

Electoral politics after the revolution: Loyalties, allegiances and the new state

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The general elections of June 1922 and August 1923 are often presented in Irish historiography as the first representative elections to be contested in the newly defined twenty-six-county Irish state. Their results have been used by historians to assist them in the task of qualifying and quantifying support for the Anglo-Irish Treaty both before and after the Irish Civil War, an almost year-long conflict in which the seeds for decades of enmity were sown. Many analyses of the election results present a statistical overview of the results before proceeding to make definitive pronouncements on why the electorate voted for particular parties or candidates. As this article will show, there is little that can be stated with certainty about the political motivations of the Irish electorate during this tumultuous period, one that modern historians have too often viewed with one eye fixed on the political context of their own times. It will be argued, that the form of the general elections and the contexts in which they were staged do not allow for the statistical approach to be a fully reliable gauge of the proportionate strengths of the parties and candidates. It is without doubt that the possibility of a reliable, representative result in the general election of 1922 was compromised by the instituting of an electoral pact before polling day, while the following year's contest was staged after many additional months of violent conflict had hardened views, crystallised enmities and led the electorate to critically re-evaluate their political representatives and allegiances. In the Irish midlands, the focus of this article, the contests in the constituencies present a nuanced and idiosyncratic picture of an electorate still coming to terms with Ireland's newly defined political status.

The eleven months before polling day in June 1922 had seen the Irish political scene change quite dramatically. 11 July 1921 marked the formal end of the Irish War of Independence. The truce that came into force between Irish republicans and the British government recognised that the issues that fuelled the destructive two-and-a-half-year conflict could, by that stage, be better addressed through political dialogue. To this end, negotiators, including Irish leader Éamon de Valera and the British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, convened a number of meetings over the ensuing four months, meetings that failed to align what the Irish desired with what the British would accept. It was made clear that the Irish demand for a republic was too great a concession for the British to make and by late November 1921, de Valera had decided to despatch to London five negotiators, Arthur Griffith, Michael Collins, George Gavan Duffy, Robert Barton and

Éamonn Duggan, tasking them with reaching an agreement. The treaty that those delegates signed under significant duress on 6 December 1921 was to prove to be an exceptionally divisive document, containing as it did numerous anti-republican clauses, the most controversial of which demanded that an oath of fidelity to the King of England be sworn by all representatives who took a seat in the new Irish parliament. Arguments over whether the delegates actually had the authority to sign the Treaty, the nature of the threats made by Lloyd George and possible alternatives to the document, among other issues, informed early rancorous debates that presaged the split in the formerly united Sinn Féin, I.R.A. and Dáil Éireann. The vote on the 7 January 1922 that narrowly saw the Treaty accepted by the Dáil, crystallised the political split between the two Sinn Féin factions, and saw de Valera lead his anti-Treaty faction out of the chamber and into political opposition. The Dáil vote was followed one week later by the establishment of the Provisional Government which saw Griffith instated as president and Collins as chairman. The Roman Catholic Church came out strongly in favour of the new body, while even individuals on the anti-Treaty side conceded that the majority of the electorate were similarly disposed. Republicans refused to recognise the Provisional Government as the legitimate government of Ireland and set about devising a stratagem that would assist them in promoting and implementing their agenda.

As the political disunity continued to fester and grow, some of those who had engaged most directly in the armed conflict with the British began to exert an influence. The southern I.R.A. came out strongly in opposition to the Treaty, as did their counterparts in Dublin. In the midlands the majority of the I.R.A. came out in support of the Treaty, due in part to Seán MacEoin, the feted hero and respected commander of the I.R.A. campaign in Longford, providing his influential backing. The transfer from the British to the Irish of the barracks at Athlone and Longford during February provided concrete proof that the Treaty was resulting in a large-scale British departure from the new state, and further boosted support for the agreement among the civil populace. However, the handover of the barracks in Mullingar saw republicans refuse to admit the Provisional Government's troops, an early indicator that the anti-Treaty I.R.A. were quite determined to adhere to what they saw as their solid mandate to bring an Irish republic into being.

Political efforts to bring the two sides closer together were seen at the Sinn Féin Árd Fheis of 22-23 February, yet, in reality, all that was achieved was an agreement to postpone the general election that was called for under the Treaty. This political temporising did nothing to assuage the growing anger of the anti-Treaty I.R.A. which convened a controversial convention the next month. The convention, which had been prohibited by the Provisional Government, heard speakers promote the belief that the majority of I.R.A. members in Ireland supported their position and that the Provisional Government was illegitimate. An Army Executive was established and charged with the task of directing efforts to establish the republic demanded by the majority of convention attendees. The anger that emanated from the gathering worried not only those politicians who supported the Treaty, but the clergy and the civilian populace, all of whom must have sensed that the intensity of the disagreement intimated that Ireland was moving

towards a violent clash between the two sides.¹

The probability of an armed conflict between the two sides appeared to increase as soon as the convention concluded. On the 13 April, anti-Treaty forces occupied The Four Courts in Dublin, designating it their headquarters. Republicans, now imbued with a greater sense of authority after the establishment of the Army Executive, set about not only promoting their right to direct Ireland's political destiny, but attempting to enforce that right. At the largest barracks in the midlands in Athlone, Seán MacEoin successfully thwarted anti-Treaty I.R.A. members' attempt to seize the garrison there, while his expulsion of those involved on the republican side saw them commandeer the Royal Hotel in the middle of the town and designate it as the local I.R.A. headquarters. Two separate stand-offs between the sides soon followed, incidents which, if it were not for the intercession of some local Franciscan friars, could easily have descended into violence. Violence did manifest in Westmeath towards the end of April with the killing of General George Adamson in Athlone, while the muscular investigation that followed itself led to fatalities in Mullingar. Incidents such as those in Westmeath caused political leaders on both sides of the Treaty debate considerable concern. They recognised that the upcoming general election could easily descend into chaos if the animosity grew further, and decided to meet in order to devise a strategy that could help avoid a violent contest.²

The result of the strategic talks between Michael Collins and Éamon de Valera was the signing of a seven-point electoral pact. In summary the pact provided for all Sinn Féin T.D.s, both pro- and anti-Treaty, to run on the same ticket and in numbers equal to their existing strengths in Dáil Éireann. The party was to form a joint panel and candidates were to canvass together, where practicable, and appear on the same platform when addressing rallies. Importantly, Sinn Féin candidates were instructed not to campaign on the pros and cons of the Treaty, a clause designed to limit the friction that was steadily building between the two sides. The desire for an uncontested return for all incumbents (or in cases where T.D.s would or could not run, their ideologically aligned replacements) was something that suited the anti-Treaty side more than their opponents; their strength inside the Dáil was out of proportion to their popularity among the electorate, something anti-Treaty T.D.s learned during the Christmas break in their constituencies.³

However, hopes for the 1922 Dáil to be an almost exact reinstatement of that of 1921 were to be frustrated. In a move designed more as a cosmetic exercise than a sincere invitation, third parties were allowed to contest the election. Opening the field to the Labour Party, Farmers' Party, Independents and others would, in a fair and democratic electoral contest, have ensured that the pro-Treaty stance that most of these third parties espoused would have further limited republican influence and undermined the entire Sinn Féin party. The fact that the pact

1 Kissane, Bill, *The Politics of the Irish Civil War* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 66-70.

2 U.C.D.A., MacEoin Papers, P151/1809; *Irish Times*, 4 Apr. 1922; *Irish Independent*, 4 Apr. 1922; *Westmeath Independent*, 8 Apr. 1922; *Irish Times*, 11 Apr. 1922; Younger, Calton, *Ireland's Civil War* (London, 1968), pp. 255-7;

3 For a more detailed account of the pact's provisions see: Gallagher, Michael, 'The pact general election of 1922', in *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 84 (1981), pp. 404-421.

presumptively provided for the creation of a coalition government which would be constituted solely from the ranks Sinn Féin (with the two sides again represented in proportion to the number of seats they held), reinforces the view that Sinn Féin believed that third parties would not be a problem. While it was unlikely that third parties, even if largely unimpeded by Sinn Féin supporters, would ever have gained enough seats to form their own government, or indeed force the pro-Treaty side of Sinn Féin to join them in coalition, their decision to contest the election rankled many within Sinn Féin who were quite attached to the general electoral monopoly they had enjoyed since 1918. Sinn Féin was for many of its members a 'national' movement, the only party that represented Ireland's true political desires; from a Sinn Féin point of view, third parties should have shown their commitment to Ireland by staying out of the election, their entry was undermining the Irish cause. Collins and de Valera jointly decried the stance adopted by the non-Sinn Féin candidates, stating that it would only 'engender bitterness and promote discord'. To combat the efforts of those outside of Sinn Féin, pressure was brought to bear on third party candidates, pressure that was influential in ensuring that a number of non-Sinn Féin candidates decided not to participate. When nominations closed on the 6 June 1922 in all just fifty-four non-Sinn Féin candidates were confirmed. As a consequence it was assured, even before the electorate went to the polls, that in a house comprised of 128 seats, those that Sinn Féin were certain to secure were enough for them to form the coalition government provided for under the pact.

The anti-democratic tone of the pact was to elicit negative reaction from a variety of sources. Arthur Griffith was greatly discomfited by it, as was the Roman Catholic Hierarchy and the British government which adopted a more rigid approach to the ongoing negotiations on the Irish constitution as a result. Indeed, the pact inspired such a degree of British rigidity during the negotiations that when the constitution was finalised in the run up to the election, its anti-republican tone inspired Collins to withhold publication until it was too late for it to sway the electorate.⁴ In another move to add to the ambiguities surrounding the election, it appears that Collins may have pulled out of the pact just a day or two before polling day. In two separate speeches delivered in Cork, he stated that voters should vote howsoever they desired; a declaration which some commentators believe amounted to a breaking of the pact. The short time between his speeches and polling day allied with a muted press response to the speeches ensured that, at least in constituencies distant from his own in Cork, Collins' ambiguous utterances would have had little effect on the voting patterns that emerged in the midlands. The pact ensured that attempts to assign definitive motives to voters for the votes they cast would be greatly handicapped. When looking at the results across the constituencies historians might consider many possible motives; were people voting on the Treaty at all, for the government provided for in the pact, were possible simply against Sinn Féin and for third parties, or perhaps for a post-election political process that might have led to a re-working of the Treaty? All are possibilities that cannot be discounted in any analysis of the contest.

The four constituencies that comprise the study group being examined

4 Townshend, Charles, *The Republic: The Fight for Irish Independence* (London, 2013), pp. 398-9.

illustrate much of the complexity of the pact election of 1922. It is certain that the provincial press informed voters of the candidates' stance on the Treaty, so voting in ignorance of what a candidate stood for on that topic was probably impossible for those who wished to know and went to the effort of reading the local newspaper. Of course, knowledge of a T.D.'s or other candidate's Treaty stance would only matter where a vote could be cast. The newly-defined constituency of Leitrim-Roscommon North presented an example of the pact-makers desired outcome; a contest-free, Sinn Féin walkover which denied the voters the right to exercise their franchise and the candidates the onerous task of having to canvass. Three of the four seats went to the pro-Treaty side, Thomas Carter T.D., Andrew Lavin T.D. and James Dolan T.D., while Count Plunkett T.D. retained his seat for the anti-Treaty side. A similar, if more balanced, situation was seen in the constituency of Mayo South-Roscommon South, which returned Harry Boland T.D. and Thomas Maguire T.D. for the anti-Treaty side, with the pro-Treaty Daniel O'Rourke T.D. and William Sears T.D. ensuring Sinn Féin candidates were returned unopposed in Co. Roscommon.⁵

The constituency that presented the biggest surprise in the region was that of Laois-Offaly where a contest was called to decide which of the five candidates would occupy the four available seats. Of the five, four were Sinn Féin and pro-Treaty, Kevin O'Higgins T.D., Francis Bulfin T.D., Patrick MacCartan T.D. and Joseph Lynch T.D., while the decision of the Labour Party's William Davin to enter the contest ensured that the local electors had to go to the polls and decide amongst five pro-Treaty candidates. A facile overview based on this information alone could lead an observer to conclude that the anti-Treaty side had little support in the constituency. Yet, as has already been adverted to, facile analyses of the 1922 general election serve historiographers poorly, and few could reasonably argue that republican support in the constituency was so depleted as to be statistically insignificant. Indeed, the constituency's ballot paper really only provides evidence on the support for the Treaty among Sinn Féin candidates rather than the electorate.

Polling day, the 18 June, saw an impressive electoral turnout in Laois-Offaly, as seventy per cent of those eligible to do so cast a ballot. After an initial count of all valid votes, a quota of 6,519 was declared. Davin was the first candidate to exceed that threshold; indeed he did so impressively, securing 15,167 first preference votes, more than enough to elect both himself and a running mate. Labour's campaign message of moving political focus to social and economic issues may have chimed with a local electorate hungry for improved living conditions. O'Higgins joined Davin in exceeding the quota on the first count with a more modest total of 6,792. Francis Bulfin followed O'Higgins after the second count with surplus votes added to his first preference total of 6,446 helping him across the line. MacCartan took the final seat after the third count, even though his 2,796 first preference votes appeared to indicate that he, like his running mate Joseph Lynch, was a

5 All electoral data has been sourced from Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland: 1801-1922* (Dublin, 1978); Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland: 1918-92* (Dublin, 1992); www.electionsireland.org (accessed 18-21 Oct. 2013); www.oireachtas.ie/members-hist (accessed 18-21 Oct. 2013).

considerably less popular choice for Sinn Féin supporters than either O'Higgins or Bulfin.

Davin's electoral success surprised many. Almost half of all votes in the constituency went to Davin and the Labour Party, something that must have led people to question why Labour did not field another candidate. The party had of course never before contested a general election in Ireland and it is probable that few could have predicted with any certainty that Davin would have been so successful. However, it is apparent that the labour movement had long been popular in parts of the constituency. Offaly's county town Tullamore, had one of the first official branches of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (I.T.G.W.U.) in the midlands when it was established in 1917; in contrast, Athlone did not gain an official I.T.G.W.U. presence until two years later.⁶ It appears that in Laois-Offaly, along with the constituencies such as Louth-Meath and Carlow-Kilkenny, Labour's lack of electoral experience may have led them to applying too conservative a strategy in deploying too few candidates. Of course, many may also have voted for Davin for another quite simple reason; he was not a member of Sinn Féin, a party whose disunity was threatening to seriously disrupt voters' lives. Davin was to remain as T.D. for the constituency until his death in 1956.

The most varied constituency of the study group was undoubtedly Longford-Westmeath. Here the voters had six candidates from which to choose, candidates that represented pro-and anti-Treaty Sinn Féin, Independent Labour and the Ratepayers' Association. Pro-Treaty Sinn Féin fielded three candidates, Seán MacEoin T.D., Lorcan Robbins T.D. and Francis McGuinness. Laurence Ginnell T.D. was the only anti-Treaty candidate, with Seán Lyons running as an Independent Labour candidate. Patrick Belton, in representing the Ratepayers' Association, was not only supporting the Treaty, but confirming that those who had formerly supported the Irish Parliamentary Party, the party which had been virtually obliterated by Sinn Féin in the 1918 general election, were still quite numerous. His candidacy was perhaps even more surprising given that pronounced intimidation by individuals, whose allegiances were not proven it must be pointed out, had not been able to force him out of the contest. Both MacEoin and, surprisingly, it must be said, given his track record of defiance, Ginnell adhered to the pact, avoiding a divisive Treaty debate. The other Sinn Féin candidates concentrated their attacks on the non-party candidates, Lyons and Belton.

The turnout on polling day was less impressive than that seen in Laois-Offaly, with roughly sixty-one per cent of the electorate casting a ballot. Seán MacEoin was the first candidate to secure a seat, with his massive total of 10,162 ensuring that he had 4,405 votes more than the quota required. Seán Lyons was also elected on the first count with his 7,073 first preferences evidencing solid support for those associated with the Labour Party in the constituency. Laurence Ginnell had to wait until the third count to gain a seat; his first preference total of 5,022 and the fact that Francis McGuinness took the bulk of MacEoin's transfers meant that Lyons' surplus was required to boost his total. McGuinness took the final seat by exceeding the quota after Ginnell's surplus provided him with the additional twenty-nine votes he required.

6 N.L.I., MS 7282, I.T.G.W.U., List of Branches in Chronological Order.

Data available on the reallocation of surplus votes is helpful in analysing the constituency's results. As already mentioned, the bulk of MacEoin's transferable surplus, 4,395 (ten votes must not have nominated any other candidate), went to McGuinness, and amounted to 2,893 extra votes for the Longford man. Ginnell received 582 votes, with the bulk of the remainder of MacEoin's surplus going to Lorcan Robbins. Robbins' poor first preference count of 1,996 ensured that such a small number of additional votes from MacEoin's surplus guaranteed his failure. Robbins' apparent unpopularity may have had a number of causes – his former support for the I.P.P. for one – but, it is without doubt that the death of Joe McGuinness T.D. just before the election in May 1922 was a massive boost to the electoral pretensions of his brother who stepped in to fight for the seat. The transfer of Lyons' share between Ginnell and McGuinness appears to indicate that Labour voters were less impressed by McGuinness; he gained just eighty-six more votes from Lyons' transfers than Ginnell, 555:469. Patrick Belton, though performing better on first preference votes than Robbins, eventually came in at the back of the field, gaining very few transfers from an electorate that had called time on the constitutional nationalists' approach to Irish politics.

A study of the move of the 'Single Transferable Vote' provided for under the prevailing electoral rules appears to confirm that the pact was, as Michael Gallagher has observed, '...much more in the rule than in the breach.'⁷ Votes for both Sinn Féin factions tended, where a second preference was indicated, to transfer to other Sinn Féin candidates, each side favouring their ideologically aligned running mates where possible. Third party votes, especially those of the Farmers' Party or Independents, were more likely to favour other third parties, confirmation perhaps that a significant proportion of the electorate were unwillingly to support Sinn Féin if an alternative was available.

The national result presented a picture that was considerably less clear than is often suggested by historians. It may appear reasonable to state that Sinn Féin's retention of ninety-four seats out of 128 was quite a success, yet from the party's point of view, the loss of thirty seats (the four Trinity College seats had ensured that in 1921 the Sinn Féin sweep was limited to 124 seats) was quite a blow. Thirty-four seats were won without contest, a figure which meant that of the ninety remaining seats, Sinn Féin candidates won two-thirds, sixty seats. In the midland constituencies which hosted contests, it is obvious that the pro-Treaty Sinn Féin were undoubtedly the more popular faction, with Laurence Ginnell's 5,022 amounting to the only anti-Treaty first preferences votes cast in the counties of Longford, Westmeath, Offaly and Laois. All the other votes were cast for candidates that supported the Treaty and amounted to 56,351, a comprehensive 11:1 ratio which appeared to show exceptional support for the agreement in the Irish midlands.

Whatever those who went to the polls on 18 June believed they were voting for, it is apparent that any moves by the two Sinn Féin factions to find a political accommodation in the immediate aftermath of the election were to be derailed. The new Irish constitution, now out in the open, was entirely unacceptable to republicans, who saw it as additional confirmation of the abrogation by

7 Gallagher, 'Pact General Election', p. 418.

the pro-Treaty side of the proclamation of the Irish Republic in 1916 and of their oath to defend that republic. The assassination of the staunch unionist Sir Henry Wilson in London just four days after the election, led the British government to apply serious pressure to the Provisional Government, who, British ministers believed, had not dealt with the anti-Treaty Four Courts garrison with the requisite firmness. The Provisional Government's decision to attack the Four Courts on the 28 June 1922 using British-supplied artillery marks for most historians the start date of the Irish Civil War.

By the time the almost year-long conflict ended in May 1923, the nascent enmities that were apparent prior to the pact election had grown. The early months of the war had seen Michael Collins' refuse to convene the newly-elected parliament, create a three-man War Council comprised of himself, Richard Mulcahy and Eoin O'Duffy and prosecute the conflict without much consultation with political colleagues.⁸ His fatal shooting in late August saw pro-Treaty control of the war move to William Cosgrave, who, unlike Collins, ensured that Treaty compliance was at the heart of the Provisional Government's envisaged solution to the conflict. Seán MacEoin spearheaded the pro-Treaty forces in the midlands and west, contesting the early stages of the war in a reserved fashion from his bases at Athlone, Sligo, Birr and Roscommon. Few serious conflicts between the two sides were staged in the midlands, with MacEoin's men usually engaged to capture republican militants, safeguard rail and civic infrastructure and maintain regular patrols of urban centres. Perhaps the most regular venue for republican activity was the grossly overcrowded prison camp in Athlone barracks where awful conditions prevailed, conditions that the mainstream press were unable to relate due to government censorship, but news of which the anti-Treaty press exploited to the full.⁹

The reconvening of the Irish parliament in September, a parliament whose first sitting saw the irrepressible Laurence Ginnell assert its illegitimacy, saw extreme powers conferred on pro-Treaty commanders. Executions were sanctioned and while the official figure of seventy-seven authorised executions was high, it was undoubtedly fewer than the actual number of republicans who were killed by the National Army after their capture. The instating of a law allowing executions demoralised republican combatants, as did the coincident release of a pro-Treaty pastoral from the Roman Catholic Hierarchy, which denounced the I.R.A. and reaffirmed the church's support for the 'National Government'. The way in which the executions were carried out undoubtedly led to an increase in sympathy for republicans, with reports of the horrific conditions in which I.R.A. prisoners were held doing little to endear the Provisional Government to the internees, their families or supporters. However, it is important to note that while many on both sides found the prosecution of the war distasteful, it was only the pro-Treaty Provisional Government that set about creating or reworking the systems required for the functioning of the new state, defining government departments and their roles, founding a civil police force and creating a national army. Republicans, for their part, did little to show their supporters that they were also planning for running

8 See Regan, John M., 'Michael Collins, General Commanding-in-Chief, as a historiographical problem', in *History*, Vol. 92, No. 307 (Jul., 2007), pp. 318-346.

9 For examples see: *Poblacht na hÉireann War News*, 7 Nov. 1922; *Freedom* 29 Nov. 1922.

the state post-conflict. The establishment of the republican government in October 1922 by de Valera motivated by a felt need to lend credibility to the anti-Treaty campaign, to give it a semblance of democratic legitimacy and to lay the foundations for a political movement to rival the pro-Treaty party.¹⁰

By the time the new Irish Free State and constitution were officially instated one year after the Treaty had been signed on the 6 December 1922, it was obvious that the republicans were fighting a losing battle. Short-lived bursts of I.R.A. activity in the midlands did little to improve their overall situation, while MacEoin's deployment of additional troops led to additional arrests, with the consequential exacerbation of the already chronic overcrowding in the Athlone barracks. Tensions within the prison camp reached a critical juncture with the shooting of republican prisoner Patrick Mulrennan by Seán MacEoin's second in command Anthony Lawlor during the first week of December 1922. Hundreds of the internees went on hunger strike and the anti-Treaty press seized upon Mulrennan's shooting and Lawlor's distasteful celebration of his own actions in a letter to his mother, describing them as indicative of the debased nature of the men who comprised the Free State government.¹¹ Though persuasive, such propaganda did little to dissuade some republicans from accepting the inevitable. In February, just a few weeks after five executions were staged in Athlone barracks, in a widely-reported incident, twenty-seven members of the Fahereen I.R.A. near Moate handed in their arms.¹² They, like many non-combatants were fatigued by the constant threat of violence, the damage being done to their families, livelihoods, parishes, villages and towns, as well as the overall stresses of conflict.

Given the hopeless position of the republican forces in most regions, moves to bring the conflict to an end were inevitable. The death of the intransigent republican military leader Liam Lynch in April 1923 allowed for successful moves towards a negotiated truce between the two sides, a truce that led to the eventual end of the conflict on the 24 May. However, the manner in which the conflict concluded ensured that there was still quite a degree of uncertainty regarding a political accommodation between the two previously warring factions. Republicans did not actually surrender, and refused to decommission their weapons, electing instead to dump them, or perhaps deliver them to a trusted third party, often a priest, who would then dispose of them. The signing of a simple declaration involving signatory's promise not to engage in further violence against the Free State usually ensured such men's liberty. The end of the conflict did not see any move towards large-scale prison releases either: the government was understandably averse to discharging hundreds of republicans back into society given the volatility such a move would bring about. Indeed, the new Public Order Bill of June 1923 actually led to additional arrests, as Cosgrave's demands that all Irish citizens operate under the terms of the Treaty continued to be ignored by many republicans.

10 Murray, Patrick, *Oracles of God: The Roman Catholic Church and Irish Politics, 1922-37* (Dublin, 2000), pp. 75-78; Kissane, *Civil War*, pp. 89-90.

11 For examples see *Freedom*, 22 Nov. 1922; *An Phoblacht* (Scottish ed.), 18 Nov. 1922; *Republican War Bulletin*, 19 Oct. 1922.

12 *Irish Times*, 8 Feb. 1923; *Irish Independent*, 8 Feb. 1922; *Westmeath Independent*, 10 Feb. 1923; *Manchester Guardian*, 10 Feb. 1923; *Southern Star*, 10 Feb. 1923.

The split in the Sinn Féin party had fully crystallised, and the electoral support for the two groups, Cosgrave's newly-formed Cumann na nGaedheal, and de Valera's Sinn Féin was soon to be tested as people headed to the polling stations in August.

No longer encumbered by a pre-election pact, the arguments that were presented to the electorate by the two main parties in the run-up to polling day were reasonably clear. Sinn Féin produced numerous posters imploring the electorate to shun the Free State government for a number of reasons, the most obvious being its capitulation to the British in regard to the acceptance of the Treaty and the Irish Constitution. The party also castigated the Free State for its recognition of the separate Northern Irish state, its assumption of massive monetary debts to Britain, its treatment of republican prisoners, attacks on Sinn Féin's electoral machinery, press censorship and the unjust application of draconian laws which saw 'murder gangs' threaten '...the life, liberty and property of the people.' Sinn Féin's alternative was the guarantee of a self-reliant, Gaelic Ireland, one that would '... offer to England not allegiance, but a peace based on the sovereignty and integrity of the Irish nation'. Accompanying the essential invocation of God's name and intervention, Sinn Féin electoral posters and advertisements saw de Valera assure people that Irish industry, educational systems and judicial practices would all be reformed in such a way as to assist the Irish people promote the best interests of a 'fearless' Irish nation.¹³

Cumann na nGaedheal's electoral propaganda was similarly simplistic. The party decided to present a juxtaposition to the electorate, one that contrasted how they viewed their role as the party in government with what they believed Sinn Féin offered as an alternative. Their electoral posters stated that in bringing the civil war to an end the government had 'beaten anarchy'. By casting a vote for 'The Cosgrave Government', people could now ensure that 'chaos and disorder; the gun, the petrol can, the torch; murder, arson, robbery and loot; burned houses, ruined roads and railways, broken bridges and ruined trade; poverty and unemployment, along with the 'Irregulars' that promoted them, were all consigned to the past. Cosgrave, Kevin O'Higgins and Richard Mulcahy, the three men at the vanguard of the Cumann na nGaedheal campaign, presented the party's credentials as not only the enforcer of good government and law and order, but as that which provided the electorate with the 'right to live; the right to work...'.¹⁴ Cosgrave was framing his government's campaign in a post-Treaty context: as far as he was concerned, the Treaty was in force and the government were determined to operate within the political boundaries the agreement had determined.

The staging of contests in all the midland constituencies, including the newly-defined constituency of Roscommon, and the greater freedom of third parties to enter the race ensured that a more representative election was seen. In the interests of brevity all three constituencies – Roscommon, Longford-Westmeath and Laois-Offaly – will be handled together, with general trends identified and important idiosyncrasies highlighted.

Table 1 details the candidates for all three:

¹³ www.irishelectionliterature.wordpress.com (accessed 17-21 Oct. 2013);

¹⁴ *Irish Times*, 25 Aug. 1923

Roscommon

Sinn Féin	Count Plunkett	Gerald Boland	James Moran	Gerald Davis
Cumann na nGaedheal	Henry Finlay	Andrew Lavin	Patrick Dyar	Patrick Dorr
Farmers' Party	Michael Brennan	Edward Cline	John Drury	
Labour Party	Liam Kelleher			
Independent	Jasper Tully	Henry Fitzgibbon		

Longford-Westmeath

Sinn Féin	Conor Byrne	James Killane	John Gavin	James Victory
Cumann na nGaedheal	Patrick Shaw	Francis McGuinness	James Carrigy	
Farmers' Party	Patrick McKenna	Hugh Garahan	Francis Philips	Thomas Groarke
Labour Party	Hugh Wilson	Thomas Redmond		
Independent	Seán Lyons	Seán O'Farrell		

Laois-Offaly

Sinn Féin	Laurence Brady	Seán McGuinness	Patrick Gorry	
Cumann na nGaedheal	Francis Bulfin	Patrick Egan	Seán Kelly	
Farmers' Party	Daniel Kelly	Patrick Birmingham	Francis Doorley	
Labour Party	William Davin	Denis Cullen		
Independent	Patrick Belton	Andrew Byrne	Joseph Delaney	

Table 1: Candidates for the three midlands constituencies in the 1923 general election

In relation to the stance adopted on the Treaty and the existence of the Irish Free State, the position of the candidates was quite clear. All, with the obvious exception of the Sinn Féin candidates, supported the Treaty and were happy to work within the political framework of the Free State. However, the considerable increase in the number of willing candidates when compared with the pact election, especially on the pro-Treaty side, ensured that the electorate's votes were to be spread more thinly than Treaty supporters would have liked. This poor vote management strategy provided republican candidates with an advantage – undoubtedly their supporters were fewer, yet still numerous enough to ensure the election of republicans

who were considerably less concerned by the threat of ideologically-aligned competitors siphoning votes away from them.

It is certain that while the Treaty was still an emotive electoral issue, regardless of Cosgrave's stance, the personalities and affiliations of the candidates also played a pivotal role. Republican stalwarts such as Count Plunkett and Gerald Boland in Roscommon presented Sinn Féin supporters not only with familiar names but continuity, something that Longford-Westmeath sorely lacked. Laurence Ginnell's death in April 1923 had ensured that the only anti-Treaty candidate to contest the 1922 election across the three constituencies had to be replaced, with Conor Byrne, an Athlone-based Sinn Féin member, being the most prominent of the four republican candidates in the constituency. Laois-Offaly too presented the electorate with new republican candidates, as voters, for the first time since 1918, were able to evince in definite terms whether the republican agenda had real support in their constituency. With the exception of Longford-Westmeath, Cumann na nGaedheal fielded the same number of candidates as Sinn Féin in the midlands, with familiar faces like Francis McGuinness and newcomers Patrick Shaw and James Carrigy hoping to draw the votes of those who had so enthusiastically backed Seán MacEoin in 1922. MacEoin's decision to concentrate on his military career probably weakened the government's election campaign in Longford-Westmeath. It should also be noted that MacEoin's reputation had suffered during the civil war and his popularity with the electorate had undoubtedly waned. Perhaps the greatest pro-Treaty threat to Cumann na nGaedheal in the midlands was the Labour vote, which had two strong vote-getters in William Davin and Seán Lyons. The decision of the Farmers' Party to move out of their southern base and contest the election in the midlands undoubtedly provided additional concern to Cosgrave's supporters – the region had a potent farming lobby, and, as the Irish Parliamentary Party had learned, farmers very often only voted on one issue: the land. Independent candidates too were appealing to the former I.P.P. voters. Patrick Belton believed that Laois-Offaly might be more amenable to his message than Longford-Westmeath was in 1922, while Jasper Tully, the owner of the Roscommon Herald and former I.P.P. MP, obviously believed, despite his 1917 bye-election drubbing in North Roscommon, that much of what he was known for – dissenting, old-school, constitutional nationalism – would prove popular among Roscommon voters.

Roscommon

Seats: 4; Quota: 6,240; Turnout: 58%

Candidate	First Preference	Seat No.
Count Plunkett (S.F.)	5507	1
Henry Finlay (CnanG)	3827	2
Andrew Lavin (CnanG)	5001	3
Gerald Boland (S.F.)	3843	4

Longford-Westmeath

Seats: 5; Quota: 5,811; Turnout: 59%

Candidate	First Preference	Seat No.
Conor Byrne (S.F.)	5299	1
Patrick Shaw (CnanG)	5147	2
Seán Lyons (Ind. Lab.)	4452	3
James Killane (S.F.)	2757	4
Patrick McKenna (F.P.)	3274	5

Laois-Offaly

Seats: 5; Quota: 6,720; Turnout: 63%

Candidate	First Preference	Seat No.
Francis Bulfin (CnanG)	5689	1
William Davin (Lab.)	6323	2
Patrick Egan (CnanG)	3630	3
Seán McGuinness (S.F.)	5572	4
Laurence Brady (S.F.)	4751	5

Table 2: Results for the midlands constituencies in the 1923 general election

A brief overview of the results table, Table 2, illustrates quite effectively that support for Sinn Féin in the midlands constituencies was considerable. The party won one seat more than Cosgrave's Cumann na nGaedheal, and achieved a first preference share that showed that the five thousand votes attained by the late Laurence Ginnell in 1922 were hardly indicative of republican support in the region. Results show that Sinn Féin polled 36.6 per cent of the first preferences in Roscommon, 31.1 per cent in Longford-Westmeath and 27.3 per cent in Laois-Offaly, the constituency where no republican had emerged from the 1922 election. Unsurprisingly both William Davin and Seán Lyons were re-elected, though Davin's running mate in Laois-Offaly, Denis Cullen, could not rely on any surplus from Davin to assist him across the line. It is obvious that the spread of votes across the pro-Treaty candidates greatly handicapped their ability to restrict the Sinn Féin challenge, a

challenge that recognised the electoral sense of limiting the choices for republican voters. The only Sinn Féin candidate to survive from the general election of 1918, Count Plunkett, was joined by newcomers such as Laurence Brady and James Killane, both of whom would join their Sinn Féin colleagues in boycotting the parliament that was convened after the election, and which again saw William Cosgrave head the Free State government, with the Labour Party, Farmers' Party and Independents making up the bulk of the opposition in the Dáil chamber.

The two elections that 'book-ended' the Irish Civil War present much of the nuance that makes studying the Irish revolutionary period so challenging. Every village, town, city and constituency exhibited idiosyncrasies that should inform the wider debate on the early development of the Irish state in the twentieth century. The campaigns and results in the midlands constituencies showed that the region's electorate were, like their contemporaries across Ireland, struggling to come to terms with the consequences of the signing of the Proclamation in 1916, the staging of the Irish War of Independence, the passage of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921, the prosecution of the Irish Civil War, their opinions on Irish nationhood as well as their views on social and economic policies. It is to be hoped that in the run-up to the centenary commemoration of this phase in Irish history further research can help us better describe and understand these nuances and move away from generalisations that all too often mislead.

John Burke biography to come