

# **The Political Impacts of Census 2006**

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**Paper presented to the  
Political Studies Association of Ireland Conference,  
University College Cork,  
21 October 2006**

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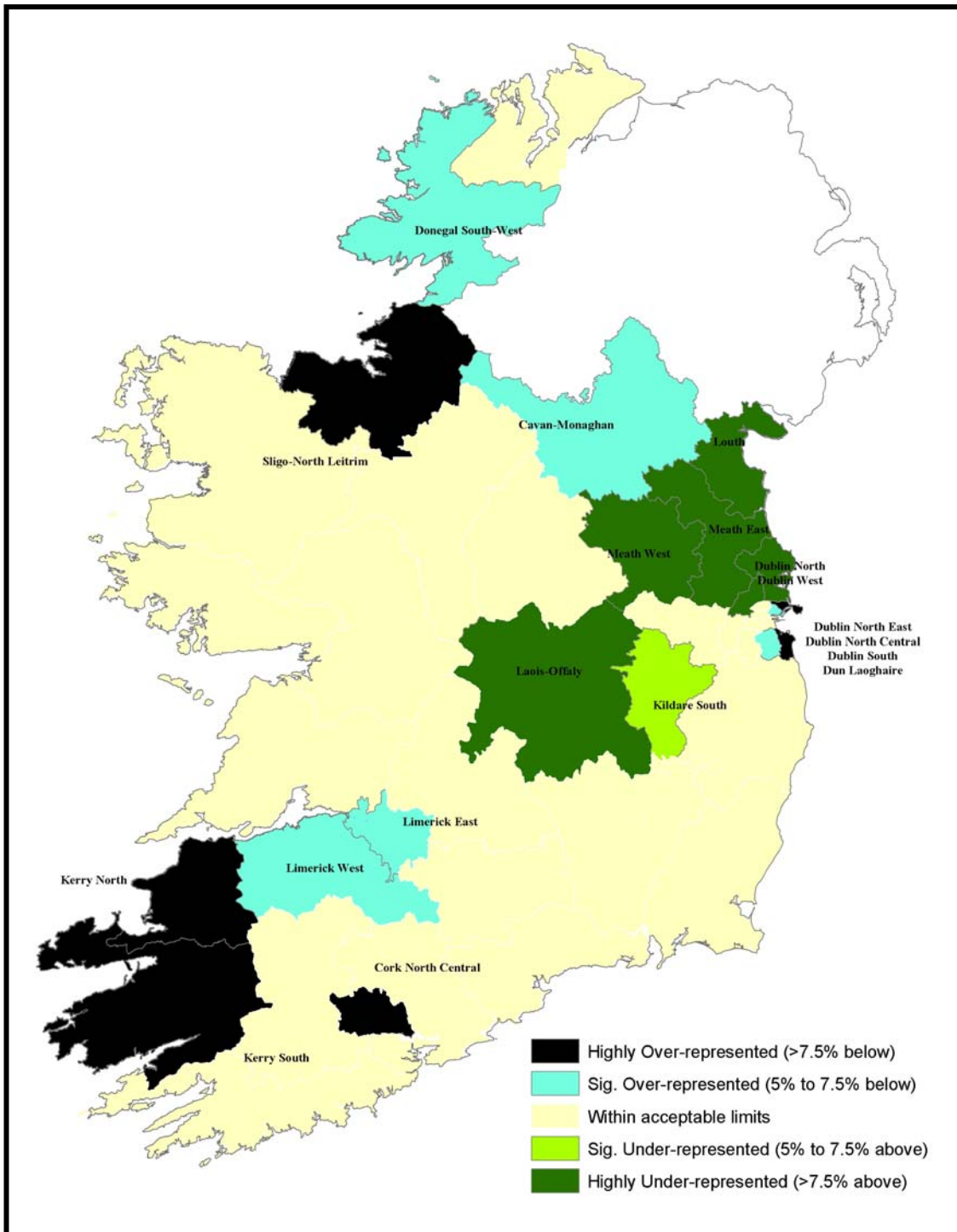
## The Political Impacts of Census 2006

### Census 2006: An Overview

On 15<sup>th</sup> July 2006 the *Census 2006 Preliminary Report* was published by the Central Statistics Office (2006), detailing the first account of the major demographic changes impacting within the State over the period between 2002 and 2006. These figures are provisional and based on the population summaries provided for each enumerator area by the 4,400 census enumerators, as opposed to the definitive figure to be presented by the Central Statistics Office in Spring 2007, based on their analysis on the census returns. However, based on previous experiences, the difference between the preliminary and definitive figures would be expected to be minimal, particularly for the larger geographical units.

The population of the State, based on these preliminary figures, increased by 317,722 (8.1 per cent) between the 2002 and 2006 censuses, leaving the population at 4,234,925 – the largest population level, by far, since the foundation of the State. There were notable spatial differences in these rates of population change, as some parts of the State experienced considerable rates of population increase, namely the rapidly growing commuter hinterlands of Dublin and the other major cities within the State, as well as the western extension of the Derry City commuter belt into north-east Donegal. The most rapid rates of population increase during the Celtic Tiger period are associated with the counties of Fingal, Meath and Kildare, which form part of the rapidly growing Dublin commuter belt, with these counties estimated to account for about 29 per cent of population growth within the State between 1996 and 2006 (Central Statistics Office, 2004: 10). The further outward expansion of the Dublin commuter belt is evidenced by the significant population increases associated with the counties that form the wider Dublin commuter belt, namely Laois, Wexford, Offaly and Westmeath, over the 2002-2006 period, and there has been a similar expansion of the smaller commuter hinterlands of the other urban centres during this period also. By contrast, the rate of population increase in western parts of Ireland tended to be lower than the State average, while populations declined in a number of the more mature urban cores, with significant levels of population decline evident in the administrative areas of Cork City and Limerick City, as well as an inner suburban ring within Dublin taking in mature north city areas, such as Coolock, Raheny, Ballymun and Cabra, and south city areas, such as Dun Laoghaire, Dundrum, Rathfarnham, Tallaght Village, Crumlin and Ballyfermot.

As well as identifying differential levels of population change across the State, the report also concerns itself with migration levels into, and within, Ireland. The estimated net migration level for the State between 2002 and 2006 was 186,408 (or 11.4 per thousand population) but the net migration levels for some counties were well in excess of the national average, namely Meath (35.7 per thousand population), Fingal (34.0), Leitrim (25.9), Cavan (25.6), and Laois (23.9). By contrast, negligible or even negative levels were associated with the local authority areas of Dublin City (0.1), Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown (-3.2), Waterford City (-3.3), South Dublin (-5.9), Cork City (-12.3) and Limerick City (-15.0) (Central Statistics Office, 2004: 87). The high levels of in-migration associated with Meath, Fingal, Laois, Cavan and Leitrim infers an association of relatively high levels of residential mobility with these counties, which in turn could be expected to have an impact on political behaviour in these areas. Conversely, the high level of out-migration associated with much of Dublin itself (as well as from the urban cores of the other large cities) points to the fact that the significant growth in the outer edges of Dublin's commuter belt is driven, in part, by population shifts within the Dublin region itself.



**Figure 1: Map showing constituencies with population per TD ratios that fall well above, or below, the maximum advised variance from the national average, based on the preliminary population figures for Census 2006.**

**Census 2006 and Electoral Boundaries**

*The 2004 Constituency Commission Report:* The Constituency Commission report on recommended Dáil constituency boundaries for the next general election was published on 7<sup>th</sup> January 2004. The terms of reference for the commission were set out in Article 16 of the Constitution and Section 6 of the *Electoral Act*. One of the key concerns that needed to be

addressed was that the ratio between the number of TDs and the population would be similar for each constituency, as far as could be practicable. Article 16.2.2<sup>0</sup> of the Constitution requires that the ratio of TDs to the population in different constituency should not be “*fixed at less than one member for each 30,000 of the population or at more than one member for each of 20,000 of the population*” (Constituency Commission, 2004: 11), with the total number of members of the Dáil to be set at between 164 and 168. Moreover, constituencies are to be represented by either three, four or five TDs and composed of contiguous areas, while the breaching of county boundaries should be avoided in drawing these, where practicable, while due regard should also be taken significant physical features, population densities and previous boundary configurations (Constituency Commission, 2004). The considerable population changes in the Republic of Ireland over the previous intercensal period (1996-2002), and the significant geographical variations in these, shaped the drawing up of the 2004 report and demanded that the ensuing amendments would be far more widespread than in the previous 1998 report, which had been largely concerned with amending the configuration of Dáil constituency boundaries within the Dublin region. The electoral boundaries of twenty-six of the forty-two existing constituencies (68%) were affected; although the amendments involving the Donegal, Kerry and Limerick constituencies, as well as most of the south side Dublin constituencies, were rather more minimal in scope. The most significant boundary alterations involved constituencies in Cork, the north city area of Dublin and the North West region (resulting in the loss of one seat by each of these regions), as well as the south-western suburbs of Dublin and the counties of Kildare and Meath (all of which gained a seat in the amendments). Some areas and political parties, as well as some individual politicians, were disgruntled by this report. The county of Leitrim was divided between the new Sligo-North Leitrim and Roscommon-South Leitrim constituencies, leading to fears that there would be no Leitrim-based TD after the next general election and the development of a “Save Leitrim” campaign, reflecting the intense opposition to the report findings within the county (Halligan, 2004). Other smaller areas, such as the Coole electoral area, in Westmeath, were also unhappy at being used as “add-ons” to make up the population numbers for adjacent constituencies (*Westmeath Examiner*, 2004 and Newman, 2004). Small political parties and independents, such as Finian McGrath in Dublin North Central, were angry at the increased number of three-seat constituencies, which are generally believed to favour the larger parties, while a number of politicians, such as Batt O’Keefe in Cork and Donie Cassidy in Westmeath, found that their political bailiwicks were split by the new arrangement of constituencies (Donnelly, 2004 and O’Donovan, 2004). Boundary changes are always of concern to politicians and political parties, as they can have significant bearing on the election results in affected constituencies in subsequent elections, which may in turn be exacerbated by unexpected changes in party support levels, as happened in 2002 when some of the Fine Gael losses were partly due to electoral boundary changes made the 1998 boundary revisions, most notably in the cases of Dublin North East and Dublin South West.

*Census 2006 Preliminary Figures:* The publishing of the preliminary results for Census 2006 has focused particular attention on how the population shifts over the 2002-2006 intercensal period have called the current electoral boundary configuration into questions and lead to demands for the immediate establishment of a new Constituency Commission to take account of these trends ahead of the 2007 General Election. The figures released in the census report pinpoints the under-representation of large tracts of the rapidly expanding Dublin commuter belt and the over-representation of the South West and North West regions, as well as Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown and the northern inner suburban ring of Dublin City, under the present boundary arrangements. The population per TD ratio for the Dublin West constituency (30,933) is now well in excess of the 30,000 upper limit as proscribed in Article 16.2.2, while the population per TD ratio for Dublin North (29,996) is very close to this. However legal interpretation of the article suggests that this is

not as serious a concern as was thought to be the case, as they claim that the provision that “*the total members of Dáil Éireann shall not be fixed at less than one member for each 30,000 of the population*” refers to the national ratio of TDs to population and not to individual constituencies – and the current national average ration of 25,512 people per TD fits in well with the provision that this national average be less than 30,000 and greater than 20,000 (Collins, 2006).

However, the serious degree of variation in terms of the population per TD ratios for individual constituencies remains a serious concern (as illustrated by Figure 1) and is seen to be in breach of the constitutional provision in Article 16.2.3 that each constituency should have the same ratio of population per Dáil deputy “*as far as it is practicable*”. Indeed, at present the three-seat Dublin West is now larger, in population terms, than the four-seat Cork North-Central (91,368) constituency, while the population of the four-seat Dublin North (119,984) is larger than the five-seat Cavan-Monaghan (119,777), Dublin South (118,545), Limerick East (118,086) and Dun Laoghaire (113,936) constituencies. Furthermore, despite also being a five-seat constituency, the population of Laois-Offaly (137,616), now the largest constituency in the state in population terms, is well in excess of Cavan-Monaghan, Dublin South, Limerick East and Dun Laoghaire (Central Statistics Office, 2006).

In terms of the population per TD ratio, the Constituency Commission has allowed for maximum variances, relative to the state average, of up to 7.9%, based on decisions taken by past commissions. (Although the norm has been for constituency boundary changes to be advised in cases where the variance exceeds the 5 per cent level, as first laid down in the 1961 High Court decision on the O’Donovan case (Collins, 2006). However a number of commentators, such as Fitzgerald (2006), have claimed that an “*accepted margin of 8 per cent*” exists.). However, based on the preliminary census figures, even this “*accepted margin of 8 per cent*” is now exceeded by a significant number of constituencies; namely Dublin West (+21.3%), Dublin North (+17.6%), Meath East (+13.2%), Dun Laoghaire (-10.7%), Cork North Central (-10.5%), Kerry North (-9.3%), Meath West (+9.1%), Dublin North East (-8.9%), Louth (+8.7%) and Kerry South (-8.2%), as displayed in Figure 1. The degree of variance for the Laois-Offaly constituency (+7.9%) falls right on the maximum degree of variance that has been permitted in previous independent boundary commission decisions.

In all, while the rapidly expanding Dublin commuter belt (including the Midland and Mid-East regions and the western suburbs of Dublin) now has a population equivalent to over 36 TDs, the constituencies located within this region are currently represented by just 33 TDs. Ironically, Dublin itself is over-represented, with a 2006 population equivalent to just 46.5 TDs, as against the 47 TDs that this region currently has, with this level of over-representation being mainly due to the over-representation of the north city region of Dublin as well as Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown county, encompassing the Dun Laoghaire constituency and a large part of Dublin South. The number of TDs warranted by the 2006 population of the north city region is 8.5 and of the Dun Laoghaire/Dublin South constituencies is 9.1, but these areas are currently represented by 9 and 10 TDs respectively. Similarly, the counties of Kerry and Limerick have a combined population level that is equivalent to 12.9 TDs, based on the Census 2006 preliminary figures, but the current arrangement of constituency boundaries leaves these considerably over-represented with 14 TDs. The North West and Border regions will be represented by 17 TDs after the next general elections, but the population of these regions is equivalent to just 16.3 TDs.

As is stands, the Census 2006 figures raised serious issues relating to the integrity of the current set of electoral boundaries. This led to a call by Labour and Independent candidates, as well as

political commentators such as Odhran Flynn and Shane Coleman (2006) of the *Sunday Tribune*, for the immediate convoking of a new Constituency Commission. The Government requested the Attorney General to assess the legality, and the constitutional basis, of running the next general election using the current boundaries. Dick Roche, the Minister for the Environment, at this point, argued against the need to revisit the constituency boundaries on the basis that the Census 2006 figures are preliminary, and not definitive, results. (However, as noted above, the difference between preliminary and final population figures are expected to be minimal, based on previous experiences. Indeed preliminary figures were used as the basis for a major revision of constituency boundaries in 1947; although this decision was taken in a specific political climate, namely the perception of the then Fianna Fáil government that efforts needed to be taken to stem the rising electoral tide of Clann na Poblachta.) On 13<sup>th</sup> September 2006, some three months later, the Government's decision was released by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government:

*“The Attorney General has advised the Government that constituencies can only be revised on the basis of the final Census figures. The preliminary figures cannot constitutionally be used to revise constituencies. The Electoral Act 1997 provides that a Constituency Commission shall be established upon the publication of the Census Report. The Minister intends to establish such a Commission when the Census Report, which contains the final figures, is published.*

*The function of the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government in the context of these procedures is to establish a Constituency Commission to review and report on Dáil and European constituencies in accordance with the relevant constitutional and statutory requirements. The Minister will discharge his statutory duty in this regard by establishing the Constituency Commission, as the legislation provides, as soon as the CSO publishes the census report setting out the population of the State classified by area. Under the Electoral Act 1997, the Commission will be required to report to the Ceann Comhairle as soon as may be and, in any event, within 6 months of its establishment; the reports will then be laid before each House of the Oireachtas.”*

Some commentators, such as Duffy (2006) and Fitzgerald (2006) have supported this decision. Fitzgerald has pointed to the “*as far as it is practicable*” proviso in the constitution, arguing that the convoking of a new constituency commission and the decision-taking process on the major boundary changes required by the census figures, as well as the implementation of these, is not possible ahead of the next general election given the time-frame involved. As Duffy (2006) notes;

*“The Government could reasonably argue that it would not be practicable, with only a year to the end of term, to redraw all the constituencies. One qualification is that the Constitution allows the Dáil term to run to seven years. Courts theoretically could argue that the statute law five-year term could have been extended in these special circumstances to allow a full review. But it is unlikely.”*

Fitzgerald (2006) also points to a sub-clause in the constitution, in which Article 16.2.4 only requires the government to “*revise the constituencies at least every 12 years, with due regard to population changes*” and on this basis he argues against the claims that a refusal to hold a new constituency commission are unconstitutional, viewing these as groundless unless the 12-year limit has been breached.

Some commentators argued that the decision was essentially a political one, especially as the Attorney General's deliberations on the matter were not made public. Shane Coleman (2006: 16), for instance, declared that the Irish people's constitutional rights were being superseded by "*the election plans of the two main parties*" and argued for the need for independent clarification by the Supreme Court on this issue:

*"When the constitution refers to the "last preceding census", does that mean that only the final figures will suffice for drawing up constituencies? Or, can preliminary figures . . . deemed highly accurate by the CSO . . . be used when those figures show significant breaches of the constitution's requirement of equality of representation in the existing constituencies?"*

Some politicians claimed that the decision was essentially a tactic to prevent further Fianna Fáil seat losses in the 2007 General Election, but this is debatable. The loss of a seat by Dun Laoghaire or Dublin South, for instance, would have made the second Fianna Fáil seat in those constituencies more vulnerable, but the Green Party and Progressive Democrats, it could be argued, would have been more adversely impacted by such a change. On the other hand, a decision to award extra seats to Dublin North and Dublin West would probably have acted to secure the party's two seats in Dublin North and given them an outside chance of a gain in Dublin West. Had significant boundary amendments, which the census figures were pointing towards, been carried out, political parties might have been required to revisit their candidate selections in specific constituencies ahead of the general election, while individual politicians may find themselves located in radically different constituencies with little time to be sufficiently bedded into these. On the basis of these concerns, there may be some argument for making minimal changes at this point and then revisiting the constituency boundaries afresh in the wake of the general election. One such scenario would involve awarding an extra seat to the two most significantly under-represented constituencies, but this in itself would not be satisfactory as it would increase the number of seats that the already over-represented Dublin region has, while the new four-seat Dublin West constituency would have a population per TD ratio of 23,200, which would be 8.0% lower than the state average of 25,208, which would ensue should the number of seats to be contested be increased to 168. This discrepancy could be addressed by a transfer of territory from the adjacent Meath East constituency, but as such this would mean breaching of county boundaries in what would be envisaged as a minor constituency amendment. Moreover, as Figure 1 shows, there are a number of other areas that require attention and such a 'minor constituency amendment' would be neither feasible nor, in all likelihood, legally advisable.

*The Next Constituency Commission:* Ultimately, whether it occurs prior to, or after, the 2007 General Election, the level of the population changes involved in the Census 2006 report suggests that a significant redrawing of constituency boundaries is needed as attempts to resolve the under, or over, representation of some constituencies will tend to have knock-on effect on neighbouring constituencies in a significant number of cases. Some amendments may simply involve transfers of territory between constituencies located within specific counties; for instance the issue of the over-representation of the Donegal South West and Cork North Central constituencies can be addressed satisfactorily by territory transfers from the adjacent Donegal South West and Cork East/North West/South Central constituencies, respectively. Similarly the current over-representation of Sligo-North Leitrim will probably be addressed by a transfer of territory (involving central parts of Co. Leitrim) from neighbouring Roscommon-South Leitrim. There may also be some other such 'internal' arrangements carried out in other counties, such as Galway. The serious under-

representation of the five-seat Laois-Offaly constituency could be addressed by creating two new three seat constituencies, while also involving some transfer of territory from the neighbouring Kildare North and (especially) Kildare South constituencies, in turn also addressing the over-representation of these constituencies.

The solution to the over-representation of the Limerick and Kerry constituencies will have to be addressed on a regional basis, as Kerry’s population no longer entitles it to six TDs and Limerick’s population no longer entitles it to eight TDs. Changes are necessary to reduce the number of TDs representing Kerry and Limerick by one; resulting either in the reduction of Limerick East to a four-seat constituency, mainly comprising of Limerick City and its immediate environs, and subsequent territory transfers involving the Limerick West and Kerry constituencies (more than likely resulting in the transfer of western parts of Co. Limerick into Kerry North, for instance), or else the amalgamation of the Kerry constituencies into a single five-seat constituencies with a resultant transfer of territory from north-western Kerry into Limerick West, and further territory transfers involving Limerick East and West. Good levels of population growth in Cavan-Monaghan, associated with the further extension of the Dublin commuter belt into southern parts of this constituency, means that the degree of variance associated with this constituency is actually lower than it was when the *2004 Constituency Commission Report* was drawn up, and there may be strong grounds for the status-quo to be upheld here. A decision may be taken to make Louth a five-seat constituency, in which case territory in east Monaghan may be transferred to Louth and Cavan-Monaghan reduced to a four-seat constituency, but this scenario is less likely than it was when the last report was being drawn up. The under-representation of Louth will probably be addressed with reference to the neighbouring Meath East and Meath West constituencies. Together, these constituencies have ten TDs, but their combined populations warrants them exactly eleven TDs. Thus, an extra seat will have to be awarded to one of these constituencies, while also involving significant territory transfers between each of the three constituencies.

Within the Dublin region, the populations of the Dublin West and Dublin North constituencies are seriously under-represented, to a degree that the current constituency boundaries are in breach of the constitutional requirement for equity of representation. This problem can be solved simply by awarding an extra seat (taken from the over-represented Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown area) to one of these constituencies and transferring territory into it from the other one. Similarly, the over-representation of Dublin South and Dun Laoghaire demands that one of these constituencies be reduced to a four-seater, with territory being also transferred from it to the other constituency. The three north-city constituencies of Dublin North East, Dublin North Central and Dublin North West are also over-represented, but not to the degree that it warrants these collectively losing a seat (although this may arise should the Howth area be moved into an enlarged Dublin North). The current three-seat constituency configuration could be maintained with transfers of territory from the neighbouring Dublin Central, Dublin North and Dublin West constituencies, but should current population trends continue this will prove to be a very temporary solution. A more pragmatic solution might be to reduce the number of constituencies in the north-city of Dublin by one, leaving two new four-seat Dublin City North constituencies (or a new four-seat and five-seat constituency, should the Howth area be retained).

A summary of the problematic constituencies and the probable solutions that may be put forward by the next commission are offered in Table 1 below:

<b>Current configuration*</b>	<b>Option 1</b>	<b>Option 2</b>
Donegal South West (2.8) Donegal North East (3.0)	Transfer part of Donegal North East into South West to balance	Make a five-seat Donegal constituency and move southern

	the numbers	Donegal into Sligo-North Leitrim or Cavan-Monaghan
Cork North Central (3.6) Cork East (4.1) Cork North West (3.1) Cork South Central (5.1) Cork South West (3.0)	Increase population of North Central by territory transfers from East, North West and South Central.	Create a new five-seat Cork City constituency and make North-West, South-West and East into two five-seat constituencies and one four seat constituency
Sligo-North Leitrim (2.8) Roscommon-South Leitrim (3.0)	Transfer part of Roscommon-South Leitrim into Sligo-North Leitrim to balance the numbers	Leave constituency boundaries as at present
Laois-Offaly (5.4) Kildare North (4.1) Kildare South (3.2)	Create two new three-seat constituencies (Offaly-Rathangan, Laois-Athy) with transfer of territory from Kildare North and Kildare South.	Make Kildare South a four seat constituency, with transfers of territory from Kildare North and Laois
Kerry North (2.7) Kerry South (2.8) Limerick East (4.6) Limerick West (2.8)	Reduce Limerick East to a four-seat constituency. Transfers of territory between all four constituencies to balance population per member ratios.	Make a new five-seat Kerry constituency. Transfers of territory between this and the Limerick constituencies to balance population per member ratios.
Cavan-Monaghan (4.7)	Leave constituency boundaries as at present	Make it a four-seat constituency, with transfer of territory (east Monaghan) to Louth constituency
Louth (4.3) Meath East (3.4) Meath West (3.3)	Make Louth into a five-seat constituency, including Drogheda environs in north-east Meath. Transfers of territory between constituencies to balance population per member ratios.	Make Meath East a four-seat constituency, transferring in part of the Drogheda area from Louth and also some territory from Meath West (possibly the Navan area)
Dublin North (4.5) Dublin West (3.6)	Dublin West (or Dublin North) gains an extra seat, with a transfer of territory from Dublin North (or Dublin West) to balance population per member ratios.	New boundary configuration, involving only areas located within Fingal County – new five-seat Fingal East and four-seat Fingal West constituencies. Some areas, such as Turnapin or Howth, may remain within North Dublin City constituencies
Dublin North Central (2.8) Dublin North East (2.7) Dublin North West (2.9)	Maintain current configuration of three seat constituencies, with transfer of territory from Dublin North and Dublin West to balance population per member ratios.	New boundary configuration, involving only areas located within Dublin City – two new four-seat north city constituencies; Dublin North East and Dublin North West (abolition of Dublin North Central).
Dublin South (4.6) Dun Laoghaire (4.5)	Dun Laoghaire (or Dublin South) loses a seat, with a transfer of territory to Dublin South (or Dun Laoghaire) to balance population per member ratios.	New boundary configuration, involving only areas located within Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown – two new four-seat constituencies; Dun Laoghaire East and Dun Laoghaire West. Part of South Dublin County, currently within Dublin South, moved into Dublin South West, making it a five-seat constituency.

## **Table 1: Current boundary configurations of over/under represented Dáil constituencies and proposed boundary changes**

**\* Number of TDs that constituency's population warrants, based on the average population per member for the state as drawn from the preliminary census figures, also included (in italics)**

One key area of concern relates to the growing proximity of general elections to census population releases, meaning that general elections are likely to be fought on the basis of constituencies drawn up on population figures drawn from a census held five or six years earlier, should the current pattern of five year gaps between general elections continue. For instance, the next constituency redrawing will be based on the population figures for Census 2006, but these new election boundaries will not be used until the next general election, which could take place as late as the summer of 2012. In light of this, there could be some argument that one of the provisions set for the Commission be that they take likely population trends into account, but on the other hand it would be hard for such a body to be expected to make decisions on the basis of unknown population figures and mere predictions, which may not pan out in the end, ultimately.

Another issue that the next Commission may need to address is the position of areas or counties that feel that they have been politically marginalised. The division of the last commission to divide Co. Leitrim has met with considerable opposition from within that county (Halligan, 2004). This is likely to remain a hot issue given that the population trends evident from the preliminary population figures for Census 2006 appear to militate against the reunion of the county within the one Dáil constituency. Indeed the more likely scenario is that part of South Leitrim, the part of the county which would have sufficient population to elect a Dáil representation, will be moved into Sligo-North Leitrim to balance these constituency's populations and bring the over-represented Sligo-North Leitrim back in line with the average population per TD ratio within the state. Similarly the need to ensure equality of representation between constituencies has resulted in parts of counties, such as eastern Carlow, the Coole area in Westmeath and northern Waterford, being added on to the Dáil constituencies of neighbouring counties. The nature of the population trends over the 2002-2006 means that the territorial integrity of these counties is unlikely to be restored by the next commission's recommendations.

### **Changing patterns of political support and political participation**

Another means in which the demographic shifts evident from the Census 2006 will impact on political life in the Republic of Ireland relates to those commuter areas that will have experienced considerable population changes over the past four or five years. Such areas might have been largely traditional and largely rural up to recent years; the type of area usually characterised by strong support for the two largest political parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, and high voter turnout levels. The dramatic influx of new populations into what were previously largely stable communities results in similarly dramatic changes to the demographic, socio-economic and political profiles of these areas.

*Voter Turnout:* Large influxes of new commuters into areas have tended to be associated with resultant, rather significant, decline in the (percentage) turnout levels of those areas, with formerly atypical high turnout areas now being characterised by turnout levels that are significantly lower than the national average. A study of the turnout geography of Ireland for the most recent general and local elections finds that the main urban centres and their commuting hinterlands form the main concentrations of low turnout within the state (Kavanagh, Sinnott and Mills, 2004), with some of the greatest declines in turnout levels between the general election of 2002 and the local, European and Citizenship Referendum elections of 2004 being found along the outer edges of these fast

expanding commuter belts (Kavanagh, 2006, Kavanagh, Fotheringham and Charlton, 2006). Why does such significant turnout decline occur as an area gets swallowed up by rapidly expanding commuter belts, or becomes gentrified? First, these areas will tend to be characterised by high degrees of residential mobility, with many new households moving into the area and often then moving to other areas a few years later. Turnout propensity to increase in line with length of residence in an area, as one will be more likely to have registered to vote in that area, will feel more rooted, or that one has a greater stake, in the area, and hence will have more interest in local political issues and personalities, and be more motivated to vote on the basis of these. New residents (assuming they are registered to vote in the area) by contrast may be unaware or, or have little interest in, such local concerns and hence will be less likely to turn out to vote, with turnout propensity especially low for local elections as opposed to general and referendum elections, where the national issues involved in these tend to resonate more with them (Kavanagh, 2002). Another factor that makes for low turnouts in the commuter hinterlands relates to the difficulties that political parties face in trying to engage with, or canvass these areas, whether they are gated inner city apartments or vast new suburban housing estates:

*“In the last election, there were reports of canvassers getting lost in the new estates, not being able to pin down issues and having no idea of who was who. In addition, as most people were not home before 7pm, it made the process of canvassing difficult because there was not enough time to rap on all the doors before dark.”* (McWilliams, 2005: 171).

Speaking of this issue in *The Pope’s Children*, McWilliams argues that this “BabyBelt” group “*did not turn up to vote*” in 2002, largely because

*“...they are profoundly cynical about national politics. They could not be bothered. A bachelor farmer from Achill is twice as likely to vote as a Kells Angel, so too is a Jagger generation lawyer in Sandycove, Foxrock, Terenure or Clontarf. In fact, the two areas of Ireland where the Pope’s Children are present – the new suburbs and the inner cities – vote least.”* (McWilliams, 2005: 113-4).

The knock-on effect of this, he argues, is that electoral checks and balances, meant to militate against excessive power falling into the hands of the financial elite, no longer work, and the commuting populations’ low participation levels allowing the maintenance of a system that is discriminating against these commuting classes.

*Party Support:* Political support patterns in new commuter areas are often radically different to normal support patterns, and smaller parties often prove to do rather well in these areas while the traditional main parties of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have not had sufficient time or scope to build up local party networks on a par with their strongholds in more stable rural and urban areas. Some recent examples of the tendency for unusual election results in newly developing areas or constituencies include the Dublin South West constituency in the 1992 election, where Labour and Democratic Left won three of the five seats and the main parties only succeeded in winning one, as well as Dublin Mid West in 2002, where the Green Party managed to win a seat in a three-seat constituency, and the Lucan electoral area in the 1999 and 2004 local elections, where Fine Gael failed to win a seat in both elections and Fianna Fáil failed to win a seat in 2004; the seats being

won instead by the Green Party, Labour and Independent candidates. As Fianna Fáil activist, Johny Fallon (2006) claimed in relation to Lucan:

*“The (new Lucanians) have little interest in the politics of the area. Those involved in the main parties remain in their home counties, while the others have their heads turned by the novelty of what are new parties to them, like the Greens and independent candidates.”* (Fallon, 2006: 144).

*“What’s happened is that the two big parties have lost their machines. Like the old Lucan people, they feel swamped; they don’t know people anymore. The cumainn are defunct and only held together by a couple of people worn out by the pace of change, too tired to keep up. Both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael long for the old days. Meanwhile, new parties like the Greens and independent candidates feed off people’s disaffection, and actively encourage a protest vote. The one thing I couldn’t stand about Lucan was the politics. There were a lot of sensible people but they didn’t bother to vote, and too much of what was said by smaller parties and independents was allowed to go unchallenged by the major parties, who were just too jaded.”* (Fallon, 2006: 146).

Given these trends of low turnouts and unconventional patterns of political support the likelihood is that such trends will be likewise replicated in other, newly developing, commuter areas. This, on the one hand, will result in the further outwards expansion of the low turnout areas surrounding the larger urban centres, with that focussed on the Dublin commuting hinterland now being extended into parts of counties Laois, Offaly, Westmeath, Longford, Wexford, Carlow, Louth, Cavan and Monaghan. There may be drop in the average turnout levels in 2007 in constituencies such as Laois-Offaly, Longford-Westmeath, Cavan-Monagan, Carlow-Kilkenny and Wexford as a result, similar to the high incidence of low turnout levels in the commuter belt constituencies of Meath and Kildare North in 2002 and the 2005 by-elections. The outward extension of low turnout into neighbouring constituencies has already been noted, in a comparison of the turnout levels in 2002 and 2004, wherein the new commuter areas were amongst the areas experiencing the greatest decline in turnout levels. However, as more of these commuters begin to vote, they are forming into a key portion of the electorate – *“uncommitted, non-partisan swing voters”* that McWilliams (2006: 27) believes could determine the result of the next general election, particularly the group that he terms the *“GAA Mums”*. *“These women could dictate the next election here if they decide to back a candidate”* he argues, portraying this group as *“tolerant and liberal without being left-wing or agitating”* in political terms. Constituencies where this group might have a significant impact on election results in 2007 include Meath East, Meath West, Kildare North and Louth, as well as Kildare South, Longford-Westmeath, Wexford and Laois-Offaly. These could prove to be constituencies wherein Labour, or the Green Party, or Sinn Féin, make unprecedented and unexpected electoral gains in this electoral contest. The approach that these parties might take towards the commuting electorate would be one that recognises commuting areas as *“single-issue land”*, with these areas only getting political on the basis of such issues, rendering them *“almost ungovernable”* (McWilliams, 2005: 171):

One final area to consider is the impact that Ireland’s growing population of immigrants will have in electoral terms. As such, these groups are restricted to voting in European and local elections (as in the case of EU, but non-Irish/British nationals, such as Polish, Lithuanian and Latvian nationals) or solely in local elections (as in the case of non-EU nationals, such as Chinese, Nigerian and Congolese nationals). In general, low levels of registration and turnout are associated with these

groups, and turnout levels for registered non-Irish nationals in the 2004 elections (where they could vote in one or two of these elections) were much lower than the average turnouts in these. However, in cases of non-nationals who were on the supplement to the register their turnout levels, on average, were much higher and often averaging around the 70-80% level in many, generally low turnout, parts of Dublin. The 2004 local elections saw the election of two Nigerian nationals in Town Commission elections – Taiwo Matthew in Ennis and Rotimi Adebare in Portlaoise – and the growing voting power of the new migrants will become even more apparent in the next (2009) local and European elections. Increasing numbers of non-Irish nationals being elected onto town commissions and county/city councils should be expected, particularly in areas with large numbers of new migrants, while it is feasible that the increasing number of EU (but non-Irish/UK) nationals will have a bearing on the results of European elections contests. The likelihood of a Polish or Lithuanian or Latvian national being selected to run in the 2009 European elections by a party – particularly in a weak area for that party – cannot be discounted given the significant numbers of voters that could be mobilised by such a strategy.

### **Concluding words**

In short, the dramatic demographic changes evident in the preliminary figures from Census 2006 pose some interesting challenges for the Irish political system, while also pointing towards significant changes in the state's electoral geography – both in terms of geographies of political support and geographies of political participation. This paper has briefly speculated, based on previous trends in political participation and support levels, as well as the precedent set by previous electoral boundary re-drawals, as to what changes will be brought about to Irish political life by such unprecedented changes, but the quality of such predictions can only be determined by how they will approximate to the future reality.

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