

business in new locations or help companies place orders to Ireland.

For us, developing a successful on-going relationship with the Irish Diaspora requires the development of a coherent Diaspora strategy that has three key ingredients. First, the strategy should recognise that the relationship between Ireland and its Diaspora needs to be reciprocal. The Diaspora should not be seen as a primed resource waiting to be exploited, but rather as a precious resource to be tended, valued and re-energised. Ireland should aim to grow in partnership with the Diaspora for the mutual benefit of each other.

Second, the fostering and maintenance of a sense of Irish-mindedness should be a primary goal not a secondary outcome. Irish-mindedness is a prerequisite for creating a sustainable relationship with the Irish Diaspora – if one does not feel or have affinity to Ireland why would one maintain a relationship with and do work for Ireland?

Third, the role of the state should not be to centrally manage and run the various schemes a Diaspora strategy promotes or to assume the work or mandate of existing or new Diaspora organisations or networks. Rather it should be to guide, facilitate, add-value, co-ordinate across, and help fund schemes, and to maximise the capacities and potential of organisations. In other words, the state and its agencies should help existing networks and organisations, and establish new, light and flexible schemes and networks.

Many countries around the world are putting into place Diaspora strategies. Several of these countries – Australia, Chile, India, Jamaica, Lithuania, New Zealand, Scotland, plus the World Bank – participated in a two day workshop organized by NUI Maynooth, Jan 27-28. They came to Ireland in order to share their experiences of formulating and implementing policy, and to think through new ways for states to engage with and serve their Diaspora.

Interestingly, these countries envy Ireland's relationship with its Diaspora and are keen to learn what Ireland presently does – and it does do some things well, such as incubating Irish business networks, fostering Irish-mindedness by supporting cultural and sporting activity, cultivating philanthropy, and providing overseas welfare assistance. There is no doubt, however, that Ireland can do much more. Our hope is that by learning from best practice elsewhere the Irish government will continue to formulate, develop, and implement a strategy that strengthens our relationship with the Diaspora – a strategy that will be the envy of the rest of the world.

Their working paper outlining a potential Diaspora strategy for Ireland can be accessed at: http://www.nuim.ie/nirsa/research/documents/WP37_BoyleandKitchin.pdf

A Geographer's View of the 2009 Local Elections

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Local elections – i.e. elections to City or County Councils and to Town and Urban District Councils – will take place on Friday 5th June. While restrictions (related to citizenship) prevent some people from voting in other types of elections (e.g. only Irish and UK nationals can vote in general elections), all adult (aged 18, and over) residents of the Republic of Ireland are allowed to vote in local elections. Thus, for these elections one can actually study the voting behaviour (at least in terms of turnout propensity) of non-Irish (and non-UK) nationals. But the much wider range of candidates, local issues, and contextual effects involved also make local elections a fascinating area of study. There are a number of issues associated with the upcoming local election contests that would be of interest to geographers:

- To what extent will new electoral boundaries, set in place by the two Electoral Areas committees in June 2008, impact on the electoral prospects of candidates and parties in this election?

- How are the candidate selection approaches of different parties shaped by geographical concerns? And do these candidate selections adequately reflect the (changing) socio-economic, gender and ethnic compositions of the constituencies that these parties are contesting?
- How do political parties and election candidates use geography to organise their campaigns and mobilise their votes?
- How do candidates use local newspapers and other local media, and, in turn, what impact might the local media have on the election contest and results?
- Will there be geographical differences in terms of party support and turnout propensity at a national level and also at a local level, and to also ask the question (should notable place differences be found in terms of support and turnout patterns); what factors are influencing voting behaviour in local elections? These different aspects will be briefly teased out in this short article.

Changing electoral boundaries: Electoral boundary reports were produced by two Electoral Area Committees – one for Dublin and the cities and the other covering the rest of the country – in June 2008. The function of these reports was to detail the changes that are being made to local election constituency (*local electoral area*) boundaries, changes that will come into force at the next local elections in June 2009. The degree of the boundary changes varies from county to county; in some cases changes were few and far between (e.g. Wicklow) while changes tended to be more extensive for some other local authority areas (e.g. Dublin City).

These changes may impact on candidates' chances of winning or holding seats in the council elections, and it is possible that some political parties may be advantaged or adversely affected by these changes. The linkage between electoral boundaries and candidates' prospects of electoral success may be related to the '*friends and neighbours*' effect, which claims that candidates will tend to win their largest vote share in their home area, with their percentage share of the vote tend to decline as they move from their home bases as tantamount to a distance-decay effect. Should electoral boundaries change so as to cut through their local support base, a candidate's prospects of winning a seat will be seriously compromised, as indeed happened in last year's general election when Donie Cassidy lost his Dáil seat after a significant part of his local support base in north-east Westmeath was moved into the neighbouring Meath West constituency.

For political parties, as well as candidate concerns, the size of constituencies (in terms of the number of seats per constituency) concerns them, particularly smaller political parties such as Sinn Féin and the Green Party. The smaller political parties, who tend to win smaller percentage shares of the vote than Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael do, tend to struggle in three-seat constituencies where 25% of the vote is required to reach the quota. As a result, the smaller parties prefer to contest larger constituencies, or electoral areas, and especially seven-seat electoral areas where a 12.5% share of the vote is sufficient to reach the quota. Notably, for the 2009 local elections, given a change in the terms of reference set for the two different electoral area committees, three-seat electoral areas have been largely removed, with only a few exceptions (Dingle, Bandon Baltinglass and electoral areas) where 'exceptional circumstances' dictate that electoral areas remain as three-seat entities.

Candidate selection and campaigning strategies: Geography generally has a bearing on the candidate selection strategies of political parties in constituencies where they are running more than one candidate; e.g. Fianna Fáil in practically all cases, Fine Gael in most cases, and Labour and Sinn Féin in their stronger areas. A key concern of these parties with the candidate selection process is to choose people from different areas within a constituency to ensure an even spread of the party vote across the constituency, otherwise the party vote may spike in areas where they have a number of local candidates running but will collapse in those areas where there is no local party candidate competing. The geographical dimension also shaped campaigning styles; parties

tend to divide up electoral areas between its candidates for campaigning purposes with each of the canvassing areas (or bailiwicks) assigned to the candidates being focused on their home base. Geography also offers a useful framework for assessing the inclusiveness of party's candidate selection processes, to assessing the degree to which females, non-Irish nationals and marginalised groups can win a place on a political party's candidate slate. In relation to the gender issue, a review of recent candidate selection trends show that females are less likely than males to be selected as local election candidates, though female participation levels have increased over past local elections, increasing from 11.0% in 1985 to 14.0% in 1991, 15.6% in 1999 and 18.1% in 2004. There are significant differences between different regions in Ireland, however, in terms of the relative success of females in being selected by parties to run in local (and other types of) elections, with females being more likely to be selected as election candidates in Dublin and the more urban constituencies. In 2004, 25.9% of candidates in urban (city council) constituencies were females as against 15.0% in the more rural (county council constituencies); furthermore females accounted for 27.3% of candidates in Dublin, 16.9% in the rest of Leinster, 15.9% in Munster and 16.4% in Connacht-Ulster.

Local elections and the local media: Another areas of interest to geographers related to the degree to which the local media (local radio and local newspapers) might have had on the election contest in certain counties. Areas to look at here would be the degree of coverage that local media gives to local election candidates and local election issues, whether it favours certain parties or candidates, and whether it focuses more on the candidates and issues relevant to certain parts of the county. Given the fact that the local media tends to be more influential in rural Ireland, local newspapers and radio probably have a relatively limited impact in the Dublin region. By contrast, this will prove to be a particularly interesting study area if focused on counties that have two, or more, different local newspapers as well as a local radio station.

Geographies of voter turnout and candidate/party support: Electoral geographers add a different dimension to electoral studies in terms of offering a spatial dimension to studies of electoral behaviour; identifying differences in support and voter turnout levels between different areas and also accounting for these. The spatial approach also allows for voting behaviour to be understood with reference to the local contexts that voting decisions are made in, as expressed in terms of the 'neighbourhood concept'. With reference to geographies of support, these may be studied at the national levels (in terms of support patterns for different political parties) or at the sub-constituency level (in terms of support levels for individual candidates, as identified by studies of tally figures).

Studies of previous turnout patterns, from a geographical perspective, will point to notable urban-rural cleavage, with turnout levels generally tending to be higher in rural Ireland than in the cities and their immediate commuting hinterlands. This was particularly notable in the 1999 local elections, wherein the average turnout level for Dublin fell to an unprecedented low level of 36%, significantly lower than for the national average for that election. However, significant turnout increases in urban Ireland for the following (and most recent) local elections saw a narrowing of the urban-rural turnout differences largely due to significant turnout increases in Dublin (which experienced a 17% increase in its percentage turnout level) and other urban areas, including Waterford City.

Support patterns for local elections at a national level generally tend to reflect general election support patterns for the different political parties. Thus, just as in general elections, Sinn Féin strongest support areas will tend to be located in Border and urban working class areas, whereas urban middle class areas (particularly in suburban parts of Dublin) offer the main support bases for the Green Party. This also proves to be the case with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, although the stronger 'personality politics' dimension associated with local elections can lead to significant differences in these parties' support levels even within counties, wherein a strong election 'ticket' with locally popular candidates can increase party support levels in one electoral area while a weaker candidate slate can see low party support levels in a neighbouring constituency.