



Political Geometry

The maths and mechanics of how we make our political choices

Damian Loscher, Managing Director, Ipsos MRBI

ifetime allegiance to one political brand is increasingly a thing of the past. Party loyalty is only borrowed, never owned. Almost overnight the political landscape can change, especially in challenging economic times.

At various stages in the relatively recent past, all five main political parties or blocs have topped or almost topped the polls.

How can we be so fickle? We are probably more loyal to our favourite brand of toothpaste than our preferred political party.

It makes no sense that we are so fickle. Surely, we conduct a rigorous evaluation of all the policies and personalities before making our decision, but the truth is this never happens.

It never happens because the amount of data we consume is too vast to analyse in depth. Instead we have developed a horribly efficient way of filtering, sorting and stacking all this data so that it can be processed with the minimum of effort.

In an ideal world, voters would compile a comprehensive list of decision criteria and painstakingly score each party on all criterion, like judges in a beauty contest. In reality, some options are never considered and most criteria are given no weight in the decision. An even more uncomfortable truth is, most of the time, a party's performance on just one or two criteria is all that matters.

The fact that voters can be so one-dimensional in their thinking requires some getting used to. It helps if we think of this one-dimensionality as a problem of maths. We are more inclined to think geometrically (to a point) than algorithmically. In other words, we can grasp the concepts of distance and space, but working out complex equations in our head is beyond us.

Human beings are most at home making one-dimensional evaluations. Think of a dimension as anything that may be considered relevant in an election, such as taxation policy, level of investment in public services or party leader likeability. Rating a party on any one of these dimensions is easy.

It gets complicated when we are asked to consider two dimensions at the same time and to trade performance on one dimension off against performance on the other. So, for example, Party A may be marginally ahead of Party B on investment in public services but way behind on taxation policy. Which party is more appealing?

It gets extremely complex when we consider that each dimension must be assigned its own level of importance, so not only do voters have to consider party ratings on each dimension but also how important each dimension is to them personally.

At election time, voters are supposed to evaluate numerous parties across multiple dimensions with each dimension attracting a different level of importance. Naturally, voters run away from having to perform this type of mental gymnastics.

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Instead, voters unconsciously allow one critical dimension to float to the surface. This is the primary dimension and if there is a clear winner on this dimension, a voter is unlikely to dig any deeper. If too close to call, the next most important dimension will be the decider. Rarely does a voter need to rummage around in the third dimension to find an answer. The fourth dimension is the stuff of science fiction.

So how does this perspective on the process by which we make decisions help us to understand the growing volatility in Irish politics?

We have witnessed a number of very significant changes in the primary dimension over the past two decades. The primary dimension that was the Civil War political divide eventually gave way to economic criteria of various shades. Generosity (in distributing our new-found wealth) had the greatest influence on party choice during the good times, followed by fairness (in raising revenue and cutting services) after the crash. With our solvency and sovereignty eventually threatened, a protectionist mindset took hold and a strict left-right dimension to Irish politics was established.

Arguably the mistake Fine Gael made in the run up to the 2016 election was to assume the siege mentality had lifted when so many households were still worried about their incomes and access to essential public services.

Right now, what is the primary dimension in Irish politics? If Fine Gael are ahead of Fianna Fail in the polls, we can probably assume a left-right spectrum is still dominant. With Fine Gael and Fianna both establishment parties and right leaning, the second dimension of Civil War politics then becomes extremely influential. With voters split on this dimension, stalemate is the inevitable consequence.

Something needs to change to break the current stalemate. Either a rising tide will eventually lift all boats and the primary dimension will shift, or the ongoing erosion of tribalism in Irish politics will allow a new second dimension to emerge.

In the meantime, it could be argued it is in Fine Gael's interests to perpetuate a right-left division. When Taoiseach Leo Varadkar and Deputy Paul Murphy are scrapping (a proxy right-left war), it invites the electorate to take sides. In this scenario, the only losers are Fianna Fail and Labour.

Thinking about elections in terms of dominant dimensions is especially useful in explaining how party preferences have flipped in Northern Ireland.

The primary dimension in Northern Ireland is obviously religion. Such a defining dimension could render all others irrelevant, except in this case voters are left with two parties to choose from at either end of the spectrum. To separate the SDLP and Sinn Fein at one end, or the UUP and the DUP at the other, a second dimension is needed.

During The Troubles, the second dimension was a party's attitude to how to achieve a resolution to the conflict. On this dimension, those parties associated with a peaceful solution – the SDLP and the UUP - were preferred. Once the violence ended, a new second dimension emerged as voters moved from choosing parties offering a peaceful solution to those fighting on their behalf for a piece of the solution.

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Which party would fight harder for their constituency in Stormont became the new second dimension. For the SDLP and the UUP, with no advantage on the first dimension and a weaker positioning on the second, their fates were sealed.

In a post-Brexit world, the game changer would be if the Northern Irish economy were required to stand on its own two feet, in which case the second dimension would likely be competence in growing the economy, a dimension on which no party currently enjoys clear competitive advantage.

A financially independent Northern Ireland is extremely unlikely so we can expect Sinn Fein and the DUP to dominate for some time to come, unless something else comes along to change the political geometry in Northern Ireland.

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