Not just friends and neighbours:

the effects of canvassing on vote choice in Ireland

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Introduction

The effects of party canvassing and local campaigning on election outcomes have once again attracted the attention of electoral behaviour scholars. These research efforts have been directed at the impact of canvassing on both turnout (see for instance Karp and Banducci 2007; Karp et al. 2008) and vote choice (Denver et al. 2004; Marsh 2004; Pattie and Johnston 2003). Traditionally, research in the North American context has emphasised the practical relevance and effectiveness of local campaigning (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Wielhouwer and Lockerbie 1994) to a much greater extent than has research in the British context. This was reinforced by Gerber and Green's (2000) experimental study on the impact of canvassing on voter turnout. By contrast, earlier British research (Kavanagh 1970, though see Bochel and Denver 1971) frequently dismissed any relevance of local campaigning, deeming it futile. More recent studies (Denver et al. 2002; Denver et al. 2004; Whiteley and Seyd 2003) have created what Pattie and Johnston (2003) named "the new orthodoxy" in British electoral campaigning research. This new approach to the issue of campaigning and its effects in the British context is characterised by a more balanced view of the relative impact of local vs. centralised (and highly "professionalized") campaigning. In particular, the impact of local campaigning on party choice appears to be statistically significant (even if usually only moderately strong). Finally, Marsh (2004), in the first individual-level study on the impact of canvassing on party choice in Ireland, presented evidence suggesting that in the Irish context campaigns remain largely "traditional", with extensive frequency and impact of door-to-door canvassing. These briefly outlined trends in electoral research suggest that any shift in the style of campaigning in the exclusively "post-modern" (Norris 2002) or "post-Fordist" (Denver and Hands 2002) direction, whereby campaigns are expected to be run by teams of professionals, employing expert knowledge and using electronic means of communication, has been exaggerated. Granted, the 'air war' aspect of the campaign has grown in importance,

but the 'ground war' remains necessary and effective. While campaigning obviously changes with the development of the mentioned "devices", the "personal" element seems still relevant and worthwhile studying.

The Impact of Canvassing on Vote Choice: Ireland and Beyond

Research in the effectiveness of campaign contact potentially suffers from the complication of the endogenous nature of party contact. This was recognised by Gerber and Green (2000) whose experimental research on the impact of canvassing on turnout was intended to counter the well-known problem created by the tendency for party canvassers to target likely voters, a pattern that would bias the results obtained from solely observational (e.g. survey) data. This difficulty has also been recognised by Marsh (2004) in his work on the effect of canvassing on vote choice in Ireland. He accepted the possibility that the parties and candidates would be able to target their supporters efficiently and thereby selectively mobilise them. When predicting contact with a set of instrumental variables proved difficult (or even impossible), Marsh (2004) opted for the more traditional strategy of using a set of control variables potentially related with the propensity to vote for a particular party (see also Pattie and Johnston 2003). While experimental evidence seems most appropriate in this situation one must also remember that in social sciences even the randomised field experiments, like the one conducted by Gerber and Green (2000), are likely to be flawed by having low external validity (Cook and Campbell 1979: 37) given the difficulty of "emulating" experimentally a situation of campaign contact by, say, a candidate. In such a situation, the question of the impact of contact on vote choice remains largely open and "doomed" to the very unsatisfactory methodological choice between endogeneity and low external validity.

With respect to the problem of the impact of campaign contact on vote choice, including the methodological issues outlined above, Ireland is a particularly interesting case to study. First, available survey data suggest that of the democracies studied to date the country is a clear leader in the frequency of contact, with 55% of the 2002 Irish National Election Study respondents being contacted during the 2002 General Election campaign, more than anywhere else in European Election Study or CSES samples (Karp et al 2002; Karp and Banducci 2007: 222). Second, Ireland uses the single-transferable-vote (STV) electoral system whereby candidates may compete for seats not only with rivals from other parties, but also against running mates from their own party. The two elements are inherently related as the additional within-party competition (non-existent in single-member-district – SMD - electoral systems) certainly constitutes an incentive for candidates to seek a personal vote (Carey and Shugart 1995) and hence for local, personal campaigning. Clearly, this was the case in the 2002 campaign when about 51% of the self-reported voters (from among respondents to the 2002 Irish National Election Study) claimed their household had been contacted by at least one candidate (Marsh et al., 2008: 133). But, more importantly, the context of campaigning in Ireland facilitates an improved approach to the outlined methodological issues surrounding the research on the impact of canvassing on vote choice. For the Irish context is the one where endogeneity is very likely to appear. First and foremost, 64% of respondents to the 2002 Irish National Election Study whose turnout was positively validated (i.e. they turned out to be voters with reference to the official electoral registers) claimed they had decided about which candidate to support before the campaign had even started (as compared to 70% who had decided the party they would support prior to the campaign). This suggests contact might have had only a relatively minor impact on vote choice, contrary to what was claimed by Marsh (2004), whose estimates could be exaggerated by endogeneity. For such contact to take place, of course, candidates need to know who their

supporters are, but also they need to be able to target these easily in any canvass. However, the volatility of the Irish electorate makes the first problematic, and the fact that contact takes place on the ground rather than via the telephone network ensures that candidates are more likely to target geographical areas than they are to target individuals. The weakness of social structural underpinning of the party system suggests even this strategy would provide only mild endogeneity. However, geography matters. Many voters attach great importance to the benefits that a TD can bring to a particular local area (Marsh et al. 2008: 155-156), an area which may well lie within a constituency; a candidate's record in and commitment to that 'local' area is thus significant. Certainly, it is apparent from the unofficial tallies made of votes by local ballot box that candidates typically win most votes in their 'home' areas within the constituency. This is perhaps most marked when a candidate is one of two or more from the same party, but is also apparent for lone candidates (see e.g. Parker 1984). The importance of locality is also apparent in transfer patterns (Marsh 1981). It is against this background that it has been suggested that geographic distance between candidates and voters could predict contact (Marsh 2004: 265). Hence the problem of endogeneity can be reframed here as the candidates viewed as good for a given area are likely going to be those who live within such an area (i.e. those whose geographic distance to a given respondent is small). A candidate will certainly find it easier to contact the citizens living close to her but, at the same time, those citizens will in any case be more prone to vote for that candidate.

In this study, we utilise a unique data set on geographic distance between the respondents to the 2002 Irish General Election Study[1] and the candidates to the Dáil (lower chamber of the Irish parliament). This allows us to obtain three benefits in the context of the research on the impact of campaign contact on vote choice, in Ireland and beyond. First, we are able to study the impact of contact by candidates while, at the same time, controlling for

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[1] See http://www.tcd.ie/ines

geographic distance between the candidates and the respondents. Practically, we conceive of geographic distance and contact as of candidate characteristics. Then, relying on the fixed-effects estimates (conditional logistic regression), we can rule out any threat of endogeneity stemming from respondents' varying propensities for particular vote choice. As such, this study does not seriously suffer from either endogeneity bias or low external validity (as the "real" campaign contact, not its experimental "surrogate", is under study here). Second, we can provide the first systematic evaluation (in Ireland or elsewhere) of the impact of geographic distance to a given candidate on the citizens' electoral choice. This way we explicitly introduce the geographic dimension to the individual-level studies of electoral behaviour. Third, we can also asses whether the impact of contact varies with geographic distance, and thereby whether, for instance, contact might help certain candidates elicit support also from the voters who happen to live further away. A positive response to a question stated this way would lend additional support to the thesis that "traditional" campaigning, at least in Ireland, is not just widespread, but is still a powerful method with which to attract electoral support.

Of course, we cannot generalise our results automatically to what happens elsewhere. Certain features of Irish political competition are unusual, but there are many systems that, one way or another, encourage a degree of candidate centred voting, and a degree of localism is also characteristic of most countries, as evidenced in the sort of candidates who get selected (Gallagher and Marsh 1988; Shugart et al 2005). Hence we hope this study will not the last to explore these issues, and that the questions asked here will in future also be asked with reference to other democracies.

Hypotheses, Data, and the Concept of Research

As it was already said in the previous section, we test three hypotheses here. The first of them relates to contact by a candidate:

Hypothesis 1: All else being equal, the respondents who report a candidate C_j called to their home during the campaign (asking for vote) are more likely (than those whose home were not visited by that candidate) to have cast their first-preference vote for that candidate.

The second hypothesis concerns geographic distance between respondents and the candidates running the 2002 Irish General Election:

Hypothesis 2: All else being equal, the smaller the geographic distance between a respondent and a candidate C_j the higher the probability that the respondent gives their first-preference vote to that candidate.

Finally, we expect that contact might help candidates partly overcome the limitations resulting from larger geographic distance to some groups of voters: At the

Hypothesis 3: All else being equal, the positive effect of contact by a candidate C_j on the probability of respondents casting their first-preference vote for that candidate will increase with geographic distance between the respondent and that candidate.

We test the hypotheses stated above using the 2002 Irish National Election Study data. We merge the latter with a unique data set that includes geographic coordinates (based on the exact addresses) of the candidates running in the 2002 Irish Dáil election. We use proxy data on the location of respondents' homes. We do not have the addresses of the respondents, only

the location of the middle point of a particular district electoral division where a given

respondent lived at the election time. Analyses presented later in this paper are conducted on a

sample of respondents distributed among 316 (of almost 3,500) different district electoral

divisions. Given that in the 2002 election Ireland was divided into 42 constituencies (each

with a unique lists of candidates), this means that we utilise considerable – both within- and

between-constituency – variation as regards geographic distance between respondents and

candidates. We acknowledge the fact that our independent variable (i.e. the mentioned

geographic distance) is measured with some error, but there is no reason to believe this is

systematic. Our other crucial variable is contact by a candidate. Respondents were asked by

the (face-to-face) interviewer to enumerate the candidates who called to their home asking for

votes. [2]We also include an interaction term between contact and geographic distance. Finally,

we include a few control variables, all of which are the characteristics of the candidates.

These are dummies relating to the candidate's status as an incumbent, senator or councillor,

the total amount of money a candidate spent on campaigning, and a set of dummy variables

denoting a candidate's party (with the independents as a reference category). We estimate our

model using a fixed-effects approach (conditional logistic regression), and so we do not

include respondents' characteristics as controls. This means that what we are looking at here

is the average "within-respondent" effect of candidates' characteristics on the respondents'

electoral choice.

Results and Discussion

In table 1, we present the conditional logistic regression estimates of our candidate choice

model, presented in the previous section. Even though standard errors have been clustered at

the level of district electoral division (as we have expected positive intra-cluster error

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[2] In 21% of cases they mentioned more than one candidate: Marsh et al, 2008: 133.

correlation at this level), the effect of both contact and geographic distance are highly statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). This is not surprising given the large number of observations as a result of the application of conditional logistic regression. However, the interaction effect between contact and distance is also statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). The interaction effects in non-linear models, including the logistic model, cannot be assessed directly on the basis of the unstandardised coefficients presented in table 1 (see Ai and Norton 2003). Therefore, in tables 2 and 3 we present the effects of our main independent variables on the predicted probability of a respondent R_i's voting for a candidate C_j.

The first set of results, presented in table 2, reinforce those obtained earlier by Marsh (2004) who found that respondents to the 2002 Irish National Election Study were significantly more likely to give their first-preference vote to a particular party if contacted by a Dáil candidate from that party. The findings presented here add two elements to what has been known to date about the impact of campaign contact on vote choice in Ireland. One of the elements is a deeper understanding of how contact really works. Marsh (2004) found that contact by a candidate increased the probability of a respondent casting a first-preference vote for the *party* of the candidate. Here it is clear that contact by a given candidate with an elector increases the probability of that elector voting for that candidate. This is perhaps a more fundamental finding as under the STV electoral system votes are given directly to candidates rather than to parties. The second new element present in this study is even more significant. The effect of contact on vote choice is not homogenous, but varies with the geographic distance between a respondent and a candidate. When the distance is held constant at its minimum level, contact increases the probability of casting a first-preference vote for a given candidate by 16.5 percentage points. At the mean value of distance the effect of contact almost doubles. But when we again increase the distance by one standard deviation, or by two, the effect of candidate contact is even stronger and distinguishable (on the basis of the

95% confidence intervals) from the analogous effect when distance was kept at its minimum. However, at the largest values of geographic distance the effect of contact on first-preference choice diminishes to eventually take values hardly distinguishable from zero. This suggests our prediction that the larger the distance the stronger the effect of contact is limited to a subset of observations. Contact indeed becomes more crucial as distance increases, helping get votes of those living further away, but when distance is very large even contact cannot convince a person to vote for a particular candidate. These findings are supplemented by the results presented in table 3. Geographic distance also has dramatic impact on a respondent's propensity to support a particular candidate. Obviously, the negative effect of distance on the probability of a candidate being given a first-preference vote is weaker if the candidate calls to the respondent home asking for support. The effects are indistinguishable from each other (on the basis of the 95% confidence intervals) when a change from minimum distance to the mean plus two standard deviations is considered.

Overall, these results reinforce the classic image of Irish electoral politics as localistic in orientation, characterised electorally by local concerns and grassroots campaigning (Chubb 1970). The latter is no doubt an important and efficient way of mobilising political support, but its power is very limited when a candidate lives too far from a voter's local area. As indicated earlier, Irish citizens perceive the Dáil candidates largely in terms of what the latter could offer to the specific local area (Marsh et al. 2008: 155-156). Perhaps distance prevents a candidate from being perceived as able to offer much to a locality so and even contact is unhelpful. Obviously, there is still a question as to why localism is so important in Ireland can be explained. Some point to the electoral system as responsible, but a more nuanced view typically treats the electoral system as just one component of a complex explanation (e.g. Gallagher xxxx).

Conclusion

Overall, our analysis suggests three major conclusions. First, the image of Irish electoral politics, even of its essentially state-level component (i.e. parliamentary elections), as firmly rooted in the local context (Marsh et al. 2008) has clearly been confirmed here. Irish voters tend to support those Dáil candidates who live nearby, as well as those who manage to call to the potential supporters' home and ask for votes. Obviously, the analyses presented in this paper can and should be extended (e.g. to an analysis of party choice on the basis of the distance between a respondent and the closest candidate from a given party, and to the value of contact in generating 2nd and 3rd preferences if not 1st preference votes). However, this would hardly change the above fundamental thesis. Comparative work is also now needed to see to what extent this phenomenon is limited to Ireland and why electoral politics in other countries might look different.

The second conclusion is about campaign contact and its impact on electoral results. Clearly, this effect is strong in Ireland. However, the effect of contact on vote choice varies depending on the geographic distance between a candidate and a voter. At the lower values of distance, contact is actually a means with which a candidate might get votes from those living further away. However, when distance increases to the maximum levels the effect of contact on the probability of a candidate getting a first-preference vote is hardly distinguishable from zero. The impact of contact on vote choice is apparently heterogeneous.

Finally, even though already mentioned, the effect of geographic distance on vote choice deserves a further comment here. Of course, this strong regularity fits well with the larger image of Irish electoral politics as localistic and personalistic. It seem unlikely that the patterns we indentify here are limited to Ireland, given the well-known importance of locality inn candidate selection, a phenomenon not limited to Ireland. Hopefully, our paper will

contribute to an increase in the interest in the impact of geographic distance on vote choice, so that this and other related questions are answered in future.

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Table 1. Predictors of Probability of a Dáil Candidate Being Selected as First-Preference in the 2002 Irish General Election: Conditional Logistic Regression Estimates

	Coef.	Robust SE
Candidates' Characteristics		
Contact	1.57**	0.11
Geographic Distance to Respondent	-5.44×10^{-5}**	0.39×10^{-5}
Contact X Geographic Distance to Respondent	1.39×10^{-5}*	0.65×10^{-5}
Euros Spent on Campaign	2.57×10^{-5}**	0.49×10^{-5}
Incumbent	0.39**	0.09
Senator	-0.69**	0.29
Councillor	0.19	0.13
Party Dummies		
Fianna Fáil	0.69**	0.12
Fine Gael	0.38**	0.13
Green	0.42**	0.18
Labour	0.28*	0.15
Progressive Democrats	0.09	0.20
Sinn Féin	0.14	0.16
Other Party	-0.58	0.37
Log Likelihood	-3,246.57	
McFadden R^2	0.23	
Average p-value for Rejecting IIA Assumption	0.45	
Number of Observations	19,858	
Number of Respondents	1,787	

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$ (one-tailed tests)
Note: The model is restricted to validated voters. Standard errors are clustered at the level of district electoral division.

Table 2. Average Effects of Contact on the Predicted Probability of Respondent Voting for a Candidate C$_j$ (for Different Values of Geographic Distance)

Geographic Distance between Respondent and Candidate C$_j$	Change (in %) in the Probability of a Contacted Respondent Voting for a Candidate C$_j$
Minimum	16.5 [8.7; 24.2]
Mean	32.8 [22.8; 42.9]
Mean + 1 Standard Deviation	46.2 [35.6; 56.7]
Mean + 2 Standard Deviations	44.6 [26.6; 62.6]
Maximum (when Contact Reported)	0.4 [0.1; 0.8]

Note: The numbers in brackets are 95% confidence intervals. The fixed intercept is assumed zero. Control variables are held at their real values.

Table 3. Average Effects of Distance on the Predicted Probability of a Respondent Voting for a Candidate C$_j$

Change in Geographic Distance between Respondent and candidate C$_j$	Change (in %) in The Probability of A Respondent Voting for a Candidate C$_j$ – Contact Not Manipulated	Change (in %) in The Probability of A Respondent Voting for a Candidate C$_j$ - No Contact Assumed	Change (in %) in The Probability of A Respondent Voting for a Candidate C$_j$ - Contact Assumed
From Minimum to Mean	-21.8 [-28.0; -15.5]	-23.3 [-30.0; -16.6]	-6.9 [-11.2; -2.6]
From Mean to Mean + 1 Standard Deviation	-24.6 [-30.2; -19.0]	-26.2 [-31.6; -20.8]	-12.9 [-20.8; -5.0]
From Mean to Mean + 2 Standard Deviations	-41.3 [-52.1; -30.5]	-43.2 [-53.3; -33.1]	-31.5 [-48.2; -14.9]

Note: The numbers in brackets are 95% confidence intervals. The fixed intercept is assumed zero. Control variables are held at their real values.