Editorial
Political reform, including the replacement of PR STV with an electoral system that encourages more nationally-focused behaviour by parliamentarians, was high on the agenda during the recent electoral campaign. The Government plans to establish a Constitutional Convention to review the electoral system. This will be the first time ordinary citizens have a direct say in electoral reform.

This Spotlight considers the arguments for and against the proposition that changing the electoral system can end excessive localism in Irish politics. In doing so, it aims to connect Members of the Houses with the findings of Irish political scientists on this topic. The potential impact of alternative electoral systems is considered as are other measures which may reduce the demand for locally-focused TDs.

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Introduction

The need for political reform dominated the 2011 general election campaign in an unprecedented way. High on the reform agenda was the perceived failure of Ireland’s political institutions, including parliament, to play a role in averting the economic and financial crisis.

The localism that defines Irish politics is often blamed for weaknesses in the Irish parliament. It is argued that a greater focus by parliamentarians on national policy issues would better enable them to collectively hold the government to account and to play an active role in the legislative process.\(^1\)

Some, including many political parties and political commentators,\(^2\) point to the electoral system as the key cause of excessive localism. Others, including many Irish political scientists, argue that changing the electoral system will not fix the problem of excessive localism.\(^3\)

A recent survey found that Members of the 30\(^{th}\) Dáil (2010)\(^4\) most valued PR STV for the strong voter-representative link and the proportionality of the result. Members were least satisfied with the competition that PR STV promotes between candidates of the same party (intra-party competition). This factor is considered to encourage localism in politics.

Following its review of the electoral system against a number of criteria, including the balance of constituency versus legislative work, the Joint Committee on the Constitution (JCC 30\(^{th}\)Dáil) favoured retaining it.\(^5\) However, it recommended that the process of electoral reform be depoliticised and a Citizens’ Assembly be established to examine the performance of PR STV.

This Spotlight assesses the case for changing the electoral system on the basis that the electoral system causes excessive localism in Irish politics.

Arguments to change from PR STV

The electoral system affects the type and level of interaction between politicians and constituents. PR STV includes the two features together predicted to encourage candidates to cultivate a personal vote through constituency-focused work. This is why some commentators call for a move away from PR STV.

1. PR STV is a candidate-focused electoral system. There is evidence that candidate-focused systems lead to higher levels of constituency work than party-centred electoral systems.\(^6\)

Most electoral systems (see Table 1), with the exception of a closed-list PR system, give voters some influence over which candidates will take party seats. However, PR STV is the most candidate-focused electoral system as voters not only select their preferred candidate but can express preferences for all candidates regardless of party.

2. PR STV encourages intra-party competition. While the plurality system promotes competition between candidates from different parties, and most preferential list systems promote competition between members of the same party, only PR STV\(^7\) promotes both

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\(^1\) For example, the Joint Committee on the Constitution, (JCC) 2010, Third Report, pp. 22.


\(^4\) Survey was conducted by Trinity College for the JCC, 2010 op cit.

\(^5\) JCC (2010) Fourth Report


\(^7\) And very open-list systems such as Switzerland.
inter- and intra-party competition between candidates.

Where voters can express a preference between candidates of the same party, it is predicted that candidates strive in an individualistic fashion to enhance their personal reputation. Personal reputations tend to be built on constituency record as candidates from the same party have identical positions on national policy.

This incentive to focus on local constituency issues above national issues may have further negative consequences:

- nationally-minded individuals are deterred from entering politics,
- poor national planning as legislators clamour to deliver services to their own areas at the expense of national planning.

The overall consequence is a parliament, weakened by its members’ lack of focus on national issues, and thereby unable to fully hold the government to account.

On this basis, it is argued, that PR STV be replaced with an electoral system that reduces the need for candidates to cultivate a personal, locally-based, vote. A mixed-member proportional (MMP) system, along the lines of the German or New Zealand electoral systems, is the system most commonly advocated.

### Table 1 Electoral systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Single Seat Constituencies</th>
<th>Multi-Seat Constituencies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First Past the Post (FPTP) Plurality</strong></td>
<td><strong>Closed List PR</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The voter is presented with the names of the nominated candidates and votes by choosing one, and only one, of them. The winning candidate is the person who wins the most votes which is not necessarily a majority of the votes. Used in the UK.</td>
<td>Each party presents a list of candidates to the electorate. Voters select the list of one party. The number of seats is allocated to the parties in proportion to their overall constituency vote. Candidates fill seats in the order they appear on the list. Used in Spain and South Africa.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alternative Vote (AV)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Preferential List PR</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The voter ranks the candidates in the order of their choice: 1, 2, 3 etc. For this reason it is also called Preferential Voting. The candidate with an absolute majority wins the seat. If no candidate gets an absolute majority the candidate with the lowest number of votes is eliminated with the votes transferred according to second preferences until one candidate gets an absolute majority. Used in Australia. UK voters rejected a proposal to adopt AV on 5th May 2011 (68% No, 32% Yes).</td>
<td>Voters vote for their party of choice and can then choose between candidates proposed on that party’s list. In some cases, voters select one candidate on the list. In others, they order their preferences. In an open list system voters alone determine which of a party’s candidates are elected. In other preferential list systems the voters’ preferences have to exceed certain limits before they change the order of candidates that appear on the party list. Used in Denmark, Finland, Austria, Poland, Netherlands.</td>
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**Mixed-Member Proportional System (MMP)**

Voters have two votes, one for the party list and one for a constituency candidate. A number of seats are allocated in single members constituencies, using first past the post (generally). The remaining seats are awarded to the parties on the basis of list-PR to ensure that the parties’ seat shares are proportional to the parties’ share of the list vote. In Germany, party lists are regional. In New Zealand, there is a national list.

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8 Appendix J of JCC (2010), *Fourth Report* describes the electoral systems in EU Member States.
9 Crisp Brian F, 2007 ‘Incentives in mixed-member electoral systems’ *Comparative Political Studies* 40,12, p. 1461.
Arguments for retaining PR STV

A number of political scientists question whether PR STV causes the demand for constituency service. It is argued that:

1. Parliamentarians are both local representatives and national legislators and, consequentially, behave as such. Equally high levels of constituency work are undertaken by parliamentarians elected via different electoral systems.

2. There are alternative explanations for the relatively high levels of constituency work in Ireland, including:
   - the absence of accountable and influential local government,
   - poor interface between the public and public administration,
   - certain aspects of Irish political culture,
   - few opportunities in the legislature to influence policy and legislation.

3. There are equally profound problems with the likely alternatives to PR STV. If local accountability is reduced, a clearly-articulated ‘national interest’ to which parliamentarians are accountable is needed. Otherwise there is a danger that instead of representing local constituents parliamentarians would focus on the needs of the party selectorate. ¹⁰

Does PR STV cause localism?

There is evidence that many Irish voters are candidate-focused voters. The Irish National Election Study (INES) found the most important criterion for Irish voters to be the ability of candidates to look after the needs of the local constituency.¹¹

A survey of Members in 2002 and 2007¹² found an electoral gain for candidates with a constituency focus. Members who saw their roles as representing constituency interests, and spent their time accordingly, enjoyed greater electoral success than those who did not.¹³

But it is not possible to determine whether voters’ focus on candidates and constituency issues is caused or facilitated by the electoral system. If voters are conditioned to thinking locally, they might not change this approach even with a different electoral system.

Party is also an important consideration for voters. The INES concluded that personal voting is nested in party voting and that 44% of voters are party centred, 16% have mixed motivations and 42% are candidate centred voters.¹⁴

Is there evidence of intra-party competition? TDs often lose their seats to running mates from their own party. Between 1927 and 1997, for example, 34% of all TDs who suffered defeat at an election and 56% of defeated incumbents in Fianna Fáil were defeated by co-partisans.¹⁵ It is also the case in Malta, where PR STV is used, that incumbents are defeated by members of their own party.¹⁶ In Ireland Ministers have been ousted by non-incumbent or backbench running mates suggesting voter unhappiness with their local performance rather than their party’s performance nationally.

There is evidence, then, of intra-party competition, but does it affect how TDs balance constituency and national issues?

¹⁰ Shugart points out that there is an implicit assumption made by those advocating closed-list systems that political parties are capable of overcoming the influence of special interests that competition for personal votes breed. Shugart in Gallagher and Mitchell, eds. (2005) The politics of electoral systems’ Oxford, Oxford University Press pp.25-55.

¹¹ Marsh, Sinnott, Garry, Kennedy, (2007) The Irish Voter Manchester University Press, pp. 150-151. 71% of FF voters, 82% of FG voters, 62% of Labour and 37% of Sinn Fein voters cited either ‘personal’ or ‘area’ as the main criteria. On the other hand, only 22% of Green party voters cited ‘personal’ or ‘area’ criteria for voting and 48% cited ‘policy.’

¹² 79 Members were interviewed in 2002 and 75 in 2007. Martin Shane, ‘Electoral rewards for personal vote cultivation under PR STV’ West European Politics Vol. 33 no. 2, 369-380.

¹³ There were three measures of electoral success: the number of first preferences, the proportion of the quota and whether the candidate is elected.


¹⁶ Personal contact with Michael Gallagher.
A survey conducted for the JCC (2010) suggests that it does. Of 19 TDs with no running mates in the 2007 election, the average level of constituency work was 41%. This jumped to 62% for the 28 TDs with two or more running mates.17

The INES found that those who voted for a candidate with no running mate from the same party, were less likely to explain their vote as a ‘personal’ or ‘area-based’ one and more likely to mention ‘national policy.’ The implication of this may be that ‘area’ and ‘personal’ factors are more important for selecting within parties than between them.18 This supports the argument that, when faced with competition from co-partisans, candidates must focus on local issues.

While not disputing the existence of intra-party competition, the strength of its effect on the behaviour of Members has been questioned by Gallagher, Komito and Farrell amongst others. They argue that intra-party competition is implicit in all parties and, regardless of the electoral system, manifests itself in the candidate-selection process.19 And, whether controlled centrally or locally, candidate selectors tend to favour candidates who do a lot of constituency work.20

It is, therefore, not surprising that there are equally high levels of constituency focus in countries using electoral systems which do not explicitly promote intra-party rivalry. The stated focus of parliamentarians on constituency work reported in a survey (2002) undertaken in five countries is presented in Table 2.21 Parliamentarians in the UK, Canada and Australian lower Houses, who are elected to single-member districts by plurality vote, all reported a higher focus on constituency work than TDs (39%). MPs elected to constituencies in New Zealand’s mixed member system reported the highest level of constituency work of all parliamentarians surveyed (71%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Constituency Focus</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Low</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single Member District MPs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian House</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian House</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK Commons</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NZ (Single Member districts)</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-Member District MPs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dáil</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Senate</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NZ (List Members)</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An earlier survey (1997) concerned with newly-elected TDs found that they spent 58% of their time on constituency work compared to 47% spent by their newly-elected UK counterparts.22 TDs were more inclined than MPs to mention ‘re-election’ rather than ‘part of the job’ motives for the constituency work they undertake.

Therefore, parliamentarians everywhere undertake heavy constituency workloads. What about other places that use PR STV?

A survey for the JCC (2010) found that parliamentarians in Malta, the only other country to use PR STV for elections to its lower house, devote 32% of their time to constituency issues compared to the 53% reported by TDs.23

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17 A statistical analysis controlling for other relevant factors was performed and it revealed that it is very unlikely that this association is due to random chance. See Matthew Wall (survey author)’s post on politicalreform.ie, 29 March 2011 http://politicalreform.ie/2011/03/29/what-did-tds-do-and-who-did-they-represent-in-the-previous-dail/#more-2478
20 Gallagher and Komito, op cit. p. 249.
22 Wood and Young, (1997), ‘Comparing constituent activity by junior legislators in Great Britain and Ireland’ Legislative Studies Quarterly 22: 2, p. 221
23 Other variables likely to affect where MPs place their focus differ in Ireland and Malta. In Malta most
Finnish parliamentarians focus primarily on influencing national legislation. Yet they are elected by an open preferential PR system which promotes intra-party competition with strong incentives to look after local constituency concerns. Denmark has a preferential list system yet only 10% of voters gave candidate as a reason for their choice of party. If localism is less obvious in countries with the same, or similar, electoral systems to Ireland, perhaps localism is a demand-led rather than a supply-led phenomenon.

**Other sources of localism**
Political scientists Farrell, Gallagher and Komito consider the type of constituency activity undertaken by TDs (Table 3) and offer more proximate causes of the demand for this constituency service.

1. **Administrative structures**
40% of constituency-based activity is spent dealing with the cases of individual constituents. Citizens use TDs as brokers or ‘welfare officers’ to find out about and obtain their entitlements, to avoid the frustration of red tape, and the general inflexibility of bureaucracy. One TD said that ‘if officials at various levels were more consumer friendly…. we wouldn’t have half the workload we have’. There is evidence of a public demand for assistance in dealing with state bureaucracy from the 972,528 direct queries dealt with by Citizens’ Information Centres in 2009.

2. **Weak local government**
TDs are asked to assist on matters which in other countries are entirely local issues. Were local government to have a stronger role in determining the affairs of local areas this might not be the case.

3. **Parliamentary procedure**
The extent to which cameral rules provide a meaningful national role for parliamentarians also clearly affects behaviour. Heitshusen et al argue that parliamentary procedures in Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and the UK provide few opportunities to claim credit for legislative work leaving members with little control over the reputation of their party and its leaders. In contrast, members can control their personal reputation by establishing a bank of local credit that may be oriented towards local party activists who are influential in selection challenges. The JCC included recommendations for parliamentary reform to address this issue in its final report.

**Different electoral systems**

**Closed List PR**
A closed-list system would reduce the supply of constituency-focused TDs. In closed list systems, candidates are ranked by the party so the incentive to cultivate a

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**Table 3: Type of constituency work**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constituency-based activity</th>
<th>Average % of constituency-based workload</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working on individual constituents’ cases</td>
<td>Ireland 40%  Malta 33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting the constituency/delivering leaflets on your work</td>
<td>Ireland 25%  Malta 28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobbying on behalf of the general interest of your constituency</td>
<td>Ireland 24%  Malta 25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabling PQs on behalf of your constituency/constituents</td>
<td>Ireland 11%  Malta 15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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MPs are part-time and all MPs come from one of two parties. Maltese MPs reported spending 39% on other activities, which is presumed to refer to their day job, and 29% on parliamentary duties. TDs reported spending 38% of time on parliamentary duties. See Joint Committee on the Constitution, (2010) ibid. p. 34.

24 Raunio Tapio, 2005 ‘Finland’ in Gallagher and Mitchell, eds., op cit.

28 See Gallagher and Komito, (2010), op cit. p.251
personal vote is low. Candidates focus on enhancing the reputation of the party. However, the incentive to build a personal profile is not completely eliminated. In small constituencies a short list makes it possible for voters to discern between candidates. This could incentivise candidates to cultivate a local, personal vote to boost party electoral prospects. Such candidates might be rewarded by a higher place on the local party list.

In Ireland where voters are used to expressing preferences for candidates, and where there appears to be demand for a ‘broker’ role, closed lists in small constituencies might not decisively reduce the incentives to cultivate a local vote.

**Preferential List PR**
These systems differ only slightly from PR STV in terms of the inter-party and intra-party competition facing candidates.

In Finland and Denmark, electors first choose their preferred party and then their preferred candidate from that party’s list. Even closer to PR STV is the open-list system in Luxembourg or Switzerland, where voters opt for a party and then express preference votes which can affect all candidates in the constituency.

Adopting the Preferential List System would ensure that servicing the needs of the constituency remained the priority.

**Mixed-Member Proportional Systems (MMP): best of both worlds?**
Many countries adopt MMP systems in order to address the disproportional results from plurality systems.

More relevant to electoral reform in Ireland is that MMP is predicted to deliver both local and national representation. There are two tiers of members – constituency and list MPs. The theory is that the constituency member, elected via first-past-the-post, provides mainly local representation while the list-PR member is nationally focused.

There may be two advantages to the introduction of MMP in Ireland:
1. A distinct group of TDs focused on national issues and not answerable to a geographical constituency;
2. Reduced intra-party competition.

**National TDs**
The evidence that mixed-member systems result in distinct locally and nationally-minded parliamentarians is mixed.

In Germany there is some evidence that parliamentarians elected from regional lists behave differently to those elected in single-member constituencies. Constituency members tend to be members of parliamentary committees which influence regional spending while list-MPs are on committees servicing wider national party constituencies. In terms of how members see their own roles, constituency members are more likely than their list colleagues to say they represent all people in their constituency rather than all people in the country.

Yet parliamentarians elected in distinct ways are not in practice truly independent of each other. Party leaders assign constituency service duties to list members hoping for constituency-seat election or re-election in that area. This puts list members in competition with constituency members.

In New Zealand, parties assign constituency service duties to list-members with a view to increasing general support for the party in a region and thereby securing election for the party candidate in the constituency election. Further, list-candidates were found to look after the concerns of constituents hoping they would be chosen as the constituency

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31 Shugart in Gallagher and Mitchell, 2005, 46-7
34 Crisp, (2007) op cit p.1461
candidate as this was the preferred route to election. 37

In Scotland and Wales, list-MPs do serve constituents, spending 14% of their work time on constituency caseloads, compared to the 21% spent by constituency-MPs.38

Farrell maintains that if MMP were introduced in Ireland there would be competition between constituency and list TDs both of whom would be representing the same sets of voters.39 A voter could contact a constituency TD or a locally-based list-TD with a particular issue.

Intra-party competition
Those recommending MMP for Ireland propose that constituency members be elected to single-member districts using Alternative Vote (AV) 40 with list candidates elected via national party lists.

AV may not actually reduce intra-party competition as TDs would still need to chase preference votes. Larger parties could run multiple candidates to gather enough transfers to get one candidate over the 50% mark.

Even if parties only ran one candidate, there would be intra-party competition in the candidate-selection process which would affect the behaviour of both types of member. If parties use a centralised candidate selection process to pick constituency and list-candidates, all types of members could compete with each other in the local and list selection process. This could lead to an unforeseen consequence of MMP highlighted by independent analysts in New Zealand: an increase in the power of parties at the expense of the local electorate.41

Conclusion
At the heart of the debate about PR STV is a fundamental matter for democracy - the trade off between local and national representation. Referred to as the ‘classic dilemma of representation’, King went so far as to describe the goals of local and national representation as ‘incompatible.’42

The only way to separate local from national is to have an electoral system which severs the geographical connection between voters and representative. Dermot Desmond’s manifesto for political reform (2011) outlines a way to implement this suggestion.43 It is arguable that neither voters nor candidates are ready to sever this link. Nor would it guarantee a reduction in constituency caseloads, only a reduction in regionally-focused lobbying.

There is a danger that an alternative electoral system, including MMP, would change what is liked about PR STV without significantly reducing the local focus and constituency workload of TDs.

The other option is to keep PR STV but to reduce the excesses of localism by addressing the causes of demand for constituency service and taking steps to "increase the opportunities for Irish TDs to represent their constituents in the legislature without having to fix their potholes." 44

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37 Political actors in New Zealand are considering abandoning MMP after 13 years. The Prime Minister has committed to a referendum on MMP to coincide with the next election.

38 Prof Lundberg in oral evidence to the Joint Committee on the Constitution. See JCC, Fourth Report, pp. 67-8. Note that Lundberg’s definition of constituency focus in this instance is less encompassing than other definitions used and alludes to servicing constituents’ individual needs only. In Ireland, the 2010 survey found 21% of TDs’ work to be on constituency case loads (when other constituency-focused tasks are excluded).


43 http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/opinion/2011/0212/1224289635945.html