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Electoral change and its impact on the nature of representative politics in Ireland

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Abstract: For a parliament to effectively serve its citizens, its members must be willing to fulfil their core constitutional duties. This article explores how the representative roles of members of Dáil Éireann (TDs) have evolved within the context of a changing Irish political landscape. Classic accounts of TDs' role orientations have emphasized a strong focus on constituency service, which has arguably had consequences for the Irish parliament's effectiveness. This paper reports findings from a recent survey of TDs and compare these with an earlier survey to reveal a noteworthy shift: while constituency work remains the most prominent activity for most TDs, it has declined in intensity compared to fifteen years ago. Importantly, more emphasis is now being placed on roles within the parliamentary arena, albeit with behavioural variation when we compare three groupings: TDs from 'Established parties,' from 'Insurgent parties' and non-party TDs. In particular, Sinn Féin TDs demonstrate a top-down adherence to party leadership directives, while independent TDs remain the most committed to constituency service. The increasing diversity of representative roles challenges the long-held perception of TDs as mere local agents, with potentially positive and negative consequences for parliamentary democracy functions in Ireland.

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The classic conception of a member of Dáil Éireann (TD) is of an elected representative whose primary focus is on constituency service; legislative work such as holding the government to account or scrutinising proposed legislation is seen as a very distant second (Chubb 1963). Different explanations are generally given for this style of political representation ranging from a localist political culture, the preferential electoral system, a Dáil dominated by the executive, the weakness of local government, and a poor public service interface. Whatever the causes, TDs' role orientation towards constituency service at the supposed expense of legislative work is believed to have implications for the Irish parliament's ability to effectively fulfil its constitutional functions, particularly across lawmaking and executive oversight (MacCarthaigh 2005), with downstream consequences for democratic accountability and the quality of government.

This paper explores if and how the representative roles of members of Dáil Éireann (TDs) have evolved within the context of a changing Irish political landscape. Ireland has seen significant changes over the past few decades, including major social and economic transformations, an ambitious digital drive in the public-citizen interface, extensive Dáil reform, plus the impact that the pandemic had on modes of operation. But most significant of all has been dramatic shifts in voting behaviour, with a plethora of new political forces entering the political mix, and the increased presence of 'insurgent' parties and non-party (independent) TDs within the parliamentary arena. Electoral change has impacted on party politics in Ireland, but how might it also have influenced representative politics? More generally, has the role-orientation of TDs changed with the changing political, cultural, and social landscape within which the Dáil operates?

By comparing the responses to two surveys of TDs in 2009 and 2023 – over a decade apart – the paper identifies significant shifts in the representative behaviour of contemporary TDs, notably in terms of their constituency focus (the amount, but also the nature of it), their work in parliament, and their willingness to abide by party rules. Yet, cross-sectional analysis of the 2023 survey data reveals that, for the most part, the changes are mediated by party or non-party status: specifically, it is the TDs elected in Sinn Féin, and to a degree also independent deputies, who are manifesting notable differences in their role orientation and behaviour

from TDs in established parties. We discuss the implications of this for the nature of parliamentary democracy that is emerging in 21st century Ireland.

The paper is structured in five parts. We start in section 1 with a review of the debates in this area and our theoretical expectations. Section 2 sets out the context of the two surveys. In section 3 we examine change over time, comparing the results of the two surveys. Section 4 then delves into the 2023 survey data to explore how three very different groupings of TDs (those from established parties, from Sinn Féin, and independent TDs) compare in their contemporary representation roles. Section 5 discusses the key findings and concludes.

1. TDs' representative roles and how they may be changing

The constituency service focus of Dáil deputies is the stuff of legends. Anthropological studies have examined the constituency orientation of TDs (e.g. Komito 1989; Sacks 1976). Surveys of and extensive interviews with TDs have tracked the prominence of their constituency role (e.g. Farrell 1970; Martin 2010; O'Leary 2011; Whyte 1966; Wood and Young 1997), showing how even their work within the legislative arena, such as parliamentary questions, can be viewed as being decidedly constituency oriented (Martin 2011). The exploits of TDs on the ground have provided rich material for influential playwrights (Keane 1967). The predominance of this constituency orientation is often characterised as a damaging feature of Irish representative politics (e.g. Chubb 1963; Mair 2012; Whyte 1966). The dominant image is of Dáil deputies who pay little attention to their legislative roles and instead 'occupy their time as political favour pedlars, consumer representatives, and clerical messenger boys [sic] on behalf of constituents' (former TD Barry Desmond quoted in Chubb 1982: 228).

In short, there is no doubt that constituency service has been a defining feature of Irish representative politics. However, as Michael Gallagher has observed – and done so repeatedly (notably in his co-authored chapters with Lee Komito in each edition of *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*)¹ – Irish legislators are not unique in attaching importance to their constituency role. As Gallagher and Komito note: 'a heavy constituency workload is the norm for

¹ Starting with Gallagher and Komito (1992) and repeated in each edition through to 2018. In the latest edition of *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, perhaps reflecting the repetitiveness of the argument in this chapter, it was replaced with a shortened version (Gallagher 2024).

parliamentarians around the world, and the main reason tends to be the same everywhere: quite simply, representing one's constituents is a central part of the job of a member of parliament in every country' (2018: 211). There may be good reason, therefore, to dispute the contention that Irish politicians are entirely out of kilter with their counterparts in other democracies (for a recent comparative overview of the concept of constituency service, see Sanches et al. 2024). And suggestive evidence indicates constituency service is on the increase in other legislatures: For example, whereas Searing's (1994) study of British MPs identified constituency orientation as one of many distinctive roles, by 2020 one British MP was noting that '[c]onstituency casework is the most important thing you can do as a Member of Parliament' (Thewliss 2020).

Nevertheless, constituency service does, at least, appear more prominent in the Irish case: comparative research, which includes TDs, indicates relatively higher levels of orientation towards constituency service in Ireland than in some neighbouring countries. Wood and Young (1997), for instance, find that TDs dedicate almost 60 percent of their time to constituency affairs and spend 2.5 days per week in the constituency. By comparison, British MPs dedicate 47 per cent of their time to constituency affairs and spend only 1.8 days in their constituencies. More recently, the PARTIREP survey of parliamentarians in 15 European democracies reports that TDs are amongst the most constituency-oriented parliamentarians (André et al. 2014; Deschouwer and Depauw 2014), both understanding and responding to the electoral incentives to undertake constituency orientation (André et al. 2016). So even if parliamentarians in most legislatures undertake constituency service and are to varying degree constituency-oriented, the point is that Irish parliamentarians have tended to do more than most: hence constituency service can undoubtedly be seen as a major component of the Dáil deputy's role.

In this paper we use survey data of TDs to consider two questions: first, whether constituency service is still treated with the same degree of priority in contemporary Irish politics as in the past, and second, if any changes in this respect are associated with large scale changes in voting behaviour, which have impacted on Dáil membership. The most recent analysis by O'Leary, based on in-depth interviews of TDs in the early 2000s, finds that while new technologies may have altered the nature of constituency service, the constituency role

‘continues to dominate the mind-frame and caseload of Irish parliamentarians’ (2011: 342). Her research preceded the dramatic electoral upheavals of 2011 and subsequent elections – as tracked in the *How Ireland Voted* volumes edited by Gallagher and his colleagues (Gallagher and Marsh 2011, 2016; Gallagher et al. 2021, 2025). A little over a decade later, and after these tumultuous elections, are we seeing the signs of changing representative behaviour and role-orientation by Dáil deputies? And how might the emergence of new political forces in Irish politics be influencing this?

Our first theoretical expectations centre on how the representative role of Dáil deputies may have changed over time. There are a number of reasons to expect this. Extensive Dáil reforms after the 2016 election, and to a lesser degree after the 2011 election (Lynch et al. 2017), have given greater scope for the Dáil and its committees to influence the legislative process (Lynch and MacCarthaigh 2023; Lynch and Martin 2020). The potential to more impactfully influence policy making and increased capacity to hold the executive to account could motivate some TDs to expend relatively more effort on their legislative roles.² Meanwhile, the information technology and social media revolution has provided new means for TDs to have contacts with their constituents, with survey evidence indicating that the traditional in-person constituency clinic is being replaced (or at least supplemented) by email and social media forms of contact (Gallagher and Suiter 2017; Farrell et al. 2018). This trend towards more online contact was also buttressed by the need to adapt representative roles in the light of Covid-19 (Farrell et al. 2024). Finally, in a context of significant shifts in voting behaviour, the changing membership of the chamber may affect the overall pattern of representative behaviour of TDs.

These changes – Dáil reforms, greater potential of and recourse to social media modes of contact, and the changing party composition of Dáil membership – have all occurred at the same time over the past decade or so. Without wishing to stretch causal claims, data gathered from surveys of Dáil deputies at two time points (which we describe below) allow us to assess the extent to which, in this evolving context, the representative roles of TDs have

² In other settings, an inability to influence the legislative process is sometimes cited as a rationale for why parliamentarians engage in constituency service (Norris 1997).

changed. As will become apparent, there have, indeed, been notable changes in a number of respects.

This, then, leads to our second set of theoretical expectations, which are framed by the major transformations in Irish party politics over the past decade and a half. The phenomenon of electoral change is a feature of all contemporary democracies. This has seen party systems become more fractionalized and polarized (e.g. Norris 2024), and the rise to prominence of anti-system parties (e.g. Mudde 2019). Ireland has been no exception to this. Its story is, to paraphrase Hemmingway, one of electoral change that occurred gradually, from the 1980s onwards, and then suddenly – starting with the 2011 election, which Gallagher and Marsh (2011) referred to as ‘Ireland’s earthquake election’, followed by elections in 2016 and 2020, which Gallagher and his colleagues (2021) saw as marking ‘the end of an era’, and culminating in the most recent 2024 election, by which time Gallagher et al. (2025) wonder if Ireland’s electoral politics may have settled on a ‘new normal’. Gallagher (2021) is unequivocal about the extent of electoral change, noting that ‘[w]ith the benefit of hindsight, elections over the period from 1932 to 2007 inclusive showed a picture of remarkable stability’, but that ‘mould was broken in 2011’. By 2020, the ‘election results, and even more the post-election coalition government ..., confirmed that there is no going back and that a new reality reigns’ (Gallagher 2021: 165).³

The nature of this new reality is apparent when we compare the composition of the Dáil elected in 2007 with that elected in 2020 (it is these two sets of Dáil members who responded to the surveys). As we see in Table 1, in 2007 ‘established’ parties – which, for the purposes of this paper, we describe as those parties that at some stage or another have served in government – occupied 94.8 percent of all the seats in the Dáil. At this stage, Sinn Féin was the only ‘insurgent’ party to win any seats, winning a mere 2.4 percent of the total, while the Independents picked up 3 percent. The 2020 election outcome was distinctly different: the established parties’ seat share shrank to just over half of the total vote (56.6 percent), insurgent parties (now in the plural) were approaching a third of the seat share (30.8 percent), and Independents won 12.5 percent of the seats. The growing support for

³ This paper makes use of two sets of survey data of TDs (described in more detail below), one gathered in 2009, preceding the 2011 ‘earthquake’, and the other in 2023, following the 2020 election.

insurgents reflects significant changes in Irish electoral politics: a clear ideological divide separating political parties on the left-right scale was apparent for the first time in the country's history (Elkink and Farrell 2021; Müller and Regan 2021).

Table 1. The 2007 and 2020 Dála compared

	Dáil elected in 2007		Dáil elected in 2020	
	Vote (%)	Seats (%)	Vote (%)	Seats (%)
<i>Total 'Established'</i>	86.4	94.8	54.6	56.6
Fianna Fáil	41.6	47.0	22.2	23.3
Fine Gael	27.3	30.9	20.9	22.0
Labour	10.1	12.1	4.4	3.8
Progressive Democrats	2.7	1.2	n.a.	n.a.
Green Party	4.7	3.6	7.1	7.5
<i>Total 'Insurgents'</i>	8.3	2.4	32.9	30.8
Sinn Féin	6.9	2.4	24.5	23.3
Social Democrats	n.a.	n.a.	2.9	3.8
Solidarity-PBP	n.a.	n.a.	2.6	3.1
Aontú	n.a.	n.a.	1.9	0.6
Others	1.4	0	1.0	0
<i>Total 'Independents'</i>	5.2	3.0	12.6	12.5
Independents For Change	n.a.	n.a.	0.4	0.6
Independents	5.2	3.0	12.2	11.9

Note: 'Established' parties are those that have served in government at one time or another.

Source: Electoral returns

The question for this paper is whether and how the changed composition of Dáil membership might shape representative politics in Ireland. While parliaments are ever-evolving institutions, significant institutional change and/or behavioural change in the parliamentary arena can be slow, not least as powerful actors often have incentives to retain the status quo (Martin and Strøm 2023). Still, looking comparatively and historically, new entrants to parliament – particularly when from parties with an anti-system or insurgent (in our use of the word) pedigree are content to breach behavioural norms, thus driving behavioural changes, often with significant consequences for how parliament and parliamentarians functions (Koš 2018; Otjes and Louwerse 2015; Valentim 2021).

Two areas of particular interest are: (1) the emphasis TDs from different parties and none give to their constituency roles, and (2) how the top-down leadership style of Sinn Féin may impact on the representative role of its TDs. In the first instance, there are reasons to expect differences over the importance attached to constituency work. This builds on earlier analysis that one of the authors of this paper carried out with Gallagher, which distinguished voters' expectations of TDs' representative roles along a localist-cosmopolitan dimension (Farrell et al. 2018). Those on the cosmopolitan end of the spectrum tend to be more educated and better off, and they tend to think that their area has been doing well, whereas those of the localist end tend to have less education and be working class or farmers, and are less inclined to think that their areas has been doing well. As measured using 2016 Irish National Election Study data, Sinn Féin supporters were more likely to be localists, followed by supporters of independent candidates. To varying degrees the supporters of the other parties were located further along the spectrum towards the cosmopolitan end. We might expect this localist-cosmopolitan distinction would create a greater demand for constituency service, shaping the representative roles of Sinn Féin and independent TDs in the form of more intense engagement with constituents than for the established parties. Additionally, exactly because independent TDs cannot rely on a party label to build electoral support, they must work to cultivate a personal vote (Cain et al. 1987), with constituency service one important way to achieve this (Carey and Shugart 1995; Weeks 2021).

A second potential area of inter-party difference focuses specifically on Sinn Féin, the insurgent party that has seen the most significant electoral gains in recent elections. As a party located on the left of the political spectrum, it has made strides to moderate its policy offerings in recent elections (Arlow 2026), positioning itself as a government-in-waiting. But its organisational structure still reflects the party's 'roots ... as an auxiliary to the [Provisional IRA]' (Whiting 2016: 555), with a top-down style of leadership and strong internal discipline, leading to 'the general impression ... of a more unitary organisation [than other political parties] with less room for internal autonomy, and one that is different from its competitors' (Weeks 2024: 144). This raises question marks over the degree to which it is a 'normal' political party in terms of its internal organisational logic (Weeks 2024; Whiting 2016). There is good reason to expect, therefore, that this top-down form of party management may be reflected in how Sinn Féin TDs perceive their role.

2. The context of the Dáil surveys

Our analysis makes use of two surveys of Dáil deputies in 2009 and 2003. The first survey was administered by the Oireachtas on behalf of the Joint Committee on the Constitution, as part of its review of the Dáil electoral system (Joint Committee on the Constitution 2010). This achieved a response rate of 45.45 percent. The timing of the 2009 survey is noteworthy, given that it was in the heat of the country's economic crisis and the imposition of deep austerity measures. It is possible that this may have had an impact on the constituency demands faced by TDs at the time, and readers should take this into account in the analysis that follows.⁴

Table 2. 2023 Survey response rates by party

	Number of TDs	Number of responses	Response rate %
<i>Total 'Established'</i>	<i>90</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>33.33</i>
Fianna Fáil	37	9	24.32
Fine Gael	34	12	35.29
Labour	7	2	28.57
Green Party	12	7	58.33
<i>Total 'Insurgents'</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>27.08</i>
Sinn Féin	36	11	30.56
Social Democrats	6	1	16.67
Solidarity-PBP	5	1	20.00
Aontú	1	0	0
<i>Total 'Independents'</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>36.36</i>
Independents For Change	1	1	100.00
Independents	21	7	33.33
N	160	51	31.88

Note: Comparisons are not available for the 2009 survey because it did not report party breakdowns.

Source: 2023 survey

The genesis of the 2023 survey was a conversation with the Dáil leadership⁵ about the idea of a survey of Irish parliamentarian both to recognise Michael Gallagher's contribution to Irish political science and the wider public good on his retirement, and to understand better the

⁴ We are grateful to one of our reviewers for this observation.

⁵ By Dáil leadership we mean the Ceann Comhairle and the senior staff in the Houses of the Oireachtas Service.

role orientation of contemporary TDs. With the full cooperation of the Houses of the Oireachtas Service, a survey instrument was drawn up (that included questions suggested by the Houses of the Oireachtas Service) and the survey was conducted between late March and early August 2023.⁶ The survey was sent out in four waves, the first two using the Qualtrics platform, the final two were paper-based, postal surveys. The first and final waves included letters of support from the Ceann Comhairle.⁷

Great effort was made to follow best academic practice in the implementation of the survey (as proposed by Bailer 2014) and to maximise response rates: we received the full support of the Dáil leadership; we conducted repeated waves using different collection methods; we timed the waves to correspond with dates when members were most likely to be located in their Dáil offices; we gave careful consideration as to the number and length of questions; we used personalised correspondence, noting that the summary results of the survey would be made available to members. Ultimately, we received 51 responses – a final response rate of 31.88 percent, which was notably lower than the response rate achieved for the 2009 survey, but still higher than typical response rates for recent surveys of legislators. For example, Deschouwer and Depauw's (2014) survey of parliamentarians in 15 European countries generated an overall response rate of approximately 25 percent, with a 22 percent response rate amongst Irish parliamentarians. Nevertheless, the relatively lower response rate for the 2023 survey runs the risk of non-response bias, particularly in the case of Sinn Féin deputies whose response rate was 30.56 percent (see Table 2).

The response rates by political party reported in Table 2 show a good spread across our three main categories of interest: established (totalling 33.33 percent), insurgents (27.08 percent), and independents (36.36 percent). Given that the bulk of the insurgents' responses (11 out of 13) are from Sinn Féin deputies, we decided to focus solely within this category on Sinn Féin TDs. This allows us to compare the responses of TDs from this party – the main contender to lead a government not including established parties – with those of the established parties.

⁶ Ethical approval was received from UCD and (because of where the data would be stored) the University of Essex.

⁷ We surveyed members of both Houses of the Oireachtas, and the Cathaoirleach of the Seanad also provided full support. Regrettably, the response rate from Senators was too low to make any meaningful use of the data.

Our analysis proceeds in two main stages. In the next section we compare the responses to a series of questions that were asked of TDs in both the 2009 and 2023 surveys, which provides a benchmark of how certain features of representative politics have changed over the course of these 14 years. In section 4, we then examine inter-party differences in the 2023 survey.⁸

3. Comparing the 2009 and 2023 cohorts of Dáil deputies

A core set of questions asked in the 2009 survey were repeated in 2023. The first of these asked TDs to account for how they spend their working week on average. The key standout from Table 3 is the changing nature of constituency work. While this feature remains the most prominent role of TDs with, on average, 44.58 percent of their week dedicated to this, there has been a marked decline from 2010 when it averaged 53.2 percent, and this decline is statistically significant. Parliamentary work and other activities feature more prominently: the former has risen from an average of 37.94 percent in 2009 to 41.36 percent of a TDs weekly workload in 2023, which is almost on a par with constituency-based work; the latter is up from 8.85 percent to 12.8 percent; but neither of these trends are statistically significant.

The amount of constituency work has changed, but so also has its form. As Table 3 reports, there are statistically significant declines in the proportion of time TDs spend in their constituencies (down from 24.94 percent to 16.89 percent) and handling casework on behalf of constituents (down from 39.35 percent to 26.1 per cent), while the proportion spent representing or acting on behalf of the general interest of the constituency has increased from 24.33 percent to 35.50 percent, and this increase is also statistically significant. These trends suggest a shift in the nature of the constituency role from a boots-on-the-ground, individual casework, emphasis toward a more aggregated or groups-of-constituents form of constituency representation.

The patterns with regard to changes in the nature of the TDs' parliamentary roles are less clear. TDs are not devoting as much time to speaking or participating in parliamentary committees as they used to (down from 26 percent to 21.78 percent), and there is also a

⁸ The 2009 survey, which was commissioned by the Oireachtas, did not report party breakdowns (Joint Committee on the Constitution 2010).

slight decline in the proportion of time spent preparing and researching legislation and amendments (down from 22.3 percent to 19.9 percent). Neither of these trends are statistically significant, though they are surprising, not least given the recent reforms that were designed to increase the role of, and resources devoted to, committee work in the Dáil (André et al 2016). However, they are balanced somewhat by the slight rise (again not statistically significant) in time spent in participating in Dáil debates and tabling parliamentary questions.⁹ The only significant change in this cluster is a reduction in the proportion of time devoted to speaking or participating in parliamentary party meetings, which dropped from 16.3 percent to 9.5 percent, suggesting perhaps that at least some of these trends may relate to the larger proportion of independent TDs in the 2023 sample, something we return to later.

⁹ In part, the lack of significant changes with regard to TDs' legislative roles may simply reflect the fact that ultimately there is not a clear distinction between constituency service and legislative activities: TDs are adept at using their parliamentary activities to address constituency issues, such as by asking parliamentary questions about constituency matters (Martin 2011).

Table 3. The average percentage of a TD's working week dedicated to ...

	Average weekly workload 2023 %	Average weekly workload 2009 %	T-test
<i>Average percentage of a TD's working week dedicated to constituency, parliamentary, and other activities</i>			
Constituency-based work	44.58	53.20	2.47*
Parliament-based work	41.36	37.94	-1.13
Other activities	12.80	8.85	-1.17
<i>Average percentage of TD's working week dedicated to different constituency activities</i>			
Representing/acting on behalf of general interest of constituency	35.50	24.33	-3.92**
Tabling parliamentary questions on behalf of constituents	11.52	11.36	-0.09
Visiting the constituency; delivering leaflets	16.89	24.94	3.23**
Casework on behalf of constituents	26.10	39.35	4.24**
<i>Average percentage of TD's working week dedicated to different parliamentary activities</i>			
Preparing & researching legislation & amendments	19.90	22.30	0.80
Speaking/participating in Dáil debates	24.30	22.10	-0.96
Speaking/participating in parliamentary committees	21.78	26.00	1.74
Speaking/participating in parliamentary party meetings	9.50	16.30	3.36**
Tabling parliamentary questions on legislative issues	15.60	13.10	-1.07

Note: p < 0.05 (*); p < 0.01 (**)

Table 4. Average ranking by TDs of importance of representation priorities

	Mean 2023	Mean 2009	Difference	T-test
All those in the constituency	2.20	1.56	+0.64	-2.77*
All those in the constituency who voted for the TD	2.82	2.77	+0.05	0.17
All voters in the country	3.09	3.37	-0.28	0.74
All those in the constituency who voted for the TD's party	3.17	3.36	-0.19	0.81
All those in the country who voted for the TD's party	3.68	4.03	-0.35	1.24
Members of a particular social group	5.00	4.89	+0.11	-0.32

Note: Ranked from 1-6 (1=most important; 6=least important), so a *positive* value in the Difference column means that the group *declined* in importance and a *negative* value means that it *increased* in importance; $p < 0.05$ (*).

Table 4 shows the relative importance TDs attach to their different roles (Searing 1994; Strøm 1997). The one significant shift between the two surveys is the decline in importance attached to representing all those in the constituency, which dropped from an average of 1.56 (on a six-point scale) to 2.2. None of the other trends are significant, but it is interesting to see a slight increase in the importance attached to representing those who voted for the TD's party (both in the constituency and in the country), and also a slight increase in the importance attached to representing all voters in the country.

Table 5. In a conflict between the views of these two, a TD should support...

	2023 %	2009 %	Difference	χ^2
The party's view vs. that of the party's supporters in the constituency	78.57	80.00	-1.43	0.01
The TD's own view vs. that of the party's supporters in the constituency	65.00	78.79	-13.79	4.05*
The party's view vs. the TD's own view	74.36	23.44	+50.92	49.86**

Note: $p < 0.05$ (*); $p < 0.001$ (**).

Table 5 shows that members of the Dáil in 2023 were significantly more likely to favour voting with their parliamentary party colleagues, compared to those in 2009. This shift is most

striking in relation to conflict between the TD's own views and that of the 'party line': while in 2009, fewer than a quarter of TDs indicated that they would submit to the party in such a case, almost three-quarters of TDs in 2023 said that they would vote with the party against their own views. There was also a weakening of the primacy given to the TD's own views compared to that of their party's supporters in the local constituency: while a majority of TDs in both waves would favour their own view in that conflict, the proportion declined from almost four in five TDs in 2009 to fewer than two out of three TDs in 2023. When asked to pick sides in a conflict between the official party line and the views of local party supporters, however, a large majority of TDs would support the former, with no significant difference between waves (80% in 2009 and only a slightly smaller proportion, 78.57%, in 2023).

Table 6. TDs' views on decision-making in their party

	Mean 2023	Mean 2009	Difference	T-test
Party decision-making is too top-down	2.95	2.80	-0.15	-0.56
TDs should be able to vote independently of party decisions	4.90	3.45	-1.45	-1.58
Party leader is too powerful	3.23	3.30	+0.07	0.25
Pollsters & strategists have too much influence on party decisions	3.29	2.76	+0.53	-2.03*

Note: 5-point scale (1=strongly agree; 5=strongly disagree); $p < 0.05$ (*).

Finally, Table 6 presents the TDs' views on decision-making in their party, which overall suggest a stronger preference for party control. TDs are less likely to think that they should vote independently of party decisions. This change is not significant, but it is at least consistent with one of the more unusual aspects of Irish parliamentary politics from a comparative perspective: while TDs expend considerable effort to engage in constituency service, their voting behaviour within the legislature is highly cohesive and disciplined (Bowler et al. 1999; Farrell et al. 2015), suggesting that TDs' responsiveness to constituents' preferences and needs does not extend to voting behaviour within the chamber (Martin 2014). TDs are also significantly less likely to think that pollsters and strategists have too much influence over party decisions. The other two items show very minor changes, none of them significant: on balance TDs are slightly less likely to disagree that party decision-making is too

top down, but slightly more likely to agree that the party leader is too powerful – but in both instances the TDs are roughly at the mid-point on the 1-to-5 scale.

In summary, over the 14-year period between the two surveys, the most notable trends are that constituency service, while still prominent in the life of the average TD, is now less a focus than it used to be. And the nature of constituency service is less focused on individual-level, ground contacts with constituents and more on representing the general interests of the constituency or groups of constituents with shared interests. Trends are more mixed regarding TDs' parliamentary roles: the most notable trend, which is also the most surprising, is that there is less emphasis on parliamentary committee work, which is at odds with the greater emphasis on that role since the Dáil reforms of 2016. When it comes to their representation roles, the evidence is suggestive of a slight shift towards a national emphasis in representation and also of representation that is mediated by party. The role of the party generally now has more prominence; most notably, TDs are far more likely to hold the view that they should adhere to party policies rather than vote independently, and while they still privilege their own views above that of local party supporters, they are less strident in this than was previously the case.

4. The impact of electoral change on parliamentary roles: Evidence from the 2023 survey

In this section, we examine the same survey questions as in the previous section, only on this occasion we are focused on how the different types of party/non-party groupings compare in 2023. As we discussed above, we distinguish between three different groupings: TDs in established parties: Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Labour, and Green Party, all of which are parties that have served in government at some point or other (N=30); Sinn Féin TDs: (N=11)¹⁰; Independent TDs: Comprising the responses we received from seven independents plus the response from the Independents For Change TD (N=8).

¹⁰ There was only one response from the Social Democrats and one from Solidarity-PBP, whereas we received 11 from Sinn Féin. We decided therefore to focus on the responses of the latter

Table 7. The average percentage of a TD's working week dedicated to ...

	Average weekly workload Established %	Average weekly workload Independents %	Average weekly workload Sinn Féin %	T-test Established vs Sinn Féin	T-test Established vs Independents
<i>Average percentage of a TD's working week dedicated to constituency, parliamentary, and other activities</i>					
Constituency-based work	43.48	51.67	46.67	-0.41	-0.838
Parliament-based work	39.24	42.50	46.67	-0.99	-0.352
Other activities	16.86	3.33	6.67	1.24	1.356
<i>Average percentage of TD's working week dedicated to different constituency activities</i>					
Representing/acting on behalf of general interest of constituency	35.62	35.0	32.78	0.41	0.062
Tabling parliamentary questions on behalf of constituents	11.90	7.50	13.33	-0.4	1.015
Visiting the constituency; delivering leaflets	18.86	6.67	17.22	0.36	2.235*
Casework on behalf of constituents	26.24	10.00	36.67	-1.91	3.002*
<i>Average percentage of TD's working week dedicated to different parliamentary activities</i>					
Preparing & researching legislation & amendments	19.57	24.17	20.63	-0.17	-0.656
Speaking/participating in Dáil debates	25.17	22.50	21.88	0.51	0.351
Speaking/participating in parliamentary committees	20.17	18.33	30.0	-1.76	0.288
Speaking participatory in parliamentary party meetings	9.84	4.17	10.0	-0.05	1.521
Tabling parliamentary questions on legislative issues	13.69	20.00	17.5	-0.81	-1.136

Note: $p < 0.05$ (*).

Table 7 reveals some notable trends regarding the average working week of TDs. When comparing the three main categories of TD activity, there are no significant differences, but it is clear that the lower emphasis on constituency-based work that was noted in Table 3 is most

apparent among established party TDs,¹¹ and to a degree also Sinn Féin deputies; by contrast, and as we expected, independent TDs continue to emphasise this feature, on average devoting 51.67 percent of their week to their constituency role (comparable to the average figure for all TDs of 53.2 percent in 2009 reported in Table 3). Sinn Féin deputies are more inclined to emphasise parliamentary-based work (46.67 percent; the same share of time as for their constituency-based work) than the other groupings, though the differences are not significant.

Table 8. Average ranking by TDs of importance of representation priorities

	Mean Established	Mean Independents	Mean Sinn Féin	T-test Established vs Sinn Féin	T-Test Established vs Independents
All those in the constituency who voted for the TD	2.54	3.00	3.56	-1.83	-0.685
All those in the constituency who voted for the TD's party	3.00	3.00	3.40	-0.88	0.000
All those in the constituency	2.11	2.00	2.30	-0.38	0.169
All those in the country who voted for the TD's party	3.90	4.33	3.40	1.05	-0.531
Members of a particular social group	5.60	3.00	4.90	1.65	4.149*
All voters in the country	2.83	3.20	3.30	-0.66	-0.380

Note: Ranked from 1-6 (1=most important; 6=least important). $p < 0.01$ (*)

Regarding the constituency activities, it is apparent that the drop in boots-on-the-ground form of constituency representation that we noted in Table 3 is primarily being driven by the independent TDs, which, compared to the established party TDs, devote significantly less

¹¹ This reduced emphasis on constituency-based work by established TDs might in part reflect the fact that in recent elections the larger parties have tended to only run one candidate per constituency, thus removing the pressure on these TDs to used constituency work as a means of competing against fellow party candidates.

time to visiting the constituency, delivering leaflets or handling casework on behalf of constituents. By contrast, Sinn Féin TDs spend more time than established party TDs on constituency casework, though this difference is not significant. As for time spent on parliamentary activities, the puzzling decline in time devoted to parliamentary committees that was noted in Table 3 appears to be due to the independents and to an extent also the established TDs; by contrast, Sinn Féin deputies are more likely to focus on this part of the parliamentary role, devoting 30 percent of their working week to this, more time than they spend on other parliamentary activities; though, again, these differences are not significant.

Table 8 reports on how the different groupings of TDs compare in relation to their representational roles. It is clear that the significant drop in emphasis on all those in the constituency that was noted in Table 4 is shared by all cohorts of TDs. Sinn Féin deputies are less inclined than TDs in established parties to prioritise those who voted for the TD: this is not significant, but it is at least perhaps a nod to a party-orientation that we return to below. There is a significant difference between independent and established party TDs over the priority given to representing a particular social group – the former more likely to prioritise it, though in this instance the significance probably reflects how low a priority this is for the latter.

Table 9. In a conflict between the views of these two, a TD should support...

	Established %	Independents %	Sinn Féin %	X ² Established vs Sinn Féin	X ² Established vs Independents
The party's view vs. that of the party's supporters in the constituency	88.46	20.00	77.78	3.34*	91.67**
The TD's own view vs. that of the party's supporters in the constituency	72.00	66.67	42.86	16.20**	0.44
The party's view vs. the TD's own view	70.83	66.67	100.00	31.85**	0.23

Note: p < 0.05 (*); p < 0.001 (**).

Looking at the topic of to whom a TD should be responsive, the key standout in Table 9 is that in a conflict between a TD's own views and that of the party, Sinn Féin TDs are significantly more likely than TDs in established parties to prioritise the party over their own views. They are also significantly less likely to put their own views over that of their party's supporters, but are somewhat more likely to prioritise the 'party line' over the views of Sinn Féin members in their constituency. Quite understandably, given their lack of party orientation, all the other variations in trends in this table are being driven by independent deputies.

The same point applies for Table 10, i.e. independent deputies are significantly more likely to have negative views, across the board, in the decision-making process in a party (in this instance, clearly the independents have treated this question in a theoretical sense). The trends of particular interest in this table relate to Sinn Féin TDs who are significantly more likely to disagree that party decision-making is too top down or that the party leader is too powerful. They are also more likely to disagree with the proposition that TDs should vote independently of party decision or that pollsters and strategists have too much influence on party decisions, though in these latter two cases the differences are not significant.

Table 10. TDs' views on decision-making in their party

	Mean Established	Mean Independents	Mean Sinn Féin	T-test Established vs Sinn Féin	T-Test Established vs Independents
Party decision-making is too top-down	2.72	1.67	3.78	-1.93	-4.14**
TDs should be able to vote independently of party decisions	5.31	3.33	4.33	0.31	-3.66**
Party leader is too powerful	2.86	2.75	4.22	-2.61*	-3.61**
Pollsters & strategists have too much influence on party decisions	3.19	2.33	3.89	-1.46	-4.01**

Note: 5-point scale (1=strongly agree; 5=strongly disagree); p < 0.05 (*), p < 0.01 (**).

In summary, the declining emphasis on constituency-based activity that was apparent in the previous section, is predominantly a product of changes among TDs from all parties; the independent TDs, by contrast, still tend to emphasise the importance of their constituency role. Despite this, however, it is among the independents that we see a reduction in the traditional, boots-on-the-ground, form of constituency service, whereas in the case of Sinn Féin deputies constituency casework takes up a significant portion of their time. Across several of the tables there is clear evidence that Sinn Féin deputies are supportive of strong party mediation in carrying out their parliamentary roles: this is the most notable aspect that separates them from the other two groupings of TDs.

5. Conclusion

Dáil Éireann is the cornerstone of Ireland's representative democracy. For a parliament to serve its citizens effectively, its members must possess not only the capability but also the *will* to fulfil their core constitutional functions – representing voters, holding the government to account, and scrutinising proposed legislation. Classic accounts of TDs role orientation have emphasised members' commitment to constituency service. This focus has been shaped by both 'supply' and 'demand' factors, including political culture, executive dominance of the legislature, and electoral incentives that some see as prioritising and rewarding local responsiveness over work within the parliamentary arena. Yet, parliaments are dynamic institutions, shaped by changes in both their wider political and cultural environment, as well as by shifts in their membership. Given these and other factors, this paper has examined the contemporary relevance of traditional accounts of constituency orientation among TDs, exploring how role orientations have evolved in recent decades and how role orientations today vary across party groupings.

Our two-stage analysis, first comparing responses to the two surveys and then examining the responses to the 2023 survey across three distinct groupings of TDs, offers interesting indications that representative roles within the Irish case are undergoing change, a change that has clearly been affected by the changing composition of the Dáil arising from the 'new era' of electoral politics that recent elections have ushered in. Two notable findings stand out. The first relates to the overall amount of time focused on constituency service. Today's TDs are devoting less time than their predecessors a decade and a half ago to constituency

service: it still remains the most prominent form of activity of the average TD, but there is no doubt that more attention is now also being paid to other parliamentary roles (even if the nature of that role is somewhat mixed among the deputies from the three different groupings, with independents in particular being relatively less inclined to perform a legislative role). The second clear finding relates to Sinn Féin. Consistent with the top-down style of leadership for which this party is renowned, its TDs walk the walk: they are perfectly comfortable with allowing the party leadership a powerful role in influencing how they carry out their roles and responsibilities as Dáil deputies.

Other trends are more nuanced. On the whole, TDs in 2023 are less focused on traditional on-the-ground constituency service (i.e. they spend less time in their constituencies and less time dealing with constituent casework), but when we examined the different party groupings it was clear that most of the change is being driven by independent deputies; by contrast Sinn Féin TDs still devote a considerable portion of their time to handling constituency casework. When we look at how the groupings compare regarding the proportion of their working week devoted to constituency-based activities, it is the independents who continue to emphasise this role; in other words, the declining focus on constituency service is for the most part a feature of Sinn Féin and established party TDs.

What, then, are the wider implications of these findings for the understanding of parliamentary democracy as it evolves in 21st century Ireland? While much will depend on the outcomes of future elections and the evolving balance between established parties, insurgent parties, and independents, recent electoral trends suggest that the long-standing Fianna Fáil–Fine Gael duopoly has been decisively eroded; Sinn Féin has emerged as a major player in a more cluttered multi-party Dáil comprising three large-ish parties (with roughly the same support levels), a clutch of other small parties and a large pool of independents. We might expect over time Sinn Féin to shed some of its top-down style of leadership as it shifts from being an insurgent party on the journey down the road to becoming more like a ‘normal’ political party, so perhaps this area of distinction between Sinn Féin deputies and other TDs may dissipate.

The results presented in this paper suggest that the ‘new normal’ (Gallagher et al. 2025) of electoral politics is likely to have significant implications for the nature of representative politics in Ireland. Constituency service certainly may remain prominent, but it is becoming less dominant when compared with TDs’ parliamentary roles.¹² This suggests that the image of Ireland’s parliamentarians as ‘clerical messenger boys [sic] on behalf of constituents’ is increasingly inaccurate. In this regard at least, perhaps Irish politics may no longer seem quite so exceptional.

¹² Though see our comment above (fn. 9) regarding the difficulty in separating out these two roles on the basis of survey questions.

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