack Lynch became taoiseach, the politics of the Irish Republic were dominated by men who had become prominent in the War of Independence (1919–21) and the resulting Civil War (1922–23). There is nothing unusual about a revolutionary cohort continuing to dominate a new state in this way. That it could be a bone of contention is suggested by the character of Moran in John McGahern's novel *Amongst Women*. Moran asks of the independence struggle, "What did we get for it? A country, if you'd believe them. Some of our own johnnies in the top jobs instead of a few Englishmen."¹ This veteran of both the War of Independence and the Civil War clearly suffered from postrevolutionary disillusionment.

And Moran had a point. All taoisigh appointed before 1966 had been involved in the Civil War in some way. Later, Liam Cosgrave, chosen in 1973, and Garrett FitzGerald, chosen in 1981, as Fine Gael Taoisigh, were sons respectively of the president of the Executive Council and the minister of external affairs during the Civil War. Charles Haughey, taoiseach on three separate occasions between 1979 and 1992, was a son-in-law of Seán Lemass, who ended the Civil War in an internment camp and had been taoiseach between 1959 and 1966. Between 1973 and 1974 the president was Erskine Childers, whose father had been executed by the Provisional Government in October 1922. Evidently, Irish politics remained in the shadow of the Civil War for quite some time.

The impact of the conflict on Irish political development has also long been an issue in Irish Studies. Most historians consider this impact to have been deep and traumatic. For Ronan Fanning Irish society "never escaped the bloody shadow cast at its birth."² Fearghal

1. John McGahern, *Amongst Women* (London and Boston: Faber, 1990).

2. Ronan Fanning, *Independent Ireland* (Dublin: Helicon Press, 1983), 39.

McGarry concluded that it is “difficult to overestimate the Civil War’s impact.”³ Niall Whelehan suggested that its “psychological impact” was “immense.”⁴ When it comes to party politics specifically, the Civil War “shaped and structured the new party system.”⁵ It both “froze the development of party politics in a unique mould”⁶ and “fixed attitudes in a way that would otherwise have been absorbed into the political system quite differently.”⁷ Up to the formation of the current Fianna Fáil/Fine Gael coalition in 2020, the pattern established in the 1920s had been “difficult to shift.”⁸

This article explores the impact of the Civil War on Irish party politics through a fresh look at an old concept, “civil-war politics.” This concept has been used to characterize a specific style of politics emanating from the conflict and to convey a sense of its overall impact on Irish party politics. This article looks at the different ways in which the style of politics rooted in the Civil War allowed the larger two parties to fend off challengers and to dominate Irish politics for most of the twentieth century. The causality involved ran in two directions: the Civil War gave shape and structure to the party system, but since the leading parties were Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, the issues raised by the Treaty were in turn perpetuated by civil-war politics.⁹ The focus here is on the period between 1922 and 1938, a time in which the emotion of the Irish independence movement was channelled into party political activity. Civil-war politics is one way of describing what this channelling involved.

For some the problem was the bitterness that this process engendered. The Civil War mattered to party politics in three ways: in structuring the party system, in retaining the capacity to polarize the

3. Fearghal McGarry, “Southern Ireland, 1922–23: A Free State?” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish History*, ed. Alvin Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 651.

4. Niall Whelehan, “The Irish Revolution, 1912–1923” in Jackson, *Oxford Handbook*, 65.

5. R. K. Carty, *Party and Parish Pump: Electoral Politics in Ireland* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1981), 17.

6. Charles Townshend, *Ireland: The Twentieth Century* (London: Arnold, 1999), 108.

7. Eoin Neeson, *The Civil War in Ireland* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1966).

8. Peter Mair, *The Changing Irish Party System: Organisation, Ideology, and Electoral Competition* (London: Pinter, 1987), 144.

9. On the Treaty, see *The Treaty: Debating and Establishing the Irish State*, ed. Michael Ó Fathartaigh and Liam Weeks (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2018).

electorate, and in engendering bitterness among the political elite. While politics was not altogether enveloped in this bitterness, scholars accept that political conflicts could easily lead to its expression, especially at election time. The emergence of a two-and-a-half party system after 1922 “ensured that the division would be intense and bitter.”¹⁰ Moreover, the bitterness did not heal and “was all the more important for being felt by the political elite.”¹¹ Indeed, “it is hard to quantify the measure of bitterness which the Treaty split had injected into the bloodstream of the new state.”¹² From a psychological perspective, therefore, the central issue is the conversion of this bitterness into the currency of party politics. Political scientists will also want to know what political forms that channelling took, how all-consuming it was, and why civil-war politics proved compatible with the achievement of democratic stability. This article aims to answer these questions.

First, a word of warning. “Civil-war politics” has been used colloquially to describe almost every aspect of the Fine Gael/Fianna Fáil rivalry. It is an overused concept that has falsified history in two ways. First, such was their eventual dominance that the divisions between these two parties have been projected backward onto 1922 in such a way that the complexity of the civil-war split has been obscured. Second, since the conflict embittered many, it has been assumed that the emergence of the party system was a natural consequence of the Civil War. Avoiding both mistakes, this article examines three meanings of the concept, rooted more in political-science terminology. These are “civil war politics as issue dominance,” “civil war politics as preference shaping,” and “civil war politics as the expression of social cleavages.” First, I consider how such a tiny elite with its roots in the independence struggle could dominate Irish politics for so long.

10. Richard Sinnott, *Irish Voters Decide: Voting Behaviour in Elections and Referendums since 1918* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 29.

11. Michael Gallagher, *Political Parties in the Republic of Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 5.

12. Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth Century Ireland: Nation and State* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994), 17.

1. Civil War Politics and Elite Dominance

One “realist” view of modern democracy as a political system revolving around the competition of elites was put forward by Joseph Schumpeter in 1948. Elections were central to his “competitive elitist” model of democracy because they gave the public the right to choose between the rival elites who were struggling for power at election time.¹³ Unpopular elites could be voted out of power, but the more competitive the elections, the more likely the truly able elites would be returned to power. If Schumpeter was right, some form of elite dominance is to be expected in a democratic system and Ireland was no exception. Indeed, of the general preconditions of his model, three—the existence of a professional neutral bureaucracy, an overall consensus among the elite on policy issues, and a fragmented pattern of class and social conflict—existed in Ireland.¹⁴

The positive aspect of this model holds in the sense that the civil-war elite did resolve those issues of state authority and legitimacy that divided the society in the early years and did so within a democratic framework. Their record in providing for social progress and individual freedom was less impressive. Either way, the political dominance is undeniable. In 1946, in *Politicians by Accident*, Liam Skinner documented that twelve members of the fourteen-member Fianna Fáil cabinet then in power had fought on the losing side in 1922, with over three-quarters of these men having seen out the conflict in the government’s prison camps in 1923.¹⁵ Although the issues that caused the Treaty split had lost their salience to the voting public by the 1940s, they retained their sharpness at the top. In 1948 the former chief of staff of the National Army, Richard Mulcahy, could not become taoiseach of the new Fine Gael-led coalition government because of his involvement with the execution policy during the Civil War. The 1960s was the decade of change, with Jack Lynch becoming taoiseach and with more diversification of backgrounds among parliamentarians.

13. Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (Oxford: Routledge, 2010).

14. See David Held, *Models of Democracy*, 3rd ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 150.

15. Liam Skinner, *Politics by Accident* (Dublin: Metropolitan, 1946).

So complete was the dominance of this cohort that the Irish public have forgotten how controversial it once was. When the delegates returned from London in December 1921, the Treaty issue was immediately framed as a personal contest between signatory Michael Collins and anti-Treaty leader Éamon de Valera. The settlement was then voted on in January by the second Dáil, a chamber that was more radical than the electorate itself. Kevin O'Higgins, a member of the Provisional Government, had already stated that Sinn Féin did not represent the nation.¹⁶ And when plans were made for holding a general election in June 1922, it was argued that one reason for calling such an election was to give the Dáil a chance to renew its representative character. The two-way Treaty split sidelined large chunks of adults—the 250,000 agricultural laborers, former supporters of the Irish Parliamentary Party, and young women who were not then on the electoral register in 1922. And during the “pact election” of 16 June 1922, both wings of Sinn Féin stood on a common platform, denying a straight vote on the Treaty. Under the terms of this pact the third parties would be excluded from the next government regardless of their vote share.

From the outset, then, the question of whether the Sinn Féin elite were bent on shaping rather than reflecting Irish public opinion was critical. In the immediate aftermath of the Treaty it seemed as if only a multiparty system could properly reflect public opinion. The strong showing of Labour in the June 1922 pact election (with seventeen out of eighteen of their candidates having been elected) suggested that bread-and-butter issues were as important to the electorate as those raised by the Treaty. Indeed, in this contest, the first election held in the history of the state, no fewer than 40 percent of the first-preference votes went to third and non-Sinn Féin parties or to independents, and the third-party electoral challenge was strong again in August 1923 and June 1927. Yet their challenge was eventually overcome, and the vote share of the civil-war parties grew correspondingly. By 1938 the third parties' share of the first-preference vote was below 15 percent. The concept of civil-war politics should be able to explain this reversal.

16. *Dáil Debates*, vol. T, no. 6 (19 Dec. 1921), <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1921-12-19/2>.

Recently, doubt has been expressed about the concept. Mel Farrell has queried how rooted Fianna Fáil (founded in 1926) or Fine Gael (founded in 1933) actually were in the Civil War. Emphasizing change rather than continuity, he suggests that by the late 1920s the two Treaty sides had begun to adopt typically European center-left and center-right identities. Brian Hanley also argues that socioeconomic issues and not the Treaty divide dominated electoral competition in the 1930s. In her discussion of military-pension awards Eve Morrison found that relations among many former combatants after 1945 were remarkably free of bitterness.¹⁷ Undoubtedly, however, the Civil War mattered and one reason for a fresh look at the concept is that political scientists still ask whether civil-war politics has really ended.¹⁸ Yet the mechanisms by which it shaped electoral politics, the time-frame in which civil-war tempers flared, and the precise meaning of the concept require scrutiny. In each section of this article I review the historical evidence in order to explore what the three conceptions tell us about the impact of the Civil War on party politics. As noted earlier, one significant claim of Schumpeter's model was that the more competitive the elections, the more capable would the elites be that were returned to power. The next section therefore provides a short electoral history of those years.

2. Electoral History, 1923–38

The political elites on both sides fought the Civil War knowing that it would be followed by a general election. This was an acknowledgment that despite the militarism of the years 1916–22, their route to power remained the general election. Aside from local elections, there

17. Mel Farrell, "Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil—Civil War Parties?" *The Irish Story: Irish History Online*, 26 May 2020, <https://www.theirishstory.com/2020/05/26/fine-gael-and-fianna-fail-civil-war-parties/#.Yw3pn3bMKUk>, archived at <https://perma.cc/9M7A-3UTA>; Brian Hanley, "The End of Civil War Politics," in *The Split: From Treaty to Civil War, 1921–23*, ed. Tommy Graham, Brian Hanley, Darragh Gannon, and Grace O'Keefe (Dublin: Worldwell, 2021): 98–102; Eve Morrison, "Treaty Reflection," *National Archives of Ireland*, n.d., archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20131020020850/http://treaty.nationalarchives.ie/treaty-reflections/treaty-reflection-by-dr-eve-morrison>.

18. See A. P. Kavanagh, "An End to 'Civil War Politics'? The Radically Reshaped Political Landscape of Post-Crisis Ireland," *Electoral Studies* 38 (June 2015): 71–81.

First Preference Vote Share of Civil War and Other Parties

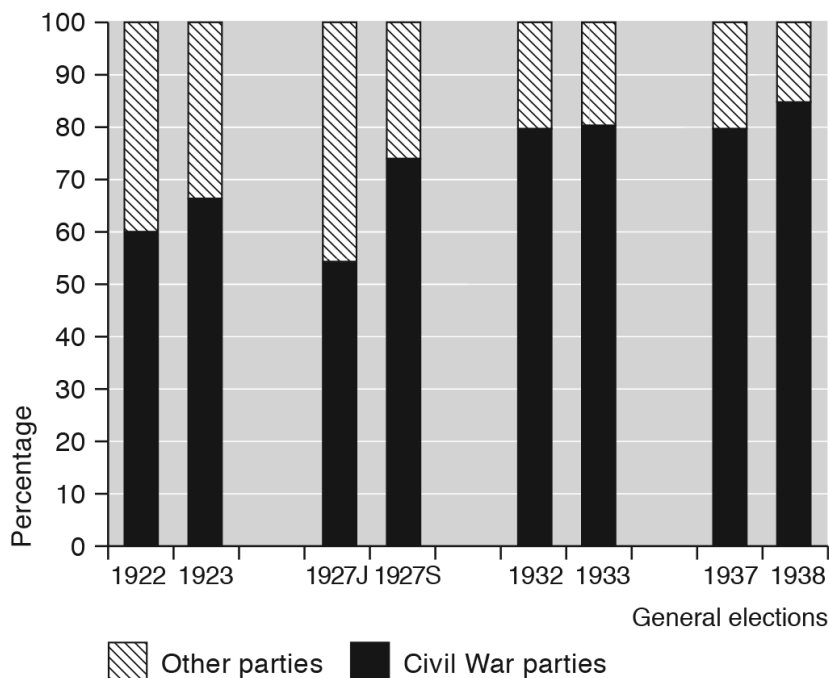


FIGURE 1: First-Preference Vote Share of Civil War and Other Parties, 1922–1938. From Bill Kissane, ed., *After Civil War: Division, Reconstruction, and Reconciliation in Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 55. Data source: Michael Gallagher, *Irish Elections, 1922–1944: Results and Analysis* (Limerick: PSAI Press, 1993).

were parliamentary elections in 1922 and 1923, two in 1927, elections again in 1932 and 1933, and two more in 1937 and 1938. Their frequency allows for an in-depth analysis of the electoral strategies of the two sides. What is clear is that frequent elections in no way resulted in a lessening of the civil-war cleavage. Figure 1 shows the increase over time of the combined first-preference vote of the two largest parties. It was modest enough in 1922 and 1923, but it grew especially after July 1927. By 1938 a “two-and-a-half party system” had clearly been consolidated.

The conclusion of the Civil War on 30 April 1923 was followed by an election in August that year. It gave the government an opportunity

to win public approval for their prosecution of the Civil War, and every effort was made by anti-Treaty Sinn Féin to contest it. De Valera, believing that the government feared a straight contest, expected that “war conditions would continue right up to the election.”¹⁹ The election was accompanied by ongoing military sweeps, internment, and the renewal of Public Safety Acts.²⁰ Most of Sinn Féin’s candidates were unable to canvas because they were in prison or on the run, and the main dailies supported the government. Cumann na nGaedheal received enough votes to govern on its own, but only because Sinn Féin abstained from the Dáil until August 1927. Sinn Féin’s twenty-four percent of first-preference votes showed that it retained the sympathy of a large minority of the electorate.

The June 1927 electoral result left no party with an overall majority, but Cumann na nGaedheal was quick to dismiss the possibility of a coalition. After the assassination of Kevin O’Higgins on 10 July, and the introduction of a bill requiring electoral candidates to promise in advance to comply with the oath, Fianna Fáil entered the Dáil. Throughout the summer there were coalition discussions between Fianna Fáil, the Labour Party, and the National League. The minority Cosgrave government formed in June, however, survived a no-confidence vote supported by these parties on 10 August. Later that month Cosgrave dissolved the Dáil and called another election which again returned his party to office as a minority government. Fianna Fáil became the official opposition, and politics became dominated by the issue of what it would do in power.

In 1931 the seventeenth amendment to the constitution gave military tribunals authority to try republican subversives, but de Valera described it as “a political stunt” designed to turn the public’s attention from the government’s poor record on economic issues.²¹ Although in 1932 Fianna Fáil became the first party to win over forty percent of the first-preference vote, it was only with Labour support that it could sustain a government—a situation that led de Valera

19. Bill Kissane, *The Politics of the Irish Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 121.

20. G. M. Foster, *The Irish Civil War and Society: Politics, Class, and Conflict* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 152.

21. Bill Kissane, “Defending Democracy: The Legislative Response to Political Extremism in the Irish Free State, 1922–1939,” *Irish Historical Studies* 34:134 (2014): 156–74.

to call for another election in January 1933. This time Fianna Fáil could ask the voters to return its candidates (not those of Cumann na nGaedheal) so as to form a majority government, with de Valera maintaining that the British would not negotiate with a government that it expected to fall. The third parties had become less relevant, with the *Irish Times* remarking that the choice was simply between the Treaty and chaos.²² Fianna Fáil was returned to power with a majority of the first-preference vote in 1933, while Cumann na nGaedheal polled just over thirty percent.

In the 1930s the Blueshirts and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) would reenact the Civil War by fighting on the streets in riots and at political rallies. The pattern of electoral transfers in the 1933 general election shows that the divide polarized the whole country, with transfers from the Centre Party voters to Cumann na nGaedheal being very high. Fears of renewed violence if a Fianna Fáil government “proved soft on the IRA” dovetailed with apprehension about the consequences of “the economic war” with Britain. On the anti-Treaty side the payment of land annuities symbolized the country’s subordination to Britain, and since they constituted one-fifth of Irish national revenue, the economic benefits of retaining them, as advocated by Fianna Fáil, could also be attractive. Yet Fianna Fáil would govern as a national party: in 1937 Minister for Finance Patrick MacEntee suggested that it was now attracting the votes of people who opposed them during the Civil War, and that it had resolved the differences of the civil-war period.²³

By 1937 the heat had gone out of elections and there was a drop in turnout. A major consequence of Fianna Fáil’s clampdown on the Blueshirts and the IRA was that polarization came to an end. The opposition was now headed by Fine Gael—the United Ireland Party which had been formed in 1933 by a coalition of Cumann na nGaedheal, the National Centre Party, and the Blueshirts. The party’s main policies were the achievement of a united Ireland through a policy which would make the state prosperous, free association with the British Commonwealth as a sovereign state, and a negotiated end to the economic war. Nothing tied the party to the Treaty any longer.

22. *Irish Times*, 3 Jan. 1933.

23. Cited in Kissane, *Politics of the Irish Civil War*, 195.

Fianna Fáil stressed its achievements in office, and de Valera declared that “if today we can stand before you and point out four years of successful achievements, it is due to the fact that in 1933 you gave us a majority over all parties.”²⁴ Yet even though Fianna Fáil won half the seats in this election, it was able to form only a minority government. This situation lasted until the following June, when it again called a snap election in which it was returned as a majority government with almost fifty-two percent of the votes.

This 1938 electoral result suggested that the civil-war divide would remain the pivot of the party system long after most substantive issues linked to the Treaty had been resolved. Two parties had dominated the process of government formation. In effect there were only two cabinets, that of Cumann na nGaedhael from 1922 to 1932 and that of Fianna Fáil from 1932 to 1938. Their combined vote share grew steadily during the 1930s, suggesting that their dominance was not a direct result of the Civil War. The challenge of the third parties dissipated in 1927—the year most critical to the formation of the party system. For it was in that year that the polarization inherent in the idea of civil-war politics found its structural form. Indeed, 1927 had seen the emergence of a pattern of party competition that would remain in place until the 1980s: “While there have always been more than 2 parties contesting elections in Irish politics, the pattern of competition has often tended to reflect that of a straight two-party system, with a strong party [Fianna Fáil] on one side and a varying collection of parties on the other.”²⁵

3. Civil War Politics as Issue Dominance

From a comparative perspective the most striking feature of the Irish party system was the dominance of two large nationalist parties combined with a weak left-wing alternative. Traditionally, this combination was seen as a reflection of the dominance of “the national issue” in Irish politics. The fact that the Treaty settlement of 1921 did not provide a permanent basis for Irish political development or undo

24. *Irish Times*, 17 June 1937.

25. Peter Mair, “Party Competition and the Changing Party System,” in *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, 3rd ed., ed. John Coakley and Michael Gallagher (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 127–52, 137.

partition has meant that issues relating to the internal structure of Irish society were marginalized. From this perspective the predominance of Fianna Fáil, the prominent role that it and its rival Fine Gael played in government formation, and the weakness of Labour can all be explained in terms of the centrality of the national issue to Irish politics.

Since the Civil War had ended in April 1923 not through direct negotiations but with an IRA ceasefire, issues such as the oath to the crown remained unresolved. Indeed, one popular conception of civil-war politics is the continued electoral dominance of issues connected with the Treaty long after 1923. R. K. Carty emphasizes the important role played by political leaders in “creating and politicising issues that will evoke electoral responses.”²⁶ According to Basil Chubb, until the 1950s the appeals of the nationalist elite to “old and familiar issues paid them dividends in terms of electoral support; and their differences, which concerned these same issues, were the basis of party allegiance and rivalry.”²⁷ Eoin Neeson has gone further and suggested that up to 1960 “jaded civil war issues” were still being offered to “an impotent electorate” more anxious about matters of immediate concern.²⁸

The idea that the legacy of the Civil War should be understood in terms of issue dominance holds true for its immediate aftermath. Unsure of the direction of the republican movement, the government’s electoral strategy continued to reflect its civil-war propaganda. On 12 July 1922 Collins had written to his minister in charge of publicity, Desmond FitzGerald, encouraging him to emphasize the economic cost of the IRA campaign in order to get people’s minds off “such controversial issues as the national question.”²⁹ To counter the idealized image of the Irish people invoked by the anti-Treatyites, subsequent propaganda represented them as enemies of the Irish nation.³⁰ One anti-Treatyite, Liam Deasy, believed that the

26. Carty, *Party and Parish Pump*, 201.

27. Basil Chubb, *The Government and Politics of Ireland*, 3rd ed. (London: Longman, 1992), 8.

28. Neeson, *Civil War*, 2.

29. Cited in Kissane, *Politics of the Irish Civil War*, 155.

30. *Ibid.*

public had been won over to the Free State on account of such propaganda.³¹ For Cumann na nGaedheal the central issues—the need for strong government, the responsibility of the anti-Treatyites for the destruction of the Civil War, and the continued threat posed by them to economic interests—were all rooted in the conflict of 1922–23. And these issues would remain salient, with de Valera complaining in 1936 that Fine Gael was still playing on the passions of the Civil War.

In situations of pronounced polarization governments can often gain from exploiting cleavages that mobilize a majority against a small and stigmatized minority group.³² Cumann na nGaedheal's tactic in 1923 had been to frighten the voters into thinking that the safety of the state was still at stake. As Figure 2 below shows, the anti-Treatyites were represented as anarchists and terrorists, and the government cast itself as the protector of life and property. Sinn Féin also stood on its civil-war record. It proposed policies aimed at those who had fought in the Civil War, such as the reform of public services to ensure that no one would be unjustly treated, the abolition of "murder gangs," the closing of secret military courts, and an end to censorship, along with some broader policies including state intervention to reduce unemployment, the revival of the Irish language, equal opportunities within the educational system, and an offer of local autonomy to Ulster.³³

Gavin Foster has argued that "the long shelf life of so-called civil war politics has as much to do with how the conflict ended, and how the losers were treated afterwards, as it does with how and why it began and how it was fought." The anti-Treatyite's sense of bitterness was compounded by blacklisting, exclusion from public and some private employment, and the necessity that many saw to emigrate.³⁴ The state's continued reliance on emergency powers also kept alive bitter memories of the execution policy that had marred the last stage of the Civil War. The conflict had added poverty to republicans' sharp sense of defeat, and their cause would now come to incorporate many for whom independence had produced little material improvement

31. Graham Walker, "Propaganda and Conservative Nationalism during the Irish Civil War 1922–23," *Éire-Ireland* 22:4 (Winter 1987): 98.

32. Patrick Dunleavy, *Democracy, Bureaucracy, and Public Choice: Economic Explanations in Political Science* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 121.

33. *Irish Times*, 25 Aug. 1923.

34. Foster, *Irish Civil War and Society*, 143.

The Challenge

<p>The Government and Order</p> <p>THE BALLOT AND MAJORITY RULE LAW WITH GOOD ORDER SECURITY FOR LIFE AND PROPERTY RIGHT TO LIVE RIGHT TO WORK WITH WORK TO DO</p>	<p>Challenged By</p>	<p>V. The Irregulars and Anarchy.</p> <p>THE GUN, PETROL CAN, THE TORCH, AND MINORITY DICTATION CHAOS AND DISORDER. MURDER, ARSON, ARMED ROBBERY AND LOOT BURNED HOUSES, RUINED ROADS AND RAILWAYS, BROKEN BRIDGES AND RUINED TRADE UNEMPLOYMENT AND STARVATION</p>	
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The Government has Beaten Anarchy. Help the Government to Kill It.

The Cosgrave Government is alone Strong Enough to Kill It.

Vote for the National Cumann Na nGaedheal Candidates and help to Kill Anarchy.

Subscribe to the Election Fund.

Remittances payable to	W. T. COSGRAVE, KEVIN O'HIGGINS, RICHARD MULCAHY, 5 Parnell Square, Dublin; or to The Munster and Leinster Bank (any Branch).
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Published by Cumann na nGaedheal, 5 Parnell Square, Dublin.

FIGURE 2: Cumann na nGaedheal Election Advertisement, August 1923. *Irish Times*, 25 August 1923.

or security.³⁵ Fianna Fáil's appeal thus covered anyone who felt victimized in the new state.

On the other hand, issue dominance tells us less about the losers' strategies. Most of Sinn Féin's policies were jettisoned when Fianna Fáil was founded in 1926. Fundamental to its break with Sinn Féin was the party's strategy of winning the support of different social groups on the basis of concrete economic issues.³⁶ In 1926 Seán Lemass argued that they needed to teach the people that independence meant "real concrete advantages for the common people and not merely an idealists' paradise."³⁷ For the June 1927 election Fianna Fáil borrowed a large part of Labour's program, declaring a commitment "to prevent extravagant expenditure, to stem emigration, to provide work for the unemployed, to better our declining trade position, and to cause an industrial revival." Fianna Fáil's initial emphasis was on such material issues, and the constitutional grievances were quickly reduced to the question of the oath.³⁸

35. Ibid., 173.

36. Richard Dunphy, *The Making of Fianna Fail Power in Ireland, 1923-1948* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 67.

37. Ibid., 69.

38. Ibid., 84.

Yet Fianna Fáil's shift to the left gave the government more incentive to play on public fears, with one poster from the June 1927 election declaring that a Fianna Fáil government would mean "army and police disbanded and in their place the undisciplined gunmen of 1922, repudiation of the National Loan and Savings Certificates, [and] a levy on bank deposits."³⁹ This negative campaigning did not change. Although some government advertisements for the September 1927 election mentioned policy achievements, the most effective were based on generating a sense of fear and ridicule stemming from Fianna Fáil's civil-war record. Among the leading ads were: "Help the Government to Finish the Job," "Who Are the War-Makers?," "Now They Are Shocked," "The Making of Ireland or Its Undoing," "They Took the Oath to Save Their Party — They Would Not Take It in 1922 to Save Their Country from Civil War," "De Valera in the Dumps and the Voters on the Warpath," "Economy by Torch and Petrol Can," and "Digging Freedom's Grave in 1922."⁴⁰ Since 1922 the government had made life and property safe for "the plain people of Ireland"; both would be threatened if Fianna Fáil came to power.⁴¹ Cosgrave told voters that his opponents had in mind "the establishment of socialism in this country."⁴² As a response, de Valera filled a whole page of a Dublin newspaper with a signed promise that his intentions were peaceful and respected the will of the people.⁴³

In the 1932 election campaign the government itself made few policy proposals, projecting itself as the sole bulwark against terror and Communism. Minister for Justice FitzGerald Kenny told voters that "Mr. de Valera's policy is that armed associations like the so-called IRA and Saor Éire should continue to drill, arm, and endeavour to impose their will by force on the people."⁴⁴ De Valera complained that the government was not fighting the election on economic issues but was relying instead on "frightening" the voters.⁴⁵ The contrast

39. *The Nation*, 11 June 1927.

40. Warner Moss, *Political Parties in the Irish Free State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1933), 126.

41. *Irish Times*, 2 Sept. 1927.

42. Bill Kissane, *Explaining Irish Democracy* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2002), 21.

43. Moss, *Political Parties*, 126.

44. *Irish Times*, 3 Feb. 1932.

45. *Ibid.*, 10 Feb. 1932.

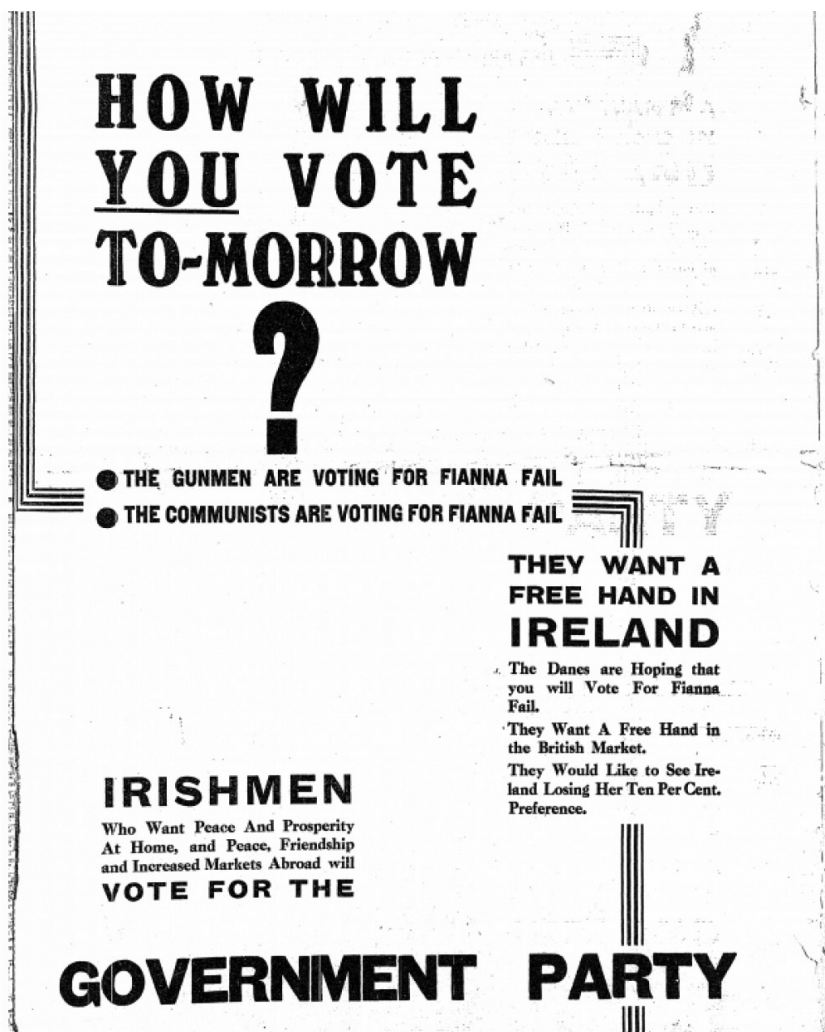


FIGURE 3: Cumann na nGaedheal Election Poster, 1932. *Irish Times*, 15 February 1932.

made between the party of property and of law and order and the anti-Treatyites is well captured in the election poster above.

Fianna Fáil stressed the need for protectionist measures to counter the effects of the world depression. These political differences had been brought to a head by Britain's decision to introduce tariffs of up to 100 percent on imports from non-Commonwealth countries. The Free State would be guaranteed a preferential rate of just 10

percent on exports to the British market if it remained within the Commonwealth, but the livelihood of the exporting sectors would be placed in jeopardy if Fianna Fáil won the election and embraced protectionism. Issues linked to the Treaty acquired a pronounced economic dimension, with Cosgrave telling voters that he opposed Fianna Fáil's plan to downgrade the office of governor general "when the vital economic interests of this country are in such a condition as they are at this moment."⁴⁶

This section has done little to support the first conception of civil-war politics. Irish electoral politics were not frozen around a set of issues first expressed in the Dáil debates on the Treaty in January 1922. The issues were increasingly economic, and the constitutional differences over the Treaty had not been sufficient to mobilize the whole electorate. In the view of Tom Garvin "the Treaty seems to have been an issue which exercised the nationalist elites far more than it did the general population of a country which was now entering an era of economic depression."⁴⁷ While one cannot deny what R. K. Carty calls "the symbolic and constitutional nature" of the Treaty split at the elite level, the way in which both sides incorporated a social dimension into their appeal was crucial to the electoral outcome.⁴⁸ From the outset the pro-Treatyites had interpreted the Civil War in social terms as a defense of individual rights, private property, and the capitalist order, while the anti-Treatyites had interpreted the conflict in national terms as a continuation of the War of Independence. The fact that the pro-Treaty interpretation won out in 1923 had clear implications. In June 1923 de Valera told Count Plunkett that "the spur of a direct material, concrete grievance" was absent from their cause, and the press and the pulpit had convinced the public that it was the anti-Treatyites who were responsible for "the material burdens being placed upon the people."⁴⁹ After splitting with Sinn Féin in 1926, Fianna Fáil changed strategy, first by adopting Labour's policies and then by themselves claiming after 1932 to be a strong national government with the power to protect life and property.

46. *Ibid.*, 5 Feb. 1932.

47. Tom Garvin, "National Elites, Irish Voters, and Irish Political Development: A Comparative Perspective," *Economic and Social Review* 8:3 (1977): 169.

48. Carty, *Party and Parish Pump*, 19.

49. Kissane, *Politics of the Irish Civil War*, 188.

Issue dominance nonetheless remains a popular conception. For if the emotion of the Civil War had found its way into the bloodstream, the divisive issues were never far from the surface. In his memoir *Against the Tide* Noel Browne recalled his shock as a young Labour TD at seeing how the bitter recriminations about the Civil War still poisoned relations between members of the Dáil twenty-five years after the conflict had ended. All it took, according to Browne, was for the trigger words of “77,” “Ballyseedy,” “Dick and Joe,” and above all “the Treaty” and “damn good bargain” to bring out the “white-hot hate” that existed between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.⁵⁰ His memoir was certainly hyperbolic. Browne was first elected to the Dáil in February 1948. The thirteenth Dáil sat from 18 February 1948 to 13 June 1951. In this three-and-a-half-year period the phrases which he said brought out the “white-hot heat” of the Civil War were mentioned only five times. Yet this infrequency does not mean that they were not present under the surface.

4. Civil War Politics as Preference-Shaping

This second conception of civil-war politics relates to the instrumental use to which the conflict was put, namely, in such a way as to structure electoral competition around the nationalist elite. Rather than seeing the party system as resting on a cleavage that had been permanently established by the Civil War, and rather than seeing civil-war politics as the natural reaction to an already existing cleavage, this conception stresses political agency. In his book *The Semi-Sovereign People* Elmer Eric Schattschneider argues that the essence of power is the ability to define the framework in which electoral competition takes place, since voters form their preferences largely in response to how the elite frame the choices in front of them.⁵¹ The two civil-war parties succeeded in providing the Irish voting public with a cognitive map of the political issues facing them. And Fianna Fáil excelled at doing so. Its use of snap elections was combined with the claim that standing before the electorate was not just a party but rather a national movement committed to the completion of the Irish

50. Noel Browne, *Against the Tide* (Dublin: Gill Books, 2007), 228.

51. E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America* (Boston: Wadsworth, 1970).

Revolution. As de Valera observed in August 1936, the public should look back on the wisdom and experience that had been gained in the struggle for Irish freedom since 1916 in order to enable the nation to move forward to “the commonly accepted goal”—an end to partition.⁵² Unresolved issues such as partition had their uses for both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil.

An instrumental understanding of civil-war politics has long been common among scholars. Carty argues that the values and attitudes of an entrepreneurial political elite were crucial in setting the terms and rules governing competition and the creation of an effective party system.⁵³ Basil Chubb also suggests that while the Civil War was “a major polarizing agent,” the political elite found it to be in their interest to act as a polarizing agent after 1922.⁵⁴ Historian Joseph Lee has offered another formulation of this conception: “It may be that the image of the Civil War had to be burnished and polished, and the fires of hatred stoked, to foster the illusion that fundamental differences remained between the parties. However, a definitive verdict must await detailed analysis of the various ways in which the survivors used the memory of the Civil War to further their purposes.”⁵⁵

This section has supported the thesis that civil-war politics was an example of “preference shaping” in the sense that a recognizable political elite pursued electoral strategies and manipulated state power in ways that shaped rather than simply reflected the preferences of the public.⁵⁶ These strategies did not bode well for the third parties. Labour had remained neutral on the Treaty in early 1922 but ended up supporting the government’s position in 1923. Before the August 1923 election Labour expected to double its share of the vote since 1922, when it took many seats from the anti-Treatyites.⁵⁷ This expectation, however, went unmet. In 1922 all but one of its eighteen candidates were elected, whereas in 1923 only fourteen out of forty-four candidates won seats. Its performance was emblematic of the failure of a host of third parties and independents, since the 1923

52. *Irish Times*, 14 Aug. 1936.

53. Carty, *Party and Parish Pump*, 27.

54. Chubb, *Government and Politics of Ireland*, 100.

55. Joseph Lee, *Ireland, 1912–1985* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 69.

56. Dunleavy, *Democracy, Bureaucracy, and Public Choice*.

57. *The Voice of Labour*, 11 Aug. 1923.

election was the occasion for “a vigorous effort by interest groups to win control of the Dáil and to transform the whole basis of the Irish party system.”⁵⁸

Although Labour’s poor showing suggests that it was the Civil War that permanently cleaved the electoral landscape in two, its significance to the long-term outcome can be overstated. The combined share of the vote of the two civil-war parties improved from about 60 percent in 1922 to over 66 percent in 1923, but by June 1927 this would drop to less than 54 percent. The fate of the third-party challenge was sealed that summer. The conflict had initially created a suitable atmosphere for elite manipulation, and the elite would then remain the main agent driving polarization around the civil-war cleavage. The following statement from minister for agriculture Patrick Hogan in June 1927 is representative of elite attitudes:

Who started the civil war? We did: we fired the first shot. The one big thing that we can put against our government is that we waited until June 1922 to begin it: that we did not start in April to put an end to de Valera’s monkey tricks. If we had started it when de Valera, in Clonmel, talked about wading through Irish blood, we would have saved many a decent young fellow. The only apology I have to make for the government is for not stopping the playboy sooner than we did.⁵⁹

Between 1927 and 1933 Cumann na nGaedhael continued with “red scare” tactics designed to shred the credibility of the Fianna Fáil alternative. One government candidate promised that a Cumann na nGaedhael government “will keep your homes, your lives, and your properties safe from the enemies of society.” The introduction of emergency legislation before the September 1927 and February 1932 elections heightened the sense that “the safety of the state” was at stake—an example of how governments can manage the political context and “manipulate the objective situation of the polity as a whole in a way which confers partisan advantages” in elections.⁶⁰

These tactics nonetheless assumed that the anti-Treatyites were the main opposition. A government poster from the 1923 election,

58. Michael Gallagher, *Irish Elections, 1922–44: Results and Analysis* (Limerick: PSAI Press, 1993), 23.

59. *Irish Times*, 4 June 1927.

60. Dunleavy, *Democracy, Bureaucracy, and Public Choice*, 122.

addressed specifically to Irish women, had suggested that the voters had three choices: to vote for the Irregulars (“an actively criminal choice”), to abstain from voting (“a passively criminal choice”), or to vote for the government (“the only choice for the sane”).⁶¹ The poster did not mention the possibility of voting for any of the third-party or independent candidates, who received around 40 percent of the vote in 1922! Yet both Treaty sides were hostile to “sectional” interests and worried about the potential for political fragmentation under the single-transferable-vote electoral system. In 1926 de Valera declared that it was vital that “the Free State be shaken at the next general election, for if an opportunity be given it to consolidate itself further as an institution, if the present Free State members are replaced by farmers and labourers and other class interests, the national interest as a whole will be submerged in the clashing of rival economic groups.”⁶²

De Valera represented the issue in September 1927 as a straight fight between Irish-Ireland and the forces of imperialism.⁶³ A Fianna Fáil spokesman remarked that “the tendency of the present election to develop into a straight fight between nationalism and imperialism is becoming more marked as the polling day approaches.”⁶⁴ Cumann na nGaedheal had also done much to discredit the coalition alternative, first by not forming a coalition with the Farmers’ Party in June 1927 and then by choosing not to establish the “national government” proposed by Labour after the assassination of O’Higgins on 10 July 1927. A Fianna Fáil poster (below) insisted that there were now only two political parties in the country.

There was a high degree of electoral volatility up to 1927. Peter Mair argues that the logic of polarization inherent in civil-war politics neutralized the third-party challenge that summer. The entry of Fianna Fáil into the Dáil led to an increase of the vote share of both Cumann na nGaedheal and Fianna Fáil, with the former increasing its share from 28 percent in June to 30 percent in September 1927, while Fianna Fáil’s share rose from 26 percent to 35 percent in the

61. *Irish Times*, 23 Aug. 1923.

62. Quoted in Michael Laffan, *The Resurrection of Ireland: The Sinn Féin Party, 1916–1923* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 442.

63. *The Nation*, 3 Sept. 1927.

64. *Ibid.*, 10 Sept. 1927.

**England's
Faithful Garrison
In Ireland
Are all on the side
Of Cumann na nGaedheal**

**There are to-day only TWO parties
In this country:**

**Fianna Fáil who stand for Ireland
And the
Cooper-Cosgrave Party who stand
For England's Interest in Ireland.**

FIGURE 4: Fianna Fáil Election Poster. Source: *The Nation*, 10 September 1927.

same period.⁶⁵ The latter's entry into the Dáil polarized the system, and those parties that occupied the center "found their politics to be increasingly peripheral to the concerns of the vast majority of the electorate."⁶⁶ The 1932 and 1933 elections saw further polarization, with turnout increasing from 68 percent in June 1927 to 81 percent in 1933. The effect "was to take Fianna Fáil and Cumann na nGaedheal from a position in which they commanded the support of 54 per cent of the voters and 36 per cent of the electorate in June 1927, to one in which they won more than 80 per cent of the voters and 64 per cent of the electorate in 1933."⁶⁷

Although coalition government was still a possibility in September 1927, the choices facing the electorate had narrowed considerably since the previous June. Labour had put forward 44 candidates for

65. Mair, *Changing Irish Party System*, 48.

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid.

the June election; the number in September was only 28. The Farmers' Party had reduced its number of candidates from 39 to 20, while the number of National League candidates had fallen from 30 to 6. The June election had therefore occasioned the last serious effort by the third parties to decisively influence the new state, and financial considerations played a large part in their failure. According to Michael Gallagher, the smaller groups had "sensed that the mood of the country was not sympathetic to another highly fractionalized Dáil and lacked the resources and enthusiasm to fight lost causes."⁶⁸

Preference-shaping works best when the government can dominate the electoral agenda. Here a specifically constitutional factor mattered. The 1922 constitution did not specify the conditions under which a Dáil could be dissolved, except to say that "Dáil Éireann may not at any time be dissolved except on the advice of the Executive Council." The first dissolution occurred in 1927 when Attorney General John A. Costello advised Cosgrave's minority government that the constitution did not prevent the Executive Council from dissolving the Dáil without its consent.⁶⁹ This ruling was to prove of great benefit to the civil-war parties. After the pattern of a regular election held once every four years had elapsed, the government soon called another snap election in order to convert its initial plurality of seats in the Dáil into a majority. Each time the governing party did this (in 1927, 1933, and again in 1938), it gained an increase in seats which then enabled its members to form a single-party government. With the exception of one election in 1933, these electoral contests saw the smaller parties' share of seats won decline. The effect of these snap elections is shown in Figure 5, which charts the rise in the number of parliamentary seats captured by the larger parties each time that there was a snap election. Fianna Fáil was a beneficiary too: snap elections gained it a parliamentary majority in 1933 and 1938.

The dissolutions were an effective way of reducing electoral contests to a two-way choice, enabling the two sides to dominate the process of government formation. Uniquely in interwar Europe, Irish politics became dominated by two single-party governments who based their party appeal on their ability to project the prerogatives of

68. Gallagher, *Irish Elections, 1922–44*, 85–116, 95.

69. Cornelius O' Leary, *Irish Elections, 1918–1977: Parties, Voters, and Proportional Representation* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1979), 24.

Party Strengths in the Dáil and “Snap Elections, 1922–38”

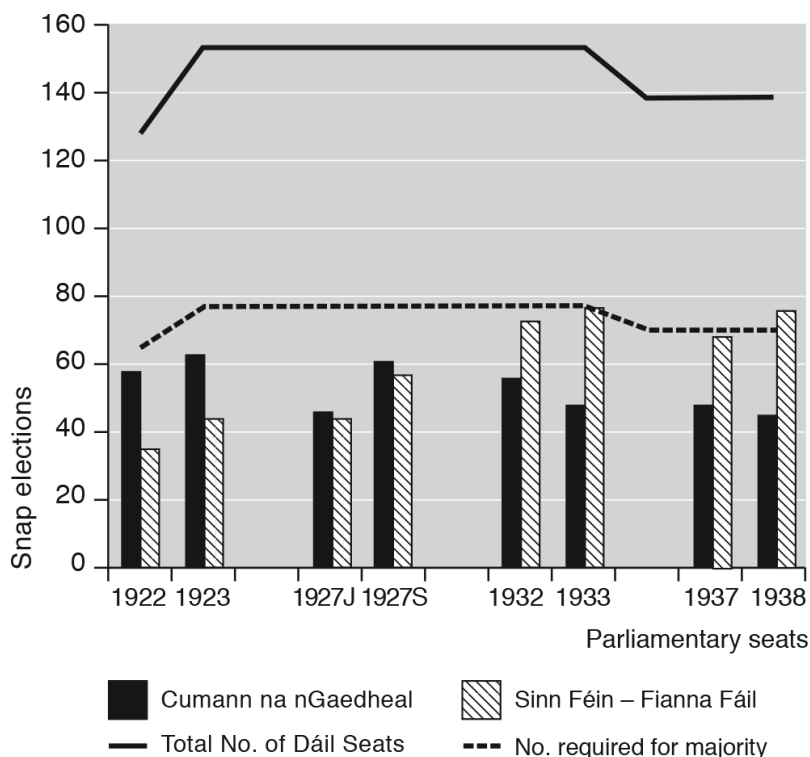


FIGURE 5: Party Strengths in the Dáil and Snap Elections, 1922–1938. From Bill Kissane, ed., *After Civil War: Division, Reconstruction, and Reconciliation in Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 54. Data source: Michael Gallagher, *Irish Elections, 1922–1944: Results and Analysis* (Limerick: PSAI Press, 1993).

the state. Tom Garvin notes that Cumann na nGaedheal tended to conflate politics with administration: in 1932 one poster asked voters simply to vote for “the government party.”⁷⁰ After the Civil War the onus on Fianna Fáil was to dispel the idea that an anti-Treaty government would threaten the livelihood and property of the voters, and their 1933 election manifesto says as much (figure 6).

70. Tom Garvin, *The Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1981), 147.

Today!
Choose your own Government
Choose a Strong Government
Choose an Irish Government!

We pledge ourselves to promote unity, to rule justly and impartially, to hold all citizens equal before the law, and to protect each in his person and in his property with all the resources at our command. We promise that the confidence placed in us by the people will not be abused. We promise to serve Ireland with all our abilities and to advance in every way the true interests of her people.

Vote Fianna Fáil.

(Signed President de Valera).

FIGURE 6: Fianna Fáil 1933 General Election Manifesto.

As it became more respectable, Fianna Fáil emphasized its role in preventing a recurrence of civil-war conditions. In 1936, a year which saw the IRA proscribed, deValera stated that the removal of the oath had opened the democratic way to all those who wanted to pursue their objectives peacefully. Any minority group that now wanted to pursue its objectives by force could only rouse the resistance of the majority and civil war would ensue.⁷¹ Fianna Fáil eventually became “the natural party of government,” making capital of its ability to represent itself as standing for the “national” as opposed to “sectional” interests. During the 1938 election campaign deValera declared that “to do its work properly, the government must be in a position to refuse sectional demands which it considers not to be in the general interest to concede, without thereby having to risk defeat in parliament and the sacrifice of its opportunity of putting the national programme into execution.”⁷²

Polarization is almost a synonym of civil-war politics. Peter Mair

71. Kissane, *Politics of the Irish Civil War*, 196.

72. *Irish Times*, 28 May 1938.

suggests that the Civil War had “created deep polarization.”⁷³ McGarry suggests that it continued “for several decades.”⁷⁴ And Chubb concluded that this polarization had “tremendous consequences.”⁷⁵ The concept of civil-war politics combines two understandings of this idea—the emotional and the instrumental—the second of which suggests that the civil-war elite would be the driver of polarization only if it served its electoral purposes. By the late 1930s the heat had largely gone out of party politics. There was something partisan about the manner in which de Valera replaced the 1922 constitution. When on 14 June 1937 the Dáil voted to approve the new constitution, the voting followed party lines. After another dissolution the plebiscite on the constitution was held on the day of a general election. This set of events elicited the opposition of Fine Gael, which raised fears of a personal dictatorship under the new constitution. Yet although de Valera won the vote by a narrow margin, the potential for polarization did not materialize. The atmosphere during the plebiscite was neither tense nor violent: the polarization inherent in civil-war politics had already subsided.

What of civil-war politics after 1938? In 1954 Sean MacBride of Cumann na Poblachta remarked to de Valera that the “party warfare” in the Dáil was ensuring that the bitterness of the Civil War was being passed on to the younger generation.⁷⁶ With a great deal of policy consensus established by then, the two largest parties may have needed a symbolic issue to mask the lack of substantive differences between them. Anne Dolan invokes a public/private distinction to suggest that while the two parties could meet agreeably behind closed doors, in the electoral arena memory of the Civil War became a “mechanism” that enabled them to retain electoral support in a polity increasingly forced to adjust to the prosaic realities of independence.⁷⁷ This mechanistic language shows that the second conception of civil-war memories being instrumentalized for electoral purposes remains influential among younger scholars.

73. Mair, *Changing Irish Party System*, 138–44.

74. Fearghal McGarry, “Southern Ireland, 1922–1932,” 651.

75. Chubb, *Government and Politics of Ireland*, 10.

76. MacBride to de Valera, 23 May 1954 (D/T S 15655, National Archives of Ireland, Dublin).

77. Anne Dolan, *Commemorating the Irish Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 201.

Ultimately, the impact of any civil war on a polity is not direct: it is dependent on the existing political culture and on the institutional rules. Carty poses the question of how a party system could be originated and then perpetuated “without being anchored in the structural division of the social and economic life of the country.”⁷⁸ One answer is that the two sides used civil-war memories and the flexible rules of electoral competition to impose themselves on the electorate, especially in the summer of 1927. On the other hand, since elites always attempt to shape preferences, the question is why these strategies were so successful. Here we move onto a third conception: civil-war politics as the expression of social cleavages. The dichotomization of the political landscape by the elite may have worked with voters, not because bitter civil-war memories were instrumentalized but because it gave expression to the socioeconomic tensions behind the Treaty divide.

5. Civil War Politics as the Expression of Social Cleavages

Although the Civil War was fought over constitutional issues, and while sociological variables do not explain the Treaty split in the Dáil, civil-war politics may have mobilized and polarized voters because they were an expression of social cleavages.⁷⁹ This third conception suggests that it was because the initial elite split came to incorporate a socioeconomic dimension that the two-and-a-half party system acquired deeper roots. This incorporation enabled the civil-war elite to mobilize more people, and by further polarizing them, it gave the Treaty divisions economic substance. While the initial split was indeed superficial, the party system reflected—to some extent at least—the structural characteristics of the society.

Two sociological approaches suggest so: the “centre-periphery” model developed by Stein Rokkan and the “dependency theory” school rooted in neo-Marxist thinking. From the first perspective Richard Sinnott suggests that the emerging party system was shaped

⁷⁸ Carty, *Party and Parish Pump*, 21.

⁷⁹ See Eunan O’Halpin and Mary Staines, “‘Between Two Hells’: The Social, Political, and Military Backgrounds and Motivations of the 121 TDs Who Voted For or Against the Anglo-Irish Treaty in January 1922,” in Weeks and O’Fathartaigh, *The Treaty*, 113–35.

by the “freezing” of party alternatives and electoral alignments around a Rokkan-type center-periphery cleavage in 1918. During the first mass-mobilizing election that year Irish politics was dominated by a center-periphery conflict, with the British government representing the center and Sinn Féin representing the Irish periphery. Most of the voters were voting for the first time, and the allegiances formed in that election would not be temporary. In the future area of the new state, Sinn Féin won seventy of the seventy-five seats contested in 1918. The Civil War, fought between a radically nationalist and a moderately nationalist party, had not involved a radical break in this pattern, since the overriding issue was still the relationship between the center and the periphery. It was a conflict within the nationalist or peripheralist consensus already established, and “far from being unrelated to the 1918 mobilisation and institutionalisation around the centre-periphery issue, it developed from it and in turn reinforced it.”⁸⁰

From this perspective the dominance of two nationalist parties and the weakness of Labour were no surprise. But Sinnott tells us little about civil-war politics other than to suggest that the unresolved national question gave an advantage to two offshoots of Sinn Féin. Yet he suggests that Fianna Fáil became dominant because it was best placed to present itself as the representative of the nationalist consensus established in 1918. Its rival had compromised with the British, and nationalist voters could not form the enduring loyalties that would have enabled the party to remain dominant. In contrast, the anti-Treaty appeal was based on clear-cut positive symbols so that the “freezing of party alternatives was more pronounced on one side of the divide than the other.”⁸¹ But the 1922 election contradicts this argument, since the anti-Treaty republican vote was only 22 per cent, while the pro-Treatyites did well. The latter were better placed to capitalize on the social tensions created by the Treaty split. Richard Sinnott assumes that the divide was simply “Green against Green,” whereas the pro-Treaty elite had believed that the defense of society was at stake in 1922–23.⁸² The anti-Treaty side made much fun of

80. Richard Sinnott, “Interpretations of the Irish Party System,” *European Journal of Political Research* 12 (1984): 289–307.

81. *Ibid.*, 304.

82. Hopkinson, *Green against Green*.

their opponents' desire for class respectability and respect for social hierarchies and eventually put forward a strong economic alternative.⁸³ Ultimately, the rapidity with which the peripheralist consensus broke down in 1922, and the eventual primacy of economic issues over those that symbolized the dependent relationship on Britain, beg the question of whether there was also an internal cleavage at work.

The German scholar Erhard Rumpf suggested that support for the Treaty sides did follow "an east-west gradient" within Ireland of urbanization, prosperity, and Anglicization, with each Treaty party stronger at one end of the slope.⁸⁴ In the "western periphery" the mean first-preference vote for the anti-Treatyites in 1923 was actually over 40 percent, compared to less than 18 percent for the Dublin area.⁸⁵ Michael Hopkinson also suggests that support for the anti-Treatyites reflected economic differences that strengthened the further one went west.⁸⁶ Rumpf attributed this pattern to the fact that the small farmers in the west were "sheltered" from the "worldly pressures" which inclined other parts of the country to take a more practical view.⁸⁷ The regional factor had an electoral dimension. Support for Sinn Féin in 1923 was uniformly strong along the Atlantic seaboard, "historically the poorest, most famine-prone region of the country."⁸⁸ This pattern is shown in Figure 7, which shades in those constituencies with the strongest anti-Treaty support in the August 1923 election. This region was also the area where the emigration of IRA men after the Civil War was most pronounced.⁸⁹

On the one hand, the Civil War was no class war. The anti-Treatyites were more politically radical than the population as a whole, and the unions and the Labour Party did not support their military campaign against the Free State. Yet Fianna Fáil would establish a broader base of support than in 1922, and Garvin shows that the party's efforts to induce industrial enterprises (which naturally located in

83. Foster, *Irish Civil War and Society*, 22–52.

84. Erhard Rumpf, *Nationalism and Socialism in Twentieth-Century Ireland*, trans. A. C. Hepburn (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1977).

85. Kissane, *Explaining Irish Democracy*, 155.

86. Michael Hopkinson, "The Civil War from the Pro-Treaty Perspective," *The Sword* 20:82 (1997): 287–92.

87. Rumpf, *Nationalism and Socialism*, 62.

88. Foster, *Irish Civil War and Society*, 175.

89. *Ibid.*, 122.

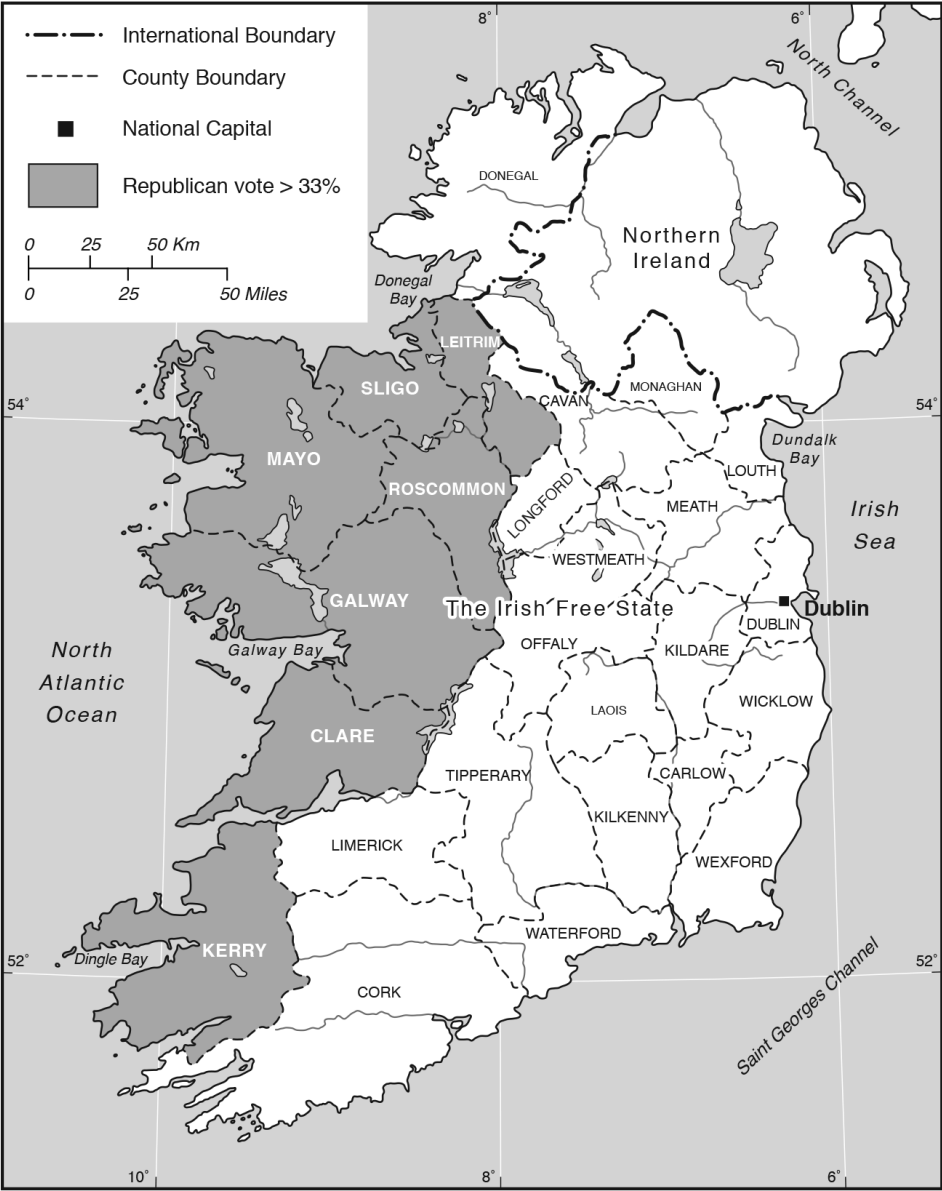


FIGURE 7: Regional Pattern of August 1923 General Election. From Bill Kissane, ed., *After Civil War: Division, Reconstruction, and Reconciliation in Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 46. Data source: Michael Gallagher, *Irish Elections, 1922–1944: Results and Analysis* (Limerick: PSAI Press, 1993).

the east and near Dublin) to move westward, along with Fianna Fáil's social-welfare schemes and its loyalty to the Irish language, appealed to rural Irish voters.⁹⁰ In 1927 Cosgrave had remarked that Fianna Fáil's interest in social issues "meant nothing to you until your own political extinction was at hand."⁹¹ Moreover, Labour would not be able to capitalize on these grievances when serious depression took hold during the mid-1920s. After the 1923 election Labour reflected that if it wanted to establish "a Workers' Republic," then it had to appeal to the rural poor in the west, but this was where Sinn Féin was already strong.⁹² As a result of this difference, economic grievances would be expressed within the idiom of civil-war politics.

Yet the gradient did not prevent the two larger parties from being national parties. The support base of early Cumann nGaedheal had cut across class boundaries and was also strong in peripheral areas such as north Connacht. Moreover, Sinn Féin's 1923 vote had actually less of a regional profile than in 1922, and it averaged more than 23 percent in all regions outside Dublin. Its rapid electoral growth in the center of the country after June 1927 could not have been as strong if it had mobilized people around a center-periphery cleavage.⁹³ Fianna Fáil saw itself as a national party, and its support grew in the late 1930s when it became more conservative. Its involvement in parliamentary politics had quickly drawn it further from its radical program of 1927 and from its western support base.⁹⁴

For Andrew Orridge the crucial variable was the extent of Ireland's economic dependence on Britain: civil-war politics expressed a cleavage between those who benefited from the links with the metro-pole and those who did not.⁹⁵ After 1922 Cumann na nGaedheal had followed orthodox liberal economic policies based on low taxes,

90. Tom Garvin, "Political Cleavages, Party Politics, and Urbanisation in Ireland: The Case of the Periphery-Dominated Centre," *European Journal of Political Research* 2:4 (1974): 307-27.

91. *Irish Times*, 1 Sept. 1927.

92. Kissane, *Explaining Irish Democracy*, 74.

93. Sinnott, "Interpretations of the Irish Party System."

94. David Kirby, "Nationalism and National Identity in the New States of Europe: The Examples of Austria, Finland, and Ireland," in *European Unity in Context: The Interwar Years*, ed. P.M.R. Stirk (London and New York: Pinter, 1989), 110-24.

95. Andrew Orridge, "The Blueshirts and 'the Economic War': A Study of Ireland in the Context of Dependency Theory," *Political Studies* 31:3 (1983): 354.

balanced budgets, and product specialization for export. With over 50 percent of males employed in agriculture in 1929, and with just over a third of national income coming from agricultural exports, free trade with Britain and the Commonwealth made sense.⁹⁶ But electoral support for the pro-Treaty position would decline as protectionism gained in appeal. Orridge notes the decline in voting strength (from 21.1 percent of valid preferences in 1923 to 14.1 percent in 1933) of two pro-metropolitan interests—first, the Independents (many of them Protestant and based mainly in Dublin and Ulster), and then the Farmers' Party and Centre Party, which were supported by large farmers dependent on trade with Britain.⁹⁷

Cumann na nGaedheal's attempt to rationalize agriculture by standardizing agricultural produce, establishing centralized credit agencies, and transferring ownership of the grazing ranches to smaller farmers under the Land Act of 1923 was seen by the left as a means of squeezing out smallholders and labourers from the national economy, and Fianna Fáil made much of the plight of the small farmers and the landless during the depression. In 1927 de Valera declared:

The policy of Fianna Fáil was the old one of Sinn Féin—to make themselves self-supporting and to establish industries in the towns and provide employment for the people. Ireland was not an agricultural country in the proper sense of the word. Its population at present consisted of bullocks instead of human beings. The poor people were to be found in the bogs eking out a living while the richest land was devoted to the bullock, which showed that in the past the country was not governed in the interests of the people of the country, but in the interests of those across the Channel.⁹⁸

The polarization inherent in civil-war politics was reignited by Fianna Fáil's turn to the left. Protectionism benefited the small farmers who gained from Fianna Fáil's subsidization of tillage farming, the urban working class who benefited from the growth in industrial employment, and the inchoate industrial class who could benefit from new protected industries. There was also a housing drive that saw more than 50,000 new homes built under state-aided schemes

96. *Ibid.*, 353.

97. *Ibid.*, 357.

98. *Irish Times*, 11 Feb. 1932.

between 1931 and 1937.⁹⁹ The party went about altering the relative social and economic standing of different groups in order to strengthen its support among particular categories of voters. During the 1933 election campaign a former Cumann na nGaedheal minister, John Marcus O'Sullivan, complained of the ruling tactic of "appealing to class prejudices" in order to retain power.¹⁰⁰ On the other hand, while its early law-and-order appeal had cut across classes, opposition to protectionism left Fine Gael with a narrower voter base. A government minister, James Joseph Walsh, had complained in 1927 that the party had "gone over to the most reactionary elements of the state," and warned that a government could not depend on the votes of "ranchers and importers" and at the same time develop industry and agriculture.¹⁰¹ In 1932 a Farmers' and Ratepayers' Party was formed, and after becoming the Centre Party in January 1933, it soon won 9.1 percent of first-preference votes in a general election. It championed the cause of farmers suffering from the "economic war" and became part of Fine Gael in September of that year.¹⁰²

The third conception of civil war politics is less "top-down" than the preference-shaping model. This model assumes that there are considerable advantages to incumbency, but the reliance of Cumann na nGaedheal on preference-shaping strategies did not prevent Fianna Fáil from coming to power. The preference-shaping model need not imply that "partisan uses of state power are always successful in terms of delivering electoral victory for the party which initiated them," and the economic dimension to the Treaty split helps to explain why this was the case in Ireland.¹⁰³ In 1932 Fianna Fáil complained that the government were not fighting the election on economic issues, but depending more on winning the election "by frightening the people." The conception of "civil war politics as the expression of social cleavages" suggests that for the Treaty split to become the structural pivot of the party system, some economic polarization had to take place. The rise in turnout occurred during a world depression, and the

99. Dermot Keogh and Andrew McCarthy, *The Making of the Irish Constitution 1937: Bunreacht na hÉireann* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2007), 60.

100. LA 60/103 (1), John Marcus O' Sullivan Papers (University College Dublin Archives).

101. Quoted in Kissane, *Politics of the Irish Civil War*, 170.

102. Orridge, "Blueshirts and the Economic War," 366.

103. Dunleavy, *Democracy, Bureaucracy, and Public Choice*, 124.

renewed polarization reflected what was now at stake materially with the Treaty. Once Fianna Fáil was formed, willing to enter the Dáil, and ready to implement radical changes, the continued polarization may simply have reflected the threat posed to the status quo. The Great Depression made this issue critical, and many voted for Fianna Fáil in 1932–33 because they thought that they would get houses, land, or steady employment. The *Irish Times* had articulated this economic logic of civil-war politics clearly in 1927:

If Mr. Cosgrave wins, the state will be secure for the next four or five years. Its credits will be maintained; its finances will be established on a sound footing; farmers and traders will have a chance to thrive. If Mr. de Valera wins, everything will go back to the melting-pot. He proposes to smash the Treaty settlement, to quarrel with his country's best customer, and having thus prostrated the Free State farmer, to give him the coup de grace of protective tariffs on a grand scale.¹⁰⁴

That there had been an economic dimension to the split in 1922 had also been suggested by O'Higgins's remark that year that the Treaty "confers . . . very great benefits, very great advantages, and very great opportunities on the Irish people, and I would not declare off-hand that it was not worth civil war."¹⁰⁵ The Treaty split may not have reflected sociological factors, but the cost of rejecting it had obvious economic ramifications, which became crucial once an anti-Treaty government became conceivable.

The stronger version of the third conception suggests that civil-war politics rested on social "cleavages" that were both fixed and identifiable. The more plausible version accepts that the polarization was an expression of socioeconomic tensions, but only for a time. In general, nationalist grievances (such as the oath of allegiance) are most powerful when reinforced by economic ones (such as the land annuities). Hence Fianna Fáil's entry into the Dáil in 1927 resulted in the "renewal" of the initial intranationalist cleavage rather than in a supplanting of that cleavage by a new one.¹⁰⁶ For this reason economic grievances were articulated in the idiom of civil-war (not

104. *Irish Times*, 12 Sept. 1927

105. *Dáil Debates*, vol. S2, no. 13 (19 May 1922), <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1922-05-19/4>.

106. Mair, *Changing Irish Party System*, 47.

class) politics and in a context where it was already hard to separate political from economic grievances in the Free State. The issues of jobs, economic resources, and access to patronage had already embittered civil-war politics, stoking an ongoing “cold war” between the two sides in peacetime.¹⁰⁷ This cold war would soon end, but it explains much about the period under review.

Civil-war politics is “an asymmetric counter concept” which assumes that the standard form of party politics is class politics, and that the Irish system is therefore a deviant case. Such concepts tend to produce only negative stereotypes. One example is John Whyte’s thesis of “politics without social bases.”¹⁰⁸ While the anti-Treaty movement during the Civil War did not embrace the socialist agenda outlined by Liam Mellows’s “prison notes,” Fianna Fáil were able to gain an electoral majority only by adopting policies which appealed to the poor. It was this turn to the left, not to the Treaty, that brought them to power. Socialists have nevertheless tended to use the concept of civil-war politics disparagingly. Noel Browne believed that the voters were “sick and tired” of hearing about 1916 and 1922, and he also blamed de Valera for forcing civil war on the country.¹⁰⁹ Yet rather than finding fault with Labour, Browne believed that an alternative system was needed, a more ideological form of politics that would structure the Irish system along western European lines.¹¹⁰ The reality is that while the Irish party system was not “structured” along such lines, neither was it “politics without social bases.” The truth is somewhere in-between. The uncomfortable lesson for the Irish left is that a radical economic alternative has been successfully presented to the Irish electorate only when a very nationalist party has done so.

6. Civil War Politics and Democratic Stability

This analysis of the three conceptions has shed some light on the phenomenon of elite dominance in Ireland. If the issues at the heart

107. Foster, *Irish Civil War and Society*, 174.

108. J. H. Whyte, “Ireland: Politics without Social Bases,” in *Electoral Behaviour: A Comparative Handbook*, ed. Richard Rose (New York and London: Free Press, 1974), 619–51.

109. John Horgan, *Noel Browne: Passionate Outsider* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2000), 53.

110. *Ibid.*, 228.

of the Treaty split were national (not “sectional”), the public was encouraged to vote for the two sides that had defended them in 1922–23. The preference-shaping approach explains the failure of the third-party challenge and points to the electoral dividend that would fall to those who could provide strong government. The social-cleavage approach shows how the conflict broadened in the late 1920s, but the fragmented pattern of social conflicts also allowed the civil-war elite to “stand above” them and to retain its autonomy. So all three conceptions say something about elite dominance.

Yet since the elite was shaping as much as reflecting the voters’ preferences, the second conception explains most about this elite dominance. The repeated dissolutions of the Dáil were an example of joint institutional manipulation and had the effect of strengthening the government’s position among the voters as well as of reinforcing the bipolar nature of political competition. In this regard the process of government formation was central to the development of the party system, since the smaller parties were rendered irrelevant in the second elections, as shown by their dramatic decline in the summer of 1927. This aspect of the preference-shaping model is probably the most crucial factor in explaining the emergence of the Irish party system from the Civil War.

Yet if the elite could manage the context in which electoral politics took place, why did the elections not continue to polarize and prevent the consolidation of a democratic system? Civil-war politics made elections “zero sum” in two ways: increases in the vote share of the larger parties automatically meant a loss for the smaller parties, and voters were forced to choose between the two parties with the most emotion to divide them. And the polarization continued: the 1933 election was the most tense in the history of the state, yet depolarization took hold in the 1930s. One explanation is that party competition led to a twin process of “fusion and elimination.” Since the larger parties shared common roots in Sinn Féin, their electoral dominance produced a competitive form of fusion rather than the articulation of two mutually exclusive visions of the nation. This fusion made civil-war politics less zero sum, and meant that the “elimination” of third-party alternatives was less problematic. Another reason was the importance attributed to the issue of security. Elections held after civil war can be incompatible with state-building if they weaken

central authority and create an atmosphere of insecurity. Irish elections did the opposite: all but one of the eight held between 1922 and 1938 were won by incumbents. The public, in other words, showed a consistent preference for strong central authority. Initially, this was an advantage for Cumann na nGaedheal, but the onset of depression deprived the party of it. Once the voters were assured that a Fianna Fáil government would not jeopardize their security, voting behavior changed.

A distinctive characteristic of the colonial state in Ireland had also been the emphasis on security, which was strongly present in the major legislative events of the 1920s and the 1930s. Indeed, the ruthless way in which the first Cosgrave administrations stamped out violence contrasts sharply with their colonial predecessors.¹¹¹ After 1932, with regard to strong majority rule, weak local government, and emergency legislation, there was substantial continuity. This continuity is significant because the “competitive elitist” model of democracy suggests that intense adversarial competition can be compatible with long-term democratic stability only if there is an underlying consensus between the main parties.¹¹² Indeed, the Irish case is a good example of how such a consensus was reestablished after the Civil War. Aside from Fine Gael’s support for Fianna Fáil’s Offences against the State Act in March 1939, the 1937 constitution had made explicit many of the values on Catholic social teaching reflected in Cumann na nGaedheal’s legislation while in office. Crucial to this emerging consensus was also the Anglo-Irish Trade Agreement signed on 25 April 1938. This pact ended the “economic war” and heralded a joint commitment to an Irish economy consisting of a protected industrial sector combined with a dominant cattle-exporting agriculture closely linked to Britain by trade, banking, and currency.¹¹³

This convergence raises another fundamental question about civil-war politics. If elections ultimately brought the two sides closer together, how can a concept that implies polarization explain this convergence? On the one hand, “civil-war politics” suggests that the

111. T. Mulhall, *The State and Agrarian Reform: The Case of Ireland, 1800–1940* (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1993).

112. Held, *Models of Democracy*, 150.

113. Mary E. Daly, *Industrial Development and Irish National Identity, 1922–1939* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 171.

bitterness of 1922–23 was converted into the currency of party politics. Yet the zero-sum nature of the Treaty split was also converted into the more flexible and conciliatory currency of parliamentary politics. Civil-war politics clearly had its limits. One reason was the ability of the two parties to defend the prerogatives of the state while at the same time not confusing its interests with those of their respective political organizations. The Cumann na nGaedheal governments chose symbols to represent the Irish state, such as the tricolour, that were not identified with their political party, preferring instead to rely on a broad sense of cultural nationalism to foster nation-building.¹¹⁴ Their efforts to officially commemorate their civil-war victory and thus to identify the state with their party were feeble. In 1925 Richard Mulcahy actually responded to a proposal to commemorate the deaths of four Free State soldiers in Wexford by stating that he could not see how Cosgrave as head of a democratic state could put himself in a position of unveiling a monument that would “perpetuate” anything like the fatal ambush “or the other things that it recalls.”¹¹⁵ De Valera also distinguished between state and party interest: in 1959 he advised that the state should continue to use Easter Sunday as a means of commemorating all those who had sacrificed themselves in the struggle for independence, while individual deaths could be commemorated privately.¹¹⁶ Ultimately, the Irish political elite was not as much in thrall to civil-war politics as is commonly believed; the concept is valid mainly for the electoral arena.

This article has involved a consideration of what divided Irish elites and their supporters during the formative years of the state. With the experience of neutrality in the Second World War, the former Sinn Féin elite returned to being a revolutionary cohort united around a set of policies and values with their roots in the Gaelic Revival and the 1916 Rising. The elections of the late 1930s and 1940s produced convergence in place of polarization. And this convergence was compatible with civil-war politics partly because of this elite autonomy. It allowed the emergence over time of a state with a nonpartisan value system. Although the two parties remained bitterly divided over the

114. Ewan Morris, *Our Own Devices: National Symbols and Political Conflict in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2004), 38–68.

115. Dolan, *Commemorating the Irish Civil War*, 122.

116. *Ibid.*, 196.

Treaty, common ground emerged on two issues: first, whatever its flaws, the state they governed was accepted as a legitimate successor to the British one; and second, it was ruled as a neutral entity rather than a partisan resource that would be used against the parliamentary opposition and its supporters.¹¹⁷ As heirs to a revolutionary project going back to 1916, the elite also considered themselves superior to the leaders of the smaller parties and lost little sleep over the decline in female representation after 1921. This autonomy gave them great flexibility when it came to elections and the formation of governments. In this flexibility one can see a basically instrumental approach to electoral politics; linked as these were to some type of Irish state tradition, it was also a question of values.

117. Foster, *Irish Civil War and Society*, 201.