

Minority Party Government and Independent MPs: A Comparative Analysis of Australia and Ireland

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Minority government is becoming more common. With support declining for traditional parties and increasing for anti-establishment movements, government formation is becoming increasingly difficult in many jurisdictions. While minority government has been the subject of much normative debate, one type of minority arrangement that has not attracted much attention is that involving independent parliamentarians. Government in most countries tends to be party government, but in this article, we examine the experience in Australia and Ireland of independents supporting minority government. We assess the performance of these administrations in terms of their stability, their productivity and their electoral performance. We find that, contrary to expectation, minority government involving independents is not a recipe for instability nor necessarily results in an efficient parliament.

Keywords: Australia, Ireland, Minority Government, Independents

Minority government is an increasingly frequent occurrence. In 1996, there were five cases of this phenomenon across 29 advanced democracies. This had increased to 12 in 37 such systems in 2016 (Political Data Yearbook: n.d.). Generally speaking, minority administrations have been most commonly associated with countries that use a form of proportional representation, but in recent years, they have also been prevalent under plurality and majoritarian electoral systems. One recent example of this was in Australia, which, following the August 2010 election, had its first so-called ‘hung’ federal parliament since 1940. For several weeks after, the independent MPs who held the balance of power conducted extensive negotiations with the major parties, before agreeing to support the Julia Gillard led Australian Labor Party (ALP). This involvement of independents in

the government formation process is a very rare phenomenon;¹ the only established democracy where this happens on a regular basis is Ireland. For example, in May 2016, the centre-right Fine Gael party formed a minority administration in Ireland with the support of eight independent MPs, three of whom were appointed directly to cabinet and two of whom were given junior ministerial posts. Commentators in Australia and Ireland have bemoaned the formation of these administrations, with claims that they are unstable, inefficient and a normatively 'bad' outcome. Many of these complaints are a repetition of accusations made against minority governments in the past, most of which were debunked in Strom's (1981) seminal work in this area. However, while it has been shown in a number of countries that minority government works (such as Belgium, the Netherlands and most Scandinavian countries), the charge remains unchallenged that this type of administration involving independents does not. The aim of this article is to assess the merits of these claims by examining how these minority governments perform vis-à-vis their majority counterparts. Different forms of minority governments and support status have been experimented with in recent years (Otjes and Louwerse, 2014) including in Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Spain. Minority governments are generally, however, not associated with Westminster-style parliamentary systems, as the value placed on being in opposition is generally quite low, so their occurrence in these two Anglophone countries is somewhat unusual. To measure the performance of minority governments involving independents, we focus on three criteria commonly used to assess their functionality: duration, legislative productivity and electoral performance. The structure of this article is as follows. We first discuss the general experience of minority governments before examining their prevalence in Australia and Ireland. The role of the independents supporting these administrations is then discussed, with a focus on why they are included in the government formation process. Utilising hypotheses based on the comparative politics literature on minority government, we then test these hypotheses with empirical data from Australia and Ireland.

1. Minority government

According to Field (2016, p. 3), between 1945 and 2010, one-third of governments in Europe had a minority status. There is now a significant number of

¹There are comparative examples of governments relying on non-party actors, such as minority administrations in Canada in the early 2000s looking to rogue party MPs or non-partisan technocrats serving as ministers in Mediterranean and former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe (McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014). However, neither of these rogue former party MPs nor technocrats are genuine (i.e. elected) independent parliamentarians.

individual country or comparative analyses that attempt to understand the processes that determine whether minority government functions effectively or not. Strom (1990) showed that the perception of such administrations as irrational, ineffective and unstable was misplaced and that minority governments could be the logical outcome of a set of self-interested strategies adopted by political parties. However, there remains serious debate over what institutions, processes or behavioural norms allow minority government to function effectively. The same author (1990, p. 238), for example, argued that the regularity of minority government was an important determinant of success. Paun (2011, p. 448) suggests that formation and success is dependent on 'a greater degree of inter-party consultation, negotiation and compromise than leaders of governments in Westminster systems are accustomed to'. Others again point to the types of agreements that are in place between governing parties and other actors involved in minority government situations (Costar and Curtin, 2004; Bale and Bergman, 2006; Chalmers, 2009; Costar, 2008;). The impact that federalism and multilevel governance has on the success of these administrations has been canvassed (Field, 2016), and this includes the way that policy transfer can occur across different layers of government (Costar, 2008; Prosser and Warhurst, 2014). Hence, while much of the literature has examined why minority governments form, as Christiansen and Pedersen (2014) note, there is not enough focus on the performance of these administrations. Some studies have attempted to tackle this lacuna, including Juul Christiansen and Damgaard (2008), Strom *et al.* (2008), Bale and Bergman (2006) and Green-Pedersen and Thomsen (2005), but none to date have considered the unusual phenomenon of minority governments involving independents.

When measuring minority government performance, Field (2009), using the case of Spain, employed three indicators: government duration, legislative success and the governing party's electoral performance in the subsequent election. On these measures, Field found little difference in the performance of majority and minority governments, with the exception of election results, where minority administrations were not punished as severely by the electorate. Field also highlights three institutional factors that can help minority governments survive: government control of the parliamentary agenda, the role of parliamentary committees and the presence of voting procedures that favour or enhance the government's capacity to govern. These factors, which had been noted previously by Tsebelis (2002), are important to consider as it allows analyses of not only legislative outcomes but also, importantly, legislative processes. While Field (2009, p. 424) suggests that, in the Spanish case, the 'macro-institutional environment' (e.g. the constructive vote of no confidence and majoritarian electoral rules) remain important, other mechanisms, including passing laws at the committee level, are used less often during minority governments. Field (2016, p. 2–3) also notes the importance of the party system and, in particular the capacity of the

governing party to make concessions to regional parties in their respective districts. Moury and Fernandes (2016, p. 2), in contrast, consider the case of minority government in Portugal, and note that ‘minority governments in Portugal have traditionally been unstable’. However, in considering whether minority governments have the potential to fulfil pledges, they argue that ‘minority governments fulfil at least as many pledges as their majority counterparts’ (2016, p. 2).

Despite this, some analyses suggest that having the institutional setup to encourage greater cooperation does not mean minority governments simply will work well. Green-Pedersen (2001, p. 18), in considering the ‘Danish economic miracle’, noted that ‘the developments in Denmark after 1973 do not provide an unambiguous answer to the issue of the governing capacity of minority governments: Danish minority governments have at times governed very effectively but at times also very ineffectively’. Nonetheless, he notes that, while changes to economic strategy were important in Denmark, of additional importance were changes to the ‘the functioning of Danish parliamentarianism making it possible for minority governments to govern effectively’. What this meant was that parties not in government could more easily pass legislation without the parties in government interfering.

2. Minority government and independents

Because parliamentary democracy is often assumed to be party democracy, it is also assumed that independent politicians² have a detrimental effect on the stability and performance of both legislature and executive. For example, a leading textbook on European politics states that ‘if there were no parties—in other words, if every member of parliament was an independent, with no institutionalised links with other members—the result would be something close to chaos’ (Gallagher *et al.*, 2011, p. 327). The rationale is that it can be difficult for parties to get these non-partisans, free to act of their own accord, to toe the line, and it can also be extremely difficult for independents to stay onside and support an unpopular government. This explains the negative commentary directed towards minority governments involving independents. In 2014, for example, the political editor of *The Irish Times* claimed that, if a large number of independents were elected to the Irish parliament: ‘that would make the formation of the next government extremely difficult, if not impossible, and plunge the country into a phase of political instability, with unknown consequences’ (Collins, 2014). Likewise, in Australia, when discussions were occurring between the independents, minor and major parties in 2010, the national broadsheet *The Australian* argued that ‘The economic costs of a fractured parliament could break us’ (Stuchbury, 2010).

²By independents, we simply mean MPs not affiliated with any party.

While the reliance of Julia Gillard's minority government on independents was a rare occurrence at the federal level in Australia, such arrangements are more common at the subnational level. A recurring feature of the subnational experience has been the development of detailed agreements between the governing party or parties and supportive minor parties and independents (see [Costar and Curtin, 2004](#); [Costar, 2008](#); [Griffith, 2010](#)). This experience had a significant impact on the Gillard-led minority government from 2010. It can partially be understood as a case of policy transfer, where minor parties and independents learnt from the experiences of other minor parties and independents at the subnational level, but more telling was that some of those involved in the federal minority government had already experienced minority governments at the subnational level.

While Gillard had to look to the subnational level for inspiration, Enda Kenny, the Fine Gael leader in Ireland, had in 2016 plenty of national experiences of this phenomenon to draw on. Forty per cent of Irish governments have been minority administrations, and in almost all these cases, independents have had a role to play in their formation and maintenance. The nature of independents' involvement has varied considerably, from their being cabinet ministers, to extensive patronage agreements and to ad hoc arrangements where independents' support was negotiated on a case-by-case basis. In total, there have been ten cases of independent involvement in minority governments between 1945 and 2018, with seven of these coming since 1980 (see [Weeks, 2017](#), p. 205–251 for more detail). In most Irish cases, as with Australia, independents are not formally part of government. Their level of participation is generally a form of external support, with their support rates in parliament averaging 86 per cent in Ireland ([Weeks, 2017](#), p. 246) and 76 per cent in Gillard's minority government in Australia.

The reasons why Gillard and Kenny looked to independents are varied. The first is their presence in parliament, a rare occurrence comparatively. Since 1990, independents have been elected to national parliament in just eight established democracies ([Weeks, 2017](#), p. 3). Minor parties have traditionally made little impact in the Australian and Irish Houses of Representatives, so independents are the obvious actors for the major parties to look to when forming a government. This feeds into the second factor, the party system. With both Australia and Ireland having a history of British rule, they inherited the Westminster distaste for coalitions and, therefore, have majoritarian tendencies. Larger parties do not want to share power, and independents offer the perfect option for them if they fail to win an overall majority. The ruling party can act in a majoritarian fashion while leading a minority administration. It can retain all the benefits accruing from majority support in parliament, with none of the disadvantages brought by having to include a party in coalition. The lack of fluidity within the party system is another reason why independents are included in the government process.

Both the Australian and Irish party systems are quite restrictive in that if neither of the main governing options wins a majority, stasis can ensue. Since neither of the main two parties in each of the respective party systems (Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in Ireland, the ALP and the Liberal Party in Australia) has ever shared power with each other, the only feasible option is for the party with the most seats to form a minority government with the help of independents. This is consistent with [Strom's \(1990, p. 90\)](#) argument that the countries most influenced by the Westminster system of government increasingly turn to minority governments as their traditional two-party systems fragment.

Many of the independents involved in minority governments in Australia and Ireland have previously been members of political parties, some even having been elected for these parties. The presence of preferential voting in both these countries (single-seat variant in Australia; multi-seat in Ireland)—the fourth factor explaining a reliance on independents ([Weeks, 2014](#))—facilitates their election.

3. Minority government performance

As has been outlined, one of the main reasons for the interest in minority governments involving independents concerns their performance. We test the general expectations that they are a normatively poor outcome via an analysis of minority governments involving independents in Australia and Ireland. In the former, this comprises just one (albeit significant and recent) case,³ and in the latter country, ten in the post-1945 era. The nature of involvement we discuss refers generally to an external reliance on independent parliamentarians (i.e. they are outside cabinet), although in a few exceptional cases (such as the Irish administration formed in 2016), they are also a part of government. In building upon the work of [Field \(2009, 2016\)](#), we examine whether minority governments relying on independents perform better or worse than other governments (in these cases, all other such governments comprise majority administrations). We hypothesise that minority governments involving independents should be shorter, less productive and likelier to face bigger electoral defeats. This is in line with findings that independents can promote legislative gridlock and reduce accountability ([Sherrill, 1998; Reilly, 2002; Wright and Schaffner, 2002](#)). It also follows on from the arguments of [Aldrich \(1995\)](#) and others ([Brennan and Lomasky, 1997](#)) that parties

³In contrast to our approach, [Prosser and Denniss \(2015\)](#) have analysed minority government by taking into account the bicameral nature of Australia's Commonwealth parliament. They suggest that unlike the orthodox approach of determining the majority or minority nature of the government based on the seats in the lower house, the composition of the entire legislature should be considered. For comparison with the Irish case, we have decided to follow the orthodox approach and focus on solely on the House of Representatives.

are needed for representative institutions to work. By implication, any government looking to non-party actors should be less likely to fulfil its functions. Our five hypotheses are as follows:

H1: Minority governments relying on independents will be shorter than other types of governments.

H2: Minority governments relying on independents will produce less legislation than other governments.

H3: Minority governments relying on independents will be more likely to be defeated in parliament than other governments.

H4: Legislation from the opposition is more likely to pass under minority governments relying on independents.

H5: Minority governments relying on independents will experience fewer electoral losses than other governments.

To test these hypotheses, data on government performance were gleaned from the parliamentary websites in both countries and from a range of secondary sources. These are summarised in [Table 1](#). The following sections discuss the implications of these statistics for the hypotheses and what they mean for our evaluation of minority government.

3.1. Government duration

Beginning with stability, it is generally believed that a reliance by major parties on minor parties and independents contributes to instability, because the threat of the whip cannot be used to guarantee the latter's support, and their influence can also generate unrest in the government backbenches, especially among those who resent the attention afforded to the kingmakers ([Weeks, 2017](#), p. 271). However, there are very few instances of minority government being brought down by independents in either Ireland or Australia. There were two periods in Ireland, in 1927 and 1982, when there were two general elections in both years because of the collapse of minority governments reliant on independents. However, as has been discussed elsewhere ([Weeks, 2017](#), p. 205–252), much of this instability was due to the government's mismanagement of independents. The latter fear snap elections more than parties as their seats can be particularly precarious and, so, are not as likely to bring about the fall of a government as some might imagine. To examine stability in more detail, we use as a proxy the duration of governments.

H1: Minority governments relying on independents will be shorter than majority governments.

The first expectation is based on the premise that, because independents are isolated individuals on whom pressure can be wielded by both interest groups and

Table 1. Minority vs. majority governments in Australia and Ireland, 1945–2016

Performance	Case	Minority government with independents	Majority government
Govt. duration	Australia	3 years 1 month	2 years 9 months
	Ireland	2 years 8 months	3 years 5 months
Support provided to government by independents	Australia	76%	N/A
	Ireland	86%	N/A
Mean annual legislative output	Australia	176	141 (1949–2010) ⁴
	Ireland	37	40
Govt. defeated (Average no. times p.a.)	Australia	20 ⁵	0 (1962–2015) ⁶
	Ireland	1.13	0.18
Successful PMB	Australia	5 in 3 years	12 in 68 years (1945–2016)
	Ireland (1945–2002)	10 in 26 years	5 in 45 years
Average electoral performance of governing parties or coalition since 1945	Australia	–4.6% (1 case)	–0.65% (27 cases)
	Ireland	–4.5% (10 cases)	–8.0% (12 cases)
Electoral fate of independents		% <i>vote change</i>	<i>Re-election rate</i>
	Australia	+16.6 %	100% (1 case)
	Ireland	–0.7%	76% (41 cases)

Source: Evershed (2013), Singleton (2014), Muller (2017), oireachtas (n.d), Weeks (2017).

local constituents, they could be more likely to buckle under pressure when compared with a majority government. This reasoning stems from the already discussed claims of commentators in both countries about the expected length of administrations involving independents. For this reason, when Gillard formed her minority government in 2010 and likewise Enda Kenny in 2016, bookmakers in the two countries offered short odds on the respective cabinets collapsing within a few months. Context is important here too. Gillard, as the first female prime minister of Australia, had to confront opponents in her own party as well as on the opposition benches and the media that sought to make her gender a

⁴Average legislative output has been determined by using figures from Evershed (2013), which provides acts passed per day per parliament.

⁵Many of these defeats were procedural, and only one of these related to government legislation (see Parliamentary Library 2013).

⁶As noted on the parliamentary website, ‘On no occasion has a vote of no confidence in a Government, or a motion or amendment censuring a Government, been successful in the House of Representatives’ (Parliamentary Library 2013). However, in 2016, the Turnbull government lost three votes on the floor of the house, which was the first time a majority government had lost votes of this nature since 1962.

central issue (Young and Ricketson, 2014; Johnson, 2015). The legislative victories the government achieved, often through hard fought negotiations, were framed as giving into the interests of unrepresentative interests (Prosser and Denniss, 2015b, p. 163). This was also a period of Australian federal politics in which there were significant leadership changes; indeed, Australia had five prime ministers in five years between 2009 and 2014.

In spite of this, one of the striking features of the Gillard administration was its stability. At the subnational level in Australia, there have been no cases of independents bringing down minority governments, and so, it is perhaps unsurprising that this record was not broken during the Gillard minority government. This stability is also underlined by the term length of this administration. At the federal level, the average post-war term for the House of Representatives has been two years and nine months, while the minority government between 2010 and 2013 lasted three years and one month. The stability of the Gillard minority government can be attributed to a few factors. First and foremost, the detail involved in the agreement between the ALP and the independents clarified most obstacles and ambiguity about the extent of the relationship. Central to the agreement was an attempt by the independents to reduce the unfettered power of the executive in the House of Representatives (Prosser and Denniss, 2015a; Rodrigues and Brenton, 2010). The changes requested included, for example, an independent speaker; the reintroduction of a committee system for the House; a parliamentary budget office and a code of conduct for members and senators. While the government's majority in the House shrunk, once a former member of the Liberal National Party resigned as speaker, and the formal agreements with the independent Andrew Wilkie and the Greens also collapsed, stability was retained as both the latter agreed to provide support for the government on confidence and supply motions (Prosser and Warhurst, 2014, p. 69–70). Two of the independents backing the government said that the reason they continued to support the Gillard-led ALP was their 'confidence in her personality and transactional ability to manage the minority government' (Prosser and Warhurst, 2014). In other words, key to the stability of the government was Gillard's ability to manage its minority status.

This too is the general pattern that affects the longevity of minority governments in Ireland. Unlike the recent Australian case, Irish minority governments are shorter than their majority counterparts, but there are far more cases of them than the solitary Australian example. Such administrations in Ireland survive two years and eight months, compared to a mean of three years and five months for majority governments. There is considerable variation however, with some of these governments lasting less than one year, while others went the full five-year term. As with the experience in Australia, key to the duration of these governments was the contracts between the governments and the independents. Those where the governments negotiated ad hoc support with independents and relied on alternative majorities

lasted the shortest, at almost exactly two years (Weeks 2017, p. 243). In contrast, those with more formal arrangements (involving independents in cabinet and/or contracts with each) lasted almost twice as long. This indicates a significant institutional dimension to the stability of minority governments involving independents—the more formal the relationship between them, the longer the government lasts.

3.2. *Legislative success*

The second area to examine minority government performance concerns their legislative output. The general expectation is that they will be less efficient and less productive. This can be measured in terms of the number of bills passed, how often they were defeated and the number of non-government-initiated bills.

H2: Minority governments relying on independents will produce less legislation than other governments.

H3: Minority governments relying on independents will be more likely to be defeated in parliament than other governments.

H4: Legislation from the opposition is more likely to pass under minority governments relying on independents.

This follows on from the findings of Wright and Schaffner (2002) that, in the absence of party ties, legislatures are less productive. It also feeds into the reasoning of Aldrich (1995) that parties are devised by legislators to help achieve their goals. Relying on individuals without any ties makes it more difficult to achieve these. This was partially confirmed by Conley and Bekafigo (2010, p. 103), who in their study of veto players in Ireland found that minority governments involving independents produced four less bills per annum than other governments.

Contrary to expectation, the Gillard government was one of the most productive administrations in Australian federal history in terms of passing legislation. During Gillard's period as prime minister—which includes 23 days prior to the 2010 election and ended 72 days before the 2013 election—more bills were passed into law per day than under any other Australian prime minister (Evershed, 2013). There were also almost 50 per cent more divisions in the 2010–2013 minority government than in the administration prior to that. In total, there were '502 regular divisions and 42 uncounted divisions . . . compared with 345 and six respectively in the 42nd Parliament. The average number of divisions per day in the 43rd Parliament (3.1) is also higher than the average of 2.2 for the 1991–2011 period' (Parliamentary Library, 2013). The average bills per annum were also higher than in majority governments as Table 1 demonstrates. Again, caveats are required here. Only 50 per cent of bills introduced were opposed by the opposition, albeit that is a significant increase on previous administrations (Singleton, 2014, p. 45). Moreover, it is not always easy to classify the importance of a

division, some are procedural and important, others less so. Nonetheless, the support of the independents was critical in passing the key legislative successes of the Gillard government (see [Marsh and Lewis, 2014](#)).

In line with Australian experience, minority governments in Ireland are not as unproductive as might have been expected. In terms of legislative output, the number of bills passed does not differ greatly between majority and minority governments. While a study of the legislative productivity of parliaments in their first year found minority administrations to be the least productive (the four least productive were all minority governments, while the four most productive were single-party majorities, bar the first government in the independent state), this is most likely owing to a teething process ([thejournal.ie.; 2017](#)) and improves once they settle in. For example, examining Dáil output over a 35-year period between 1982 and 2017, minority governments on average pass 37 bills per year, just three fewer than majority administrations.

For the second measure of legislative success of how often the government was defeated, Gillard's government had a seemingly poor record. It was defeated 61 times in total. Before the minority government, it had also been over 80 years since a government of any persuasion had lost a 'crucial House vote on legislation' ([Green, 2011](#)). But, the context is important here too. First, the defeats for the Gillard government on the floor of the House were a product of the nature of the agreements with the independents, as none provided unilateral support. Andrew Wilkie, the Tasmanian independent, voted with the government in 77 per cent of divisions, while the two rural independents, Rob Oakeshott and Tony Windsor, voted with the government in 77 and 75 per cent of divisions, respectively. Adam Bandt, the Green who also ensured the government survived, voted with the government in 84 per cent of divisions. While this might portray an image of instability, most of these defeats were on procedural rather than legislative matters ([Parliamentary Library, 2013](#)). Second, none involved a defeat of government-sponsored legislation ([Singleton, 2014](#), p. 45). As Oakeshott, one of the participating independents, said: 'The leader of the house was very blunt, in that if Windsor and Oakeshott [two of the independents] didn't support it, it wouldn't happen. So we were quite often seeing ideas before they even went to Cabinet quite frankly' ([Prosser and Warhurst, 2014](#)).

Irish parliaments also follow the Westminster tradition in that almost all government motions are passed and almost all opposition motions are defeated. The success rates vary slightly between governments, but these differences are not significant. Between 1937 and 2007, the 10 minority governments were defeated 17 times in total (with very few of these defeats on legislative matters), with 9 opposition motions passed. Under the 13 majority administrations in the same time period, just 9 government motions were defeated and 1 opposition passed. So, minority governments are slightly less successful in having their way and

thwarting that of the opposition, but only marginally. Of course, just because minority governments are rarely defeated does not mean that they necessarily get their own way. They might choose to only introduce legislation that they know they can pass, and the opposition may have a great deal of input. One reason, therefore, for the lack of defeat could be that few ‘controversial’ bills are introduced, but another factor is that independents are consulted regarding such legislation, as has been shown to be the case in Australia. Consequently, when such bills come before parliament, independents have already had an input and are less likely to vote against the government.

This pattern also prevails under minority rule in Ireland, as the government tends to concentrate its focus on independents, allowing it to act in a majoritarian fashion, knowing it has their support. Nevertheless, as with the experience of the independents during the Gillard administration in Australia, so too, independents can wield a significant input in the Irish case. Irish Taoisigh, in decades past, used to ignore independents in the belief that they were pro-establishment or would not have the nerve to bring down a minority government. This attitude changed, however, in the 1980s as independents became more anti-establishment. Minority governments reliant on independents now consult them on a weekly basis, more so than their own parliamentary parties, and the input of independents can be significant. Indeed, one independent parliamentarian recalled ‘I remember that there was nothing we asked for that they didn’t say was OK and I remember thinking that was a bit worrying’ (Weeks 2017, p. 237). It is impossible to quantify their influence, but the general conclusion is that, while Irish minority governments may act majoritarian towards the opposition, they are far more consensus-seeking with the independents.

The third measure of legislative success concerns the level of legislative activity outside of government. This indicates the majoritarian nature of the administration, that is, the more bills passed by the opposition, the weaker the government. Both Ireland and Australia follow the Westminster tradition of almost all legislation emanating from government benches. Between 1985 and 2013, in Australia, only 12 Private Members’ Bills (PMB) passed into law (Prosser and Warhurst, 2014), an average of one every two years. Indeed, before the 43rd parliament (2010–2013), no PMB initiated by an independent had ever been passed into law (Prosser and Warhurst, 2014). Under the Gillard government, two PMBs introduced by independents became legislation, while another passed the House of Representatives but was rejected by the Senate. The Greens got a further two PMBs (of the 17 they introduced) successfully onto the statute books. At the same time, none of the 22 PMBs from the opposition passed into legislation (Parliamentary Library, 2013). While this and the marginally increased success rate of PMBs might suggest a weak opposition, these numbers do not capture all of the latter’s influence. As a part of the frequent consultation that was occurring

between the government, the Greens and the independents, frequently, the basis of PMBs the independents were going to introduce were included in the government's bills. Or, alternatively, the government designed bills with input from the independents (Prosser and Warhurst, 2014). The changes to how parliament functioned, which were introduced as part of the agreement between the ALP and the independents, also cannot be underestimated in evaluating the indirect influence that non-government members had over legislation. The reintroduction of committees for the House, and the re-establishment of the Selection Committee, which allowed for more negotiation and debate over bills in the House, are prominent examples.

The Australian experience echoes much of the pattern of minority government rule in Ireland, which likewise exhibits majoritarian tendencies, as few PMB are passed (just 15 in total between 1937 and 2002). However, there are some significant differences, with twice as many PMBs being passed in half the amount of time under minority government.⁷ In more recent times, the impact of minority government on the output of parliament was especially prominent under the Fine Gael minority coalition formed in 2016. In the first year of the administration, 100 PMBs were introduced, a fivefold increase on a mean of 21 for the previous 4 parliaments, although notably none had passed (thejournal.ie.; 2017). This number of PMBs had doubled less than a year later, by which stage five had become law (Loughlin, 2018). What all this says about our three hypotheses is that the evidence is mixed concerning the stability and output of minority governments involving independents. They are not much less productive (rejecting H3), and the results are somewhat inconclusive in terms of their being defeated in parliament and the success rates of PMB (H3 and H4). While there are slight indications in support of the latter, there are not wildly significant differences between minority and majority governments to suggest that a reliance on independents undermines the stability and efficiency of parliamentary democracy.

3.3. *Governing party's electoral performance in the subsequent election*

The final measure of the performance of minority governments involving independents concerns their fate at elections. The expectation is that they will experience fewer electoral losses because minority governments in general lose less support than majority ones (Powell 2000, p. 54).

H5: Minority governments relying on independents will experience fewer electoral losses than other governments.

⁷Furthermore, four of the five PMBs passed were during the tenure of the rainbow coalition (1994–1997), the only government that had a minority in the Senate, as it was formed without an election.

In general, Australian governments, irrespective of status, tend to be re-elected, while those in Ireland are defeated. Given the historical dominance of Fianna Fáil in the Irish political system, it can be at times difficult to determine the re-election rates of governments, since the party in recent decades formed an administration with whomever it was able to cobble together a majority. So, while the 1987–1989 Fianna Fáil minority government was not strictly re-elected in 1989, the party did remain in office by forming a coalition with the Progressive Democrats. If we are to examine only the same combinations, however, only two minority governments were re-elected in the post-war era. Given the aforementioned low success rates of re-election for any government (the 1997–2002 Fianna Fáil-Progressive Democrats minority coalition was the first of any hue to be re-elected since 1969), it is difficult to attribute the poor re-election record of minority governments to their reliance on independents.

Aside from losing office, the mean change in the government party's vote in the eight minority administrations between 1948 and 2011 in Ireland was a loss of 1.4 percentage points. An outlier occurred in the middle of a severe economic recession in 2011 when the outgoing Fianna Fáil-led minority coalition lost 27 percentage points. When these results are compared with those accrued by majority governments, they are significantly less. Examining the electoral record of the 11 majority administrations over the same time period, these lost an average of almost 8 percentage points at their outgoing election.

So, minority governments reliant on independents seem to have a better electoral experience than majority administrations. A similar fate did not befall the Gillard government in Australia. In fact, not only the performance of the ALP, but also the Greens, in the aftermath of the minority government could only be described as disastrous. It lost 5 percentage points for a second successive election. It was also only the third time since the First World War that a party in government in Australia failed to win a third term in office (Green 2015, p. 393). As Sharman and Moon (2003, p. 251) have shown, in the period from 1910 to 2001, the mean of alterations in government between the ALP and non-ALP parties was 12.5 years in the states and 11 years at the federal level. While minority government is unusual in the Australian context at the national level, the broader context is again important. When the ALP came to power in 2007, they held government federally and in every state and territory in Australia. Numerous scandals at the subnational level damaged the ALP during this period. The aforementioned leadership changes also were significant. Hence, while the vote share for the government in this case certainly did decrease, there were broader issues at play that need to be considered than simply the minority government. So, there is only partial evidence to support this hypothesis as the experience of minority

governments involving independents differs between our two country case studies.

What is the fate of the independents supporting these governments? In considering the effect on the independents who support minority administrations, this is complicated for a few reasons. First, it is difficult to talk about an effect on the support for independents as a collective group as, evidently, they come from varying constituencies and have been elected owing to a unique set of contextual factors. This is certainly the case for the three Australian independents supporting Gillard in 2010 as two (Oakeshott and Windsor) were from conservative regional constituencies. Indeed, both independents were previously members of the Nationals, the coalition partner to the Liberal Party. In contrast, the other independent (Wilkie) represented a left-leaning electorate that had been a Labor stronghold and which has a strong Green vote. Second, the strength of the data emerging from the Australian case is further complicated as neither Windsor nor Oakeshott re-contested their seat. Wilkie did, and won convincingly, increasing his first preferences by 16.8 per cent. However, while impressive, it needs to be recognised that Wilkie's breakthrough in 2010 was considered fortunate as he only received 21.2 per cent of first preferences, coming from third to claim victory owing to the major party supporters preferencing him over their direct opponent.

Of the 41 independents who ran again following a minority government they had propped up in Ireland, 31 retained their seats, a re-election rate of 76 per cent, slightly below the average for all other independent MPs (80 per cent) and for those independents choosing not to back a minority government (78 per cent). Generally speaking, most independents hold onto their seats when seeking re-election, and this is no different for those who supported minority governments. In terms of the specific vote change, the mean constituency vote for those supporting a government was 18.2 per cent when it was elected and 17.5 per cent at the election after. The comparable figures for those independents not supporting a minority government was 16.1 and 15 per cent. In addition, the mean national vote for independents after these arrangements is 6.6 per cent, a mean increase of 0.2 percentage points on the preceding election. At all other elections, it is 6.8 per cent, a change of 0.1 percentage points. This suggests that the stance of independents, vis-à-vis minority governments, has a minimal electoral effect. At the same time, it did not have a negative effect, in contrast to minor parties, which experience electoral setbacks following a period of propping up governments (albeit via participation, which may have a different effect) (O'Malley, 2012). The dividends of being in cabinet might be outweighed by the potential electoral losses ensuing from such a position. For this reason, being too close to

government can have a negative effect, as Oakeshott and Windsor found in Australia, and which was why Wilkie ended his arrangement midterm.

4. Conclusion

Minority government is increasingly common. This article has examined one type of arrangement, that of minority government reliant on independents. Although unusual, we find that the experience of these administrations bears many similarities to that of other minority governments. Such arrangements are not much shorter than majority governments, in other words, they need not spell instability or short-lived cabinets. They are also only marginally less productive in terms of legislative output or not much more likely to be defeated. The one area where we do see some difference concerning these types of minority governments lies in their electoral record. Both the experience of the Fianna Fáil-led coalition in Ireland in 2011 and the Labor minority government in Australia are striking examples of administrations reliant on independents that suffered severe electoral shocks. However, these may well be outliers (with context important), as the other Irish examples lost considerably less support than majority arrangements.

Overall, our analysis strengthens the claims of those who suggest that minority governments can function as effectively as majority administrations. If minority government should be dysfunctional, it should be in these cases where there are multiple non-party actors involved in these agreements who all in theory are pursuing their own agendas. We have found this not to be the case, and we have also shown that institutional arrangements matter, as where there were stronger contractual ties between parties and independents, the governments lasted longer.

Normative concerns about the role of independents in the parliamentary and governing process abound (see Weeks 2017, p. 276). However, as we have shown, there is little empirical evidence to support these claims. Of course, we examined just a few measures of performance, and there are many other areas that could be considered in future research, such as economic output or the level of accountability or transparency in the governing process. Indeed, the latter is an area that independents supporting minority governments have particularly focused on, particularly via their aforementioned 'charters of good governance', so we may have missed their impact in this area. Ultimately, however, the evidence from our analysis strengthens the arguments that suggest that minority governments are just as functional and effective as majority governments. It also shows that involving non-party actors has little to no influence on the effectiveness of these administrations either.

Conflict of Interest

The authors report no declarations of interest.

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