



PR voting system makes small sectoral interests too powerful

This week we saw more evidence of how the sensitive voting system dictates government policy and threatens to damage our economic prospects, writes **Marc Coleman**, Economics Editor

Dithering, pandering to vested interest groups and looking after local constituents at the national expense – just some of the accusations thrown at politicians in relation to a range of issues from decentralisation to delays in making a decision on extending Dublin airport. But are they really to blame? Some 80 years after gaining independence, the time may have come to look at our electoral system as a chief suspect for many of our policy ills.

Our system of multi-seat transferable voting has a seismographic quality. It can take minor tremors in public opinion and turn them into significant changes in Dáil representation. More than any other feature of our political system, this Proportional Representation (PR) voting gives tremendous advantage to economic interests which are prepared to act and lobby in unison, trading their votes in return for favourable government policy decisions.

To illustrate the extreme sensitivity of the system, consider Fianna Fáil's share of votes and Dáil seats at the last election. With 41 per cent of the vote Fianna Fáil was, pro rata, entitled to about 68 seats in the Dáil. The vagaries of the single transferable vote gave it 81 – a 13-seat bonus. But PR giveth and PR taketh away. A significant change in transfer patterns at the next election could see Fianna Fáil retain the same share of the first preference vote, but lose around seven or eight seats.

Another example is the 1987 election result for the constituency of Dublin North Central. With just

24 per cent of the first preference vote – less than one quarter of total votes – favourable transfers allowed Fine Gael to secure two seats out of four – one half of total seats. A sliver of a change in preferences in that election would have given Fianna Fáil the third seat.

In such a system any group that can swing votes in return for policy favours becomes king. Voters who do not “trade” their votes in this way can get ignored. If the latter type of voter are the majority, then minority interests can prevail.

Those minority interests can be locally or sectorally defined. This week's anger in Fianna Fáil over the Taoiseach's decision not to give a junior ministry to Seán Haughey is a prime example of local constituency interests staking a claim to a position of power.

Opposition to public sector reform by some unions is a more sectoral case. Both involve minorities of voters who are intensely affected by a policy measure. The majority interest may be served by doing the opposite of what the minority wants. The majority interest is usually widely spread and weakly felt, so that voters who benefit will not alter their vote accordingly. The more intensely affected – and better organised – minority will win the day.

That, at least, is the case under our present electoral system because of its extreme sensitivity. Like all human beings, politicians are averse to job loss and in Ireland's voting system every vote can count right down to the whim of a transfer.

Ireland's PR system has often been

held up in a positive light in contrast with the “first past the post” system in the UK. This system has allowed both Tory and Labour governments to preserve strong working majorities in parliament in spite of pushing through tough and unpopular reforms. A British government, whatever its colour, is more able to shrug off the effect of a one or two percentage point loss in support and still get re-elected.

But the British system is a poor model for Ireland. It represents the other extreme of insensitivity. The ability of Margaret Thatcher to base her majority on support in southern England caused severe long-term damage to Britain's regional balance and cohesion. And however abused it has become more recently, in the 1980s and early 1990s social partnership in Ireland gave organised labour an input into government policy that preserved policy stability and cohesion, an input made politically necessary by our PR system.

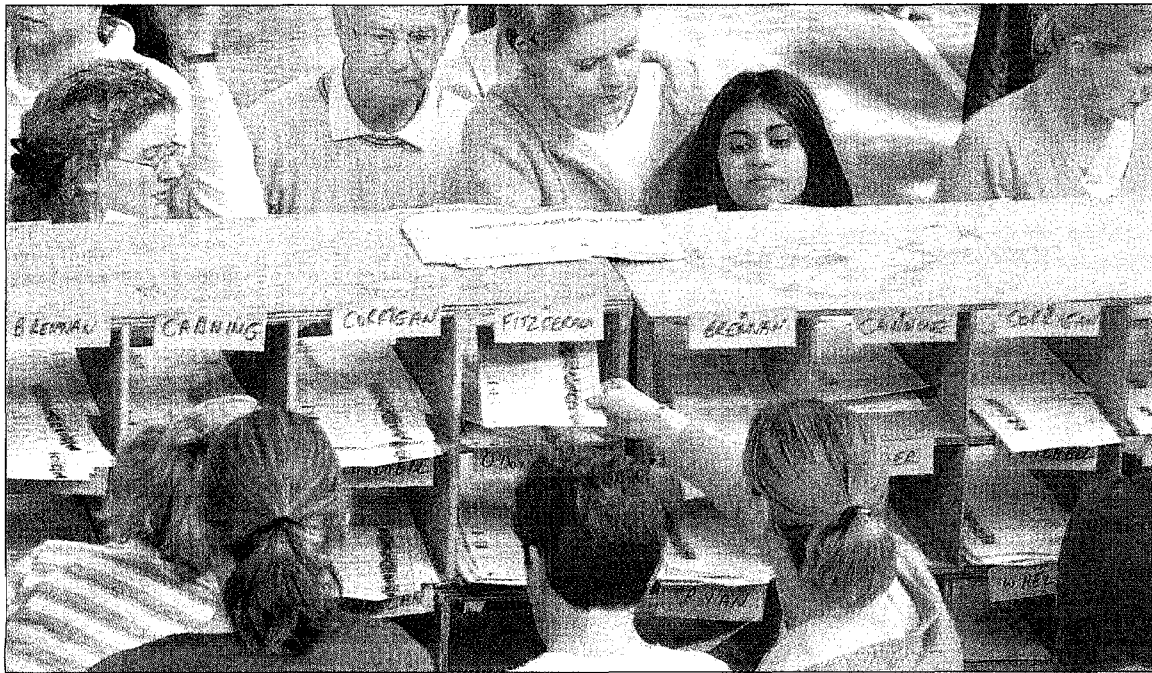
A compromise is available. Both Germany and the Netherlands have systems of electoral representation that are based on proportionality, but avoid manipulation by tiny minorities. In Germany, political parties must obtain 5 per cent of the national vote before they can be represented in the Bundestag. Unlike Ireland, a strong system of local government in Germany reduces the need for the Bundestag to represent local interests. And whereas one half of its members are directly selected by voters, the remainder are selected by the parties themselves, distributed according to the share of votes

received by that party. The Dutch system is similarly insulated against local pressures affecting national politics, while having an effective local government system to channel those pressures in a more appropriate way.

In their paper, *A Design for Democracy*, John Roden, Donal de Buitléir and Donal Ó Brocháin link present dissatisfaction with our Government directly to dysfunction of policy-making structures. In a more recent ESRI paper, Dr Frank Barry of UCD identifies our PR system as a source of poor land planning, high property prices and, by extension, as a fundamental threat to our economy's competitiveness. But this area is just one of many affected by how PR currently works. The neglect of the Hanly report, the implementation of civil service decentralisation, the erosion

of the spatial strategy and the many problems with transport and planning policy can also be traced to this problem.

Long-term damage is being done to the political system as a result: if core voters realise that minority groups are getting more attention than their relative share of the electorate merits, they may decide that – as the saying goes – “If you can't beat them, join them”. Successive polls have shown steady decline in core voters for the main political parties. Independent TDs focused on a narrower range of issues have grown in number. In the absence of electoral reform, policy-making threatens to degenerate further into a swamp of local and sectoral interest bargaining, with the national interest quietly forgotten.



Counting the votes: the PR system gives tremendous advantage to economic interests which are prepared to act and lobby in unison.
Photograph: Frank Miller