

What's in a name? Using surnames as data for party research

Party Politics
19(6) 985–997
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DOI: 10.1177/1354068811436032
ppq.sagepub.com


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Abstract

We present a novel method which can be used to show that contemporary party systems may originate much further back than is usually assumed or might be expected – in reality many centuries. Using data on Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, jurisdictions with party systems that differ significantly, one of which poses significant challenges to the universality of many political science theories, we show how using surnames as markers can confirm the obvious explanation for the Northern Ireland party system and then propose a novel explanation for the Irish party system. We suggest that surnames could be an objective way of studying migration patterns and ethnic heritage which may be important in explaining party systems.

Keywords

Cleavages, genetics, Irish politics, party system formation, surnames

Paper submitted 08 April 2010; accepted for publication 12 November 2011

Introduction

Research into political parties and party systems tends to focus almost exclusively on contemporary elections. This is not because the past is not interesting; the most famous

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description of the determinants of party systems is Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) cleavage voting based on revolutions which may have occurred centuries earlier. In their view the key revolutions place since the seventeenth century, shifting resources and preferences, and causing the formation of new groups. Party systems emerged as the interaction of these groups (particularly their elites) led to the formation of coalitions of interests, operating within institutional constraints. Through this prism, the democratization of much of Europe in the twentieth century saw the emergence of new institutional architecture and the ceding of political power to groups hitherto without formal access to power structures, which in turn saw the emergence of modern party systems.

But survey methods, the mainstay of electoral and party research, cannot reliably be used retrospectively even for voting behaviour at prior elections. And if the question goes back even further, other obvious problems exist; we cannot survey the dead. So if historical trends in party behaviour are interesting how can we study these? We suggest a method based on the analysis of surname distributions to see through the 'fog of history'. Genetic research has shown the utility of surnames as a proxy for tracing population movements and measuring migratory history.

We outline how a growing number of scholars in different fields of the social sciences have used surnames as a data source for answering their research questions. We demonstrate their usefulness in two cases: both party systems on the island of Ireland. One, the Republic of Ireland, shows how surname analysis can be used to answer more difficult questions and offer confirming evidence for a novel hypothesis, while the other, Northern Ireland's party system, validates the use of surnames by confirming a well-established pattern.

We argue that the party system in the Republic of Ireland, for so long an anomalous puzzle for comparative political science, can be explained using cleavage structure, but one that is based on population migrations which took place up to 800 years ago. This has a number of implications that are of interest to the broader comparative literature on party politics and uses a new data source and method that will prove useful for study of political movements.

We find that party systems are potentially based on group divisions that are far older and less visible than have hitherto been thought. Our research supports the view that political elites can indeed shape the party system and that party systems are not determined by social factors, but it suggests that the conflicts on which party systems are based, are themselves based on values, which are socially structured. By their nature we would expect cleavages to be durable and it might be difficult to create a cleavage without *any* social basis, even if the social basis is an outgrowth of political activity. Without an underlying social structure, political entrepreneurs' attempts to create new issues to induce competitive divisions would be more easily achieved and ultimately lead to more volatility than we actually observe.

Using surnames

Surnames have been used by geneticists from when Darwin studied the frequency of marriage of first cousins (Jobling, 2001). More recent analyses in the British Isles have established the fidelity of surnames to underlying genetic markers (King and Jobling,

2009; McEvoy and Bradley, 2006). Tracing these markers, namely the Y-chromosome (which, like a surname, is passed through the male line), offers a way to date elite-led population movements (Oppenheimer, 2006: 4 f.). Such studies are now commonly used to study ancient population movements and to verify and disprove theories proposed in archaeology and other disciplines. Because most populations now use hereditary surnames passed through the male line – although there is a great variety in the length of time these have been used – they also offer scientists a way to trace ancient population movements.

Issues such as false designation, false paternity and their patrilineal nature mean surnames are necessarily a crude indicator, but they carry a real signal, and in large populations biases will persist and surnames can be usefully used as an indicator of genetic, ethnic or migratory heritage. As some surnames have multiple potential origins it is often deemed useful to concentrate isonymic analysis – the analysis of names – on surnames with clear origins.

While surname analysis has been common among geneticists and epidemiologists, social scientists have now started to use surnames as data for their research. The large number of surnames means that researchers can use subsets. For example, using rare surnames allows for confidence relating one group at one time with another at a different time. Himmelfarb et al. (1983) used surnames as a way of identifying and sampling groups which are unlikely to be chosen by random or quasi-random sampling. Anthropologists, Dipierri et al. (2005) have used surnames to study inbreeding and social isolation in Argentina. Clark and Cummins (2011) use rare surnames to answer questions on social mobility in the UK. Clark (2010) was able to use surnames to make some interesting findings on the social origins of defendants and victims in Old Bailey trials and used it and data from wills to measure social mobility. Allensina (2011) used surnames to measure nepotism in Italian academia.

We think that there are many further uses for surnames in social science research, and particularly in areas where population movements occurred some time ago. Especially in voting research, where the survey relies on respondents to self-identify factors such as ethnic heritage, surnames might provide a useful alternative measure.

We now outline the Irish party systems, construct our argument for their origins and how we will use surnames to test the hypotheses.

Ireland's party systems

The two party systems on the island of Ireland differ in remarkable ways, not least because one is so obviously based on historical cleavages whereas the other has puzzled political scientists for many decades as it was ‘without social bases’ (Whyte, 1974). Carty (1983: 1) was puzzled by the fact that one found the two main parties ‘heterogeneous in their bases of support, relatively undifferentiated in terms of policy or programme, and remarkably stable in their support levels’. Evidence from expert surveys, opinion polls and candidate surveys all fail to identify strong distinctions between the two traditionally largest parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael (Benoit and Laver, 2003, 2005; Gilland Lutz, 2003).

By contrast, Northern Ireland’s party system is highly polarized with ethnic roots that are well established (Gallagher, 1995). Whyte (1990: 73) could describe as

'extraordinary' the fidelity of the religious groups – based on migrations of Protestants mainly from Scotland and England to Northern Ireland and the 'native' Catholic population – to particular party blocks (Unionist and Nationalist).

We hypothesize that the Republic's party system is based on migrations of Old and New English into Ireland since the twelfth century, a group we speculate is associated with a form of constitutional nationalism which was eventually represented by Fine Gael. The Gaelic population we suggest was associated with a more culturally exclusive and militant nationalism represented by Fianna Fáil (see Byrne and O'Malley (forthcoming) for a discussion). Though these questions of nationalism matter less and less, they were used decisively as recently as the 1997 election (Girvin, 1999: 20 f.).

Irish surnames

Irish surnames have maintained a patrilineal heritage from about the tenth century and hence predate the population movements we want to study. The country possesses a wealth of genealogical knowledge and the ethnic origin of most surnames is known. Genetic studies of Irish surnames corroborate this genealogical information. For example, DNA samples taken from hundreds of Irish men show that two men sharing the same Irish surname are many times more likely (over 30 times on average) to share a genetic marker of common patrilineal ancestry than two random Irish men (McEvoy and Bradley, 2006).

While genetics confirms the general reliability of Irish surnames, we do not believe it is responsible for the transmission of political values and outlooks alongside those surnames. Instead, we argue that family socialization is the causal mechanism. While recent research has shown some evidence of a genetic basis for voting (Fowler et al., 2008), no link of specific parties to genetic heritage has ever been established, and we do not believe a genetic component is necessary, but rather that the mechanism of family socialization is sufficient to explain how different groups pass their distinct political values and outlooks from generation to generation. Given Irish society's long-standing patriarchal nature, where the male head of the household would usually set the political and cultural values of the family, this mode of transmission is a logical mechanism. Transmission by family socialization also means that common scenarios such as false paternity will not break the link between surnames and political values, as they would if it were driven by genetics. The faithfulness of transmission of political outlook will of course itself be attenuated over time but, demonstrating the strength of family socialization right into the modern era, even today Irish parents and children have a high coincidence of party loyalty (Marsh et al., 2008: 72–77).

Our expectation is that in the Republic of Ireland there will be a bias toward Gaelic surnames in Fianna Fáil and a bias in Fine Gael toward Old and New English surnames (which we refer to simply as 'English' surnames). In Northern Ireland we expect a bias toward Gaelic surnames among nationalists and towards English and Scottish surnames among unionist parties.

Surname coding protocol

In order to test if the modern Irish party systems are based on centuries-old population movements we rely on an analysis of the distribution of surnames. Irish surnames predate

the ancient population movements we study and have ethnic information embedded in them. Using genealogical sources, we coded surnames in each dataset as having one or more of the following origins: Gaelic, Old English, New English, Scottish, Welsh, Viking/Norse, French (e.g. Huguenot refugees in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries), Other (names of known origin, but of small frequency, e.g. Jewish families originally from Eastern Europe) and Unknown.

We used *Grenham's Irish Surname* (Grenham, 2003) database as the source for the coding. This was recommended to us by professional genealogists. Where Grenham had no information we used MacLysaght's (1985) book on surname origins. Where surnames had multiple potential origins, names were given multiple codes. So, for instance, politicians with the quite common surname, Kennedy, which has two potential origins (Gaelic and Scottish), were coded for both. For the small number of double-barrelled names we coded both, and where both were in agreement we coded the politician that way otherwise they were coded as Unknown.

At times surnames have been changed for political purposes. So from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries many Gaelic surnames were Anglicized to accommodate their bearers to life under British rule. While in the last century many nationalist politicians with surnames of English origin have Gaelicized their names, Gaelicized and Anglicized versions of surnames were coded to represent their original synonym. By taking the root name we ensure we are not misled by the adaptation of surnames for political/economic purposes.

Data

For the test on the Republic of Ireland the unit of analysis is individual legislators (TDs) in the Irish Lower House, Dáil Éireann. Each individual is counted once (regardless of number of terms served). We coded the origin of the surnames of every TD elected to Dáil Éireann from its foundation in 1919 to the 2007 Irish general election ($N = 1156$; 636 surnames). The data were taken from an Irish electoral database (www.electionsireland.org) and these were cross-checked with Gallagher's (1993, 2009) data. TDs are coded according to the last party they represented. The major surname cohorts in Ireland are the indigenous Gaelic and the Old and New English (referred to as 'English' in this study). Almost all surname origins are known (1144 of 1156 TDs; 99 percent). Nearly three-quarters (857 of 1156 TDs) of the members elected to the parliament bear a surname that is exclusively of either Gaelic or English origin and only TDs with surnames with these exclusive origins feature in our analyses.

For Northern Ireland the unit of analysis is individual candidates in local government elections. We coded the origin of the surnames of every candidate from 1985 to the most recent Northern Ireland local election in 2005. We chose 1985 as our start date as it was the first election at which the four parties that dominate Northern Irish politics all got over 10 percent of the vote. However, the results of our analyses were similar across all six elections, and as many of the same candidates feature in all or many elections, pooling over the 20 years adds little extra data, so instead we focus on presenting the results from a recent election (2005; $N = 919$; 595 surnames). The results are also very similar if we examine just those candidates who were elected (data not shown). The data were

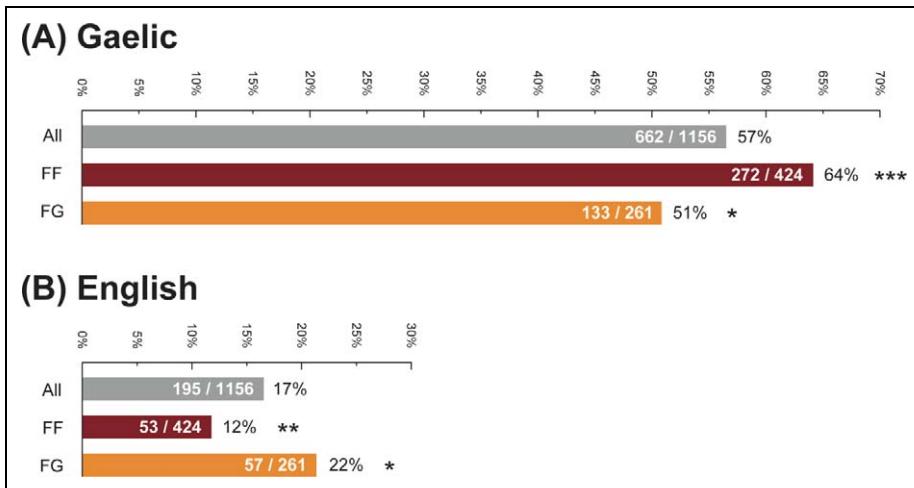


Figure 1. Surname origin levels in political parties in the Republic of Ireland.

Percentage of TDs with surnames whose origin is exclusively (A) Gaelic or (B), English for all TDs (grey bars), Fianna Fáil (red) and Fine Gael (orange). Exact percentages and counts are displayed outside and inside each bar, respectively. Observed values that are significantly different from that expected by chance (calculated from 100,000 simulations) are marked with asterisks (* $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$).

taken from the Northern Ireland Social and Political Archive (www.ark.ac.uk/elections). The vast majority of surname origins are known (871 of 919 candidates; 95 percent). The three major surname cohorts in Northern Ireland are the indigenous Gaelic, the Scottish and the Old and New English (referred to simply as ‘English’ hereafter). Over three-fifths (579 of 919 candidates; 63 percent) of the local government candidates bear a surname that is exclusively of Gaelic, Scottish or English origin. Only politicians with surnames with these exclusive origins feature in our analyses.

Results

In the Republic of Ireland we find significant and previously unappreciated differences in the ethnic background of the representatives of the two main parties. While 64 percent of Fianna Fáil TDs have had surnames of exclusively Gaelic origin (see Figure 1), Fine Gael has the significantly lower level of 51 percent. And only 12 percent of Fianna Fáil TDs have had surnames of English origin, compared to 22 percent for Fine Gael. By randomly distributing the TDs across parties 100,000 times (see Methods Appendix) and counting the proportion of simulated parties in which the number of TDs with a surname with a particular ethnic origin exceeds or is less than the observed number of such TDs in the real data, we can get an empirical measure of the statistical significance of the observation under the null hypothesis of a random distribution of TDs. In the real data, 57 percent of all TDs ever elected have had surnames of exclusively Gaelic origin and 17 percent of exclusively English origin (Figure 1). We find that Fianna Fáil has significantly more TDs of Gaelic origin and significantly fewer of English origin

than would be expected by chance ($p = 0.00016$ and $p = 0.0015$, respectively). Conversely, Fine Gael has significantly fewer TDs of Gaelic origin and significantly more of English origin than one would have expected by chance ($p = 0.012$ and $p = 0.011$, respectively). The directions of these biases show the two largest Irish political parties to be significantly polarized.

We can examine the party system from various angles using surnames. So, for example, instead of counting TDs we could consider length of service as a good indicator of a parliamentarian's importance – distinguishing between a long-serving 'champion' of a party and its voters and a TD who has come and gone quickly, and may not be as characteristic of the party. Both are counted equally in our main analysis, but now they can be weighted by their years of service. Using this framework of the 13,000 plus 'representative-years' served over the history of the Irish parliament, 55 percent have been served by TDs with Gaelic surnames and 17 by TDs with English surnames, very close to the proportions we see just counting TDs. We find 61 percent of Fianna Fáil's representative-years were Gaelic and 12 percent English, with 50 percent Gaelic and 23 percent English for Fine Gael, very similar to the biases we have already found between the parties and very significantly different to the parliament-wide levels ($p < 1.0E-07$ for chi-squared tests on all four comparisons). One advantage of this approach is that it allows us to draw some tentative conclusions about a lower frequency surname type such as Scottish (less than 2 percent of TDs), where the 85 years of Fine Gael representation compare to 12 years of Fianna Fáil representation, a significant difference that fits with our broader hypothesis about the parties.

In Northern Ireland we observe the hypothesized differences between the two political blocs, confirming what we already know, that there is an ethnic basis for constitutional and religious differences in Northern Ireland which has resulted in such an unusually polarized party system (see Figure 2 – green bars represent nationalist parties, blue bars unionist ones). Gaelic surnames are the most common in Northern Ireland, with 30 percent of the 2005 local election candidates bearing a name of exclusively Gaelic origin. Surnames of exclusively Scottish and English origin account for 18 percent and 15 percent of the politicians, respectively.

The two nationalist parties have a much higher proportion of candidates with Gaelic surnames (57 percent; see Figure 2A) compared to very low levels in the two unionist parties (9–12 percent). On the other hand, unionist politicians are much more likely to bear either English (21 percent; Figure 2B) or Scottish (25–26 percent; Figure 2C) surnames than nationalists (9 percent or less for both).

These comparisons reveal a significant difference in the ethnic background of representatives of the two main political traditions, with highly consistent results for both parties in both traditions. While the links between Northern Ireland's political and population history are well known, and the biases we observed are as expected given those established links, nevertheless these results are a dramatic demonstration of the ethnic roots of the province's political system.

Regional variation reflects historic migration patterns

One of the uses of surname analysis is that it allows us to examine population movements and migrations patterns. With over a thousand parliamentarians in the dataset on the

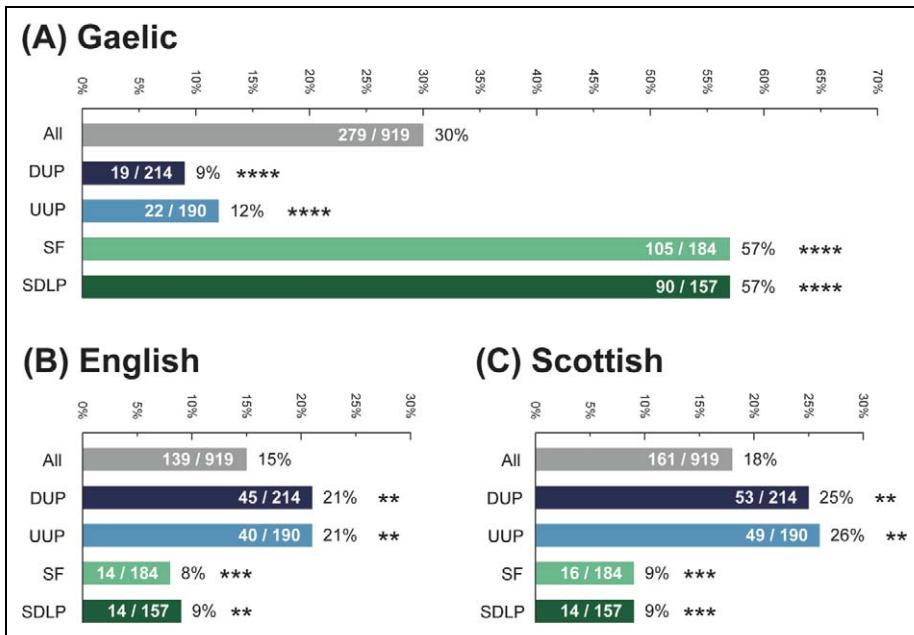


Figure 2. Surname origin levels in political parties in Northern Ireland.

Percentage of local election candidates in 2005 with surnames whose origin is exclusively (A) Gaelic, (B) English or (C) Scottish, for all candidates (grey bars), the DUP (dark blue), the UUP (light blue), Sinn Féin (SF; light green) and the SDLP (dark green). Exact percentages and counts are displayed outside and inside each bar, respectively. Observed values that are significantly different from that expected by chance (calculated from 100,000 simulations) are marked with asterisks (* $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$, **** $p<0.0001$).

Republic of Ireland it is possible to partition the data to explore the surname origin biases further. Given ancient population migrations were not spread evenly across Ireland (the south and east of the country had more inward migration than the west and north-west), we repeated our analysis on regional subsets of the data to see if any regional variation we might observe reflects those population movements. The four regions we used were based on historic Irish provinces and we assign TDs to their region on the basis of the location of the district they represent (see Methods Appendix). The maps in Figure 3 show the geographic location of the regions. While the same general bias is found across the country, regional variation is also apparent, with certain regions having more surnames of a particular type and certain parties being exceptionally biased toward one group in certain regions. These regional variations mirror the historic movements of the groups being studied, and reveal that ethnic background has a continuing impact on political activity across the entire country.

The ‘Dublin’ region (Figure 3A) consists of the city and county of Dublin, the capital and major population centre of Ireland. It was the centre, and at times the extent, of English influence in Ireland. The fact that there are significantly fewer Gaelic surnames and more English names than nationally reflects this influence. The ethnic background of Fine Gael representatives is particularly biased in this region. The 31 percent of Fine

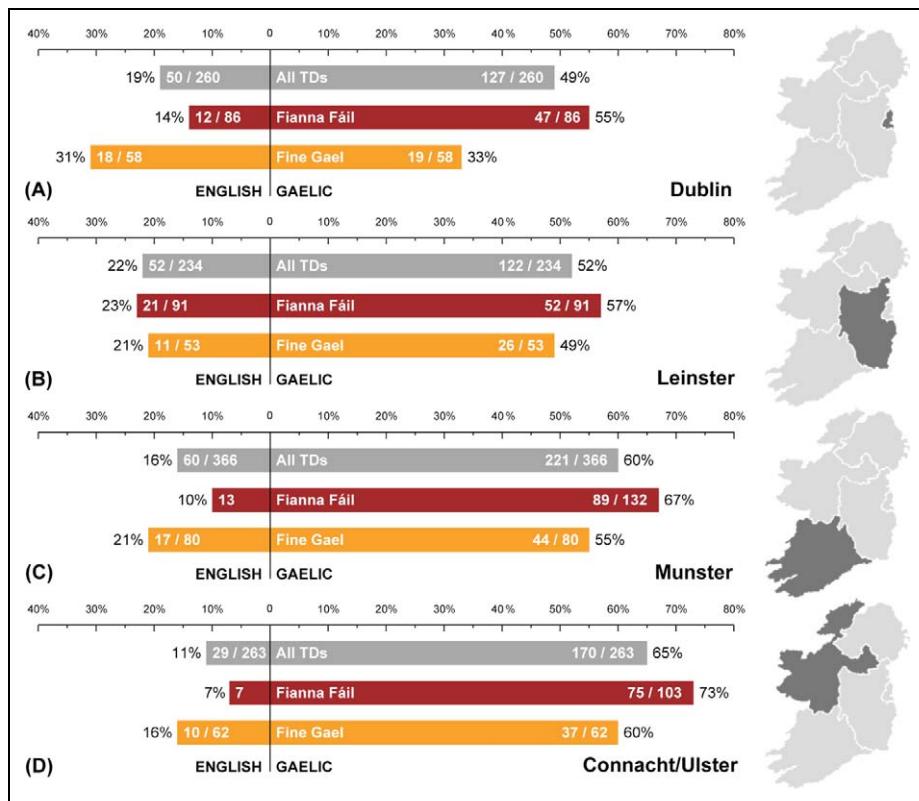


Figure 3. Variation of surname origin levels by region.

Percentage of TDs with surnames whose origin is exclusively Gaelic (right bars) or exclusively English (left bars), for all TDs (grey bars), Fianna Fáil (red) and Fine Gael (orange), across four regions (A) Dublin, (B) Leinster, (C) Munster and (D) Connacht/Ulster. Dark areas on the maps at right indicate the geographic extent of each region (the remaining northeast part of the island is Northern Ireland). Exact percentages and counts are displayed outside and inside each bar, respectively.

Gael TDs in Dublin bearing English surnames is the highest proportion seen for any party in any region, substantially higher than the 22 percent seen for FG nationally, and even with this small sample size is significantly more than would be expected by chance ($p = 0.01$). The bias away from Gaelic names is just as striking with only a third of Fine Gael TDs in Dublin bearing one, well below the 51 percent seen nationally, the lowest seen for either party in any region, and also highly significant ($p = 0.0041$). In the region that was the focal point of English migration into Ireland, this pronounced bias among Fine Gael TDs toward English names and away from Gaelic ones strongly supports our hypothesis that the basis for the differences between the two main parties is ethnic in origin.

Similarly, we see the expected differences in other regions. So, conversely to Dublin, the ‘Connacht/ Ulster’ region is the area least planted by English settlers, and reflecting this we find significantly more Gaelic names and significantly fewer English names than

nationally. Almost three-quarters of Fianna Fáil TDs here have Gaelic surnames ($p=0.017$), the highest level for any party in any region. Conversely, just 7 percent of Fianna Fáil TDs here have had English surnames, the lowest level in any region for either of the major parties.

One might argue that regional variation is driving the surname origin biases we observe between the parties. So perhaps Fianna Fáil has a pro-Gaelic name bias because it does well in those areas with more Gaelic surnames. If this were the case the regional variation in surname origins might be driving the overall effect we observe. To address this concern it is helpful to change perspective and, instead of looking at the proportions within parties, to look at the proportion of all the TDs in a region that are Fianna Fáil TDs with Gaelic surnames, FF TDs with English names, Fine Gael TDs with Gaelic surnames and FG TDs with English surnames (e.g. 18 percent of all Dublin TDs are FF TDs with Gaelic names (47/260), 7 percent are FF TDs with English names (12/260), etc.). These proportions vary from region to region, reflecting party support levels and regional surname distributions, as we would expect if there is an affinity between certain parties and certain surname types. However, it is the relationship between these proportions that tells us if regional effects have any influence on the biases between the parties.

For Gaelic surnames we find a linear relationship between the proportion of a region's TDs representing the two parties – if the proportion is higher for one party in a region it will also be higher in a completely consistent way for the other party. The bias between the parties is present in every region and is uniform across them. Far from being generated by regional variation the bias is present within it. For English surnames: for three of the regions we find a similar linear relationship with a consistent bias between the parties from region to region. The outlier is Leinster (the atypically even English levels on the left panel of Figure 3B reflect this), where Fianna Fáil has a higher proportion of English surnamed TDs than the other regions would predict (it is also the only region where the larger party has a higher number or percentage of English named TDs than FG). This is the only regional deviation we found, and it cannot be said to be driving the overall bias between the parties because it in fact results in almost no differences in English surname levels in that region, depressing the national bias that emerges from the other regions. This elevated level of English surnames in Fianna Fáil in Leinster might reflect a somewhat differing party history there, and may merit further investigation. Aside from this, the same consistent biases are seen between the parties across the regions, within regional variation that reflects the historic migration patterns.

Another way to look for regional effects in the party biases is to allocate each party its 'fair share' of Gaelic and English named TDs in each region (based on the overall surname levels in that region and the level of support for the party there). If only regional effects are at play this should return party biases like we see in the real data. However, doing this for each region gives a national tally that is within one TD of the expected party surname totals if just the national surname levels are used instead (i.e. 57 percent Gaelic, 17 percent English). So accounting for regional variation in surname distributions changes the expected number of TDs for both surname types in both parties by less than half a percent from that expected if regional effects are ignored. This again illustrates that regional variation cannot account for the polarization in the ethnic

background of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael representatives, which appears to be an intrinsic difference between the parties.

Discussion: Surnames reveal the ethnic bases for party politics

The significant differences we find in the surnames of politicians offer strong support for our hypothesis that the Irish party systems are based on ethnic roots, and that there are social bases for the Irish party system, though in the Republic these are hidden. Using surnames allows us to detect the legacy in modern party systems of divisions between ancient self-identifying ethnic groups and demonstrate that their movements many centuries ago have a previously unappreciated systemic impact on the party system. Our findings support much of the literature on the Irish party system but give a fuller understanding of its deep and hidden roots.

This research on Ireland demonstrates that the social divisions party systems can be based on may be much older than those initially suggested by Lipset and Rokkan (1967), and that they can be influential in the formation of party systems even where the social divisions themselves are no longer extant. Even though such groups no longer self-identify, we find that these deep roots have left a significant and continuing political legacy.

This approach to the study of party systems is unusual and the exact approach is very useful for Ireland, where surnames have been given on a patrilineal basis from over 1,000 years ago. However, it could be used to study the effects of population movements, geographic divisions and the behaviour of migrants elsewhere. The idea that waves of migration are important in the formation and maintenance of party systems, even long after the descendants of those immigrants are aware of the nature of their arrival, is also of general interest. So, for instance, we see that in France it was argued that the geographic distribution of support for different parties could be explained by the family structure, which in turn related to the different ancient groups in France (Franks, Celts and Basques) (Le Bras and Todd, 1981). It may be the case, for instance, that the weakness of the religious right in southern parts of Spain and Portugal, as well as being related to their comparative poverty to the North, is also related to the influence of the ancient Moors in those parts. We expect that this approach will help answer other research questions.

Note

Methods appendic refered to in the text is available at <http://www.kevinbyrne.org/>

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