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Kusche, Isabel

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The Accusation of Clientelism: On the Interplay between Social Science, Mass Media, and Politics in the Critique of Irish Democracy

Isabel Kusche[*]

Abstract: *»Die Anklage des Klientelismus: Zum Zusammenspiel von Sozialwissenschaft, Massenmedien und Politik in der Kritik der irischen Demokratie«.* The case of Ireland provides an example of a long-term critical reflection on the nature of democracy that is not linked to social movements. Instead it is the result of an interplay between social science research, mass media, and parliamentary debate, all of which employ the notion of clientelism. The structural feature on which the respective critique focuses is the peculiar relationship between public representatives and voters in Ireland. It is strongly based in constituency service and individual brokerage and thus contradicts universalistic expectations towards modern politics. The article starts with a justification of the choice of the case and the theoretical framework, i.e. the sociology of critical capacity proposed by Boltanski and Thévenot. It then introduces records of parliamentary debates and newspaper articles as the empirical material and qualitative content analysis as the main method of analysis. Subsequent sections reconstruct the dynamics of the critical reflection over a thirty-year period and highlight significant patterns of critique and justification.

Keywords: Critique, justification, orders of worth, Ireland, politics, clientelism, qualitative analysis.

1. Introduction

Demands for (more) democracy have been a central aspect of critique in many settings. Such demands become most visible once articulated by social movements or public intellectuals. Their critique has often been fundamental in the sense that they characterize society in general as deficient in terms of genuine democracy and link this deficiency to capitalism and the inequalities produced by a market economy. The financial and economic crisis that hit many countries after 2008 has been a recent occasion for making this link, especially in those European countries that were forced to implement catalogues of austerity measures in order to manage their sovereign debt crises and procure financial

*   Isabel Kusche, Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies, Aarhus University, Høegh-Guldbergs Gade 6B, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark; isabelkusche@aias.au.dk.

support by the European Union and the International Monetary Fund. Sustained public protests and new political movements have arisen over the course of the crisis in Spain and Greece (Roos and Oikonomakis 2014; Kousis 2014). In contrast, for Ireland, which had to have recourse to European financial aid in order to handle its spiraling sovereign debt after the public bailout of major Irish banks (on the financial crisis see Münnich 2017; Dosdall and Rom-Jensen 2017, both in this volume), the absence of sustained protests and movements has been noted (Cannon and Murphy 2015, 1-2). This observation however may seem less a surprise than almost a matter of course against the background of a domestic political past in which social movements apart from nationalism rarely had a discernible public impact. The nationalist movement in its turn overwhelmingly focused on the question of national unity and did not develop a critical agenda pertaining to the existing political or social conditions in the Republic of Ireland.

The absence of social movements and highly visible public intellectuals is however not synonymous with an irrelevance of social critique. In its most general sense, going back to the Greek *kritikós*, critique is a judgement. In order for such a judgement to be of particular interest to sociology, it has to recur over a certain period of time, address general features of certain situations or structures and demand their change. It is in this sense that the concept of critique is used in this article in order to analyze a long-term critical reflection on democracy in Ireland, rekindled by the financial and economic crisis. This reflection revolves around a critique of the relationship between public representatives and voters. This relationship has often been criticized as a form of clientelism and as detrimental to Irish democracy. Instead of social movements or nongovernmental organizations it is the interplay of social science research, mass media, and politicians themselves that has driven this critical reflection. It can be understood as both a mirror and a promoter of changes within Irish politics and society that have transformed the country within the last 35 years. The Irish case thus provides an opportunity to explore processes and dynamics of critique that do not draw the attention in the same way as protests but may nevertheless initiate and support institutional change. By analyzing how this critique developed and was sustained over time in the Irish case, the article aims to contribute to a broader conception of social critique.

Although the concept of clientelism was originally linked to modernization theory, the research question that is pursued here requires another theoretical framework. Arguments from modernization theory may be employed when reflecting on the state of Irish politics and society in past and present. But they communicate a specific perspective on the relative worth of supposedly traditional versus modern behavioral patterns or values from which the former inevitably lose.

Arguments referring to political culture as such are not much more helpful. They typically point to a set of durable cultural orientations with political con-

sequences (Inglehart 1988), based on the notion of (political) culture as a system of shared values that coordinates (political) actions (Almond and Verba 1963; Parsons 1968). Although it is rarely stated explicitly, this notion continues to dominate the understanding of political culture (Cartocci 2011). From this perspective, long-term changes of political culture may well be noted, but are conceived as a direct result of socio-economic and institutional change (Coakley 2010b). The contribution of a critique that scrutinizes and challenges certain values and, in doing that, becomes itself a part of political culture, is overlooked.

Having further discussed the specificities of the Irish case (2.), the article will propose the sociology of critical capacity (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 2006) as the theoretical framework that is appropriate to relate these specificities to the topic of critique (3.). Thereafter follows a description of the material and methods used for the empirical analysis (4.). Subsequent sections present the main results of this analysis in relation to the theoretical framework (5., 6., and 7.) before the article ends with a short conclusion regarding critique and social change (8.).

2. Limits and Opportunities for Social Critique in Irish Democracy

Democratic politics in the Republic of Ireland has often been described as exceptional in several regards. Many peculiarities can be traced back to its past as a part of the United Kingdom and the political ramifications of the struggle for independence. Political mobilization in the nineteenth century was based on Irish nationalism (Coakley 2010a, 12), which identified British rule over Ireland as the main reason for poverty and hardship. The formation of the Irish Free State, the first political entity that achieved almost complete independence from the United Kingdom as a result of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, split the nationalist movement into proponents and opponents and led to a bloody civil war (Coakley 2010a, 18-21). Contemporary Ireland's two largest parties *Fianna Fáil* and *Fine Gael* go back to this divide between support for and opposition to the Anglo-Irish Treaty (Weeks 2010, 137-40). Their actual policy platforms typically have been very similar and although both parties can be characterized as center-right, they do not easily fit into common classifications of party families (Weeks 2010, 142-3). The left Labour Party has never had the strength of other European social-democratic parties and in terms of governing it has been restricted to the role of a potential junior coalition party. The general weakness of the left is also attributed to the important role that emigration has always played as a safety valve. It channeled economic and social discontent away from domestic politics to a significant degree (Weeks 2010, 145). The neo-corporatist orientation of the Irish unions and the influence of Catholic

social thought have been pointed out as further aspects of the setting that is relevant for the possibilities and limitations of social critique (McCabe 2015, 114).

Content and scope of potential social critique also depend on the state of economy, politics, and society. In terms of socio-economic development the Ireland of the early 1970s was still predominantly an agricultural country strongly anchored in Catholicism (Coakley 2010b, 40), although the 1950s and 1960s had seen intensified government efforts at industrialization (Townshend 1999, 168-72) and only about a third of the male workforce was still in agriculture by 1971 (Coakley 2010c, 435). Until the early 1990s Ireland remained a relatively poor country, compared to other member states of the European Union (Kirby 2010, 13-30). Girvin (1997) argues that this peripheral economic position can be attributed neither to the colonial past nor to the small size of the country and its agrarian base. Instead he stresses the persistence of behavioral patterns and values that were in conflict with a market economy and industrialization up until the 1960s and beyond (ibid., 67-8). In other words, at a time when the "capitalist spirit" had already renewed and revived itself in those countries in which market economies had been firmly established (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005), Ireland according to this perspective still struggled with a pre-capitalist spirit that blocked innovation and growth, and its Catholic church was one of the most relevant critics of capitalism (Girvin 1997, 69).

Although this pronounced view is by no means consensual, it highlights the stark contrast between reflections on Irish socio-economic development before and after the "rise of the Celtic Tiger" in the 1990s. Both the success story and the subsequent bust of the Irish economy as a result of the financial crisis in 2008 easily lent themselves to approaches commonly used when analyzing advanced capitalist economies (e.g. Kirby 2010; Chari and Bernhagen 2011). Yet, for the period between the 1930s and the 1980s notions from modernization theory frequently provided the framework for attempts to understand the weak growth and societal stagnation in Ireland. Aspects of political culture have been pointed out as especially relevant in this regard. Scholars reflecting on Ireland noted, tried to understand, and sometimes criticized a persistent traditionalism of Irish (political) culture (e.g. Prager 1986; Lee 1989) that seemed at odds with common expectations regarding both economic performance and the character of democracy in Western European countries. Authoritarianism, loyalty to religious and political leaders, political conformism, and anti-intellectualism have been cited as elements of this culture (Coakley 2010b, 55), all of which do not seem conducive to critique.

On the other hand, the rapid transformation of Ireland within the last three decades suggests that the alleged traditionalism at some point either had become irrelevant or had been sufficiently weakened over time in order to render that social change possible. The most common explanations for that turning point are the long-term impact of the entry into the European Community in 1973 and the establishment of a social partnership between the state, business, and

labor, as well as other interest groups (Ferriter 2005, 681-5; House and McGrath 2004). Yet, the perpetuation of an extremely strict anti-abortion policy until today indicates that a broader social change is by no means an automatic outcome of economic growth. Ideas on what society and democracy are about can only change as a result of critical communication about such ideas, which means that we should expect that critique of some kind or another is relevant with regard to social change even in the seemingly least likely case of Ireland.

In fact, certain features of the Irish political system at least potentially facilitate access to central democratic institutions such as parliament for more radical or innovative voices. The electoral rules for the lower house, the *Dáil*, combine constituencies with three to five seats with a preference vote (single transferable vote) that allows the ranking of all candidates (Sinnott 2010). They render the system relatively open to independent candidates or small parties with local strongholds. For example, the radical left Workers' Party had seven deputies (TDs) in the *Dáil* at its high in 1989 (McCabe 2015, 159). The upper house of parliament is much less important with regard to legislation. But the very unusual (and also controversial) rules for election to the *Seanad* ensure a regular presence of members of the two oldest Irish universities in this chamber and thus the potential for intellectual input: The graduates of Trinity College Dublin and the National University of Ireland elect six of the 60 senators (Gallagher 2010, 222).[1]

In order to get an empirical grasp of the relation between critique and social change in the case of Ireland this article focuses on an aspect that is both indicative of the alleged traditionalist character of Irish (political) culture and of the special interest of politicians themselves: Irish politics in general and the relationship between parliamentary deputies and voters in particular have often been characterized as essentially clientelistic and thus at odds with common notions of universalistic democracy. Since this characterization has played a significant role in academic, parliamentary, and mass media debates, it constitutes a suitable focus for further analysis of processes of critique in Ireland. Although Irish political science attempted to replace the concept of clientelism with the analytically more appropriate notion of brokerage already by the mid-1980s (Komito 1984), this correction did not have much impact outside academia. In fact, political scientists felt compelled to continue using the term 'clientelism' despite their reservations (e.g. Komito 1997), because it had quickly become a familiar expression in Irish political debate.

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[1] 43 are elected by the members of city and county councils, the Dáil, and the outgoing Seanad from quasi-vocational panels. 11 are appointed by the Prime Minister, the Taoiseach.

3. The Sociology of Critical Capacity and the Accusation of Clientelism

In the Irish context, the accusation of clientelism has become the focal point of contentions about appropriate ways to relate to political institutions and to possibly change them. The sociology of critical capacity (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 2006) provides a suitable theoretical framework to understand this critical discourse. It assumes a limited number of orders of worth that are incompatible with each other (Diaz-Bone 2017, in this volume). It analyses how both the critique and the justification of specific behaviors, organizational arrangements or ideas refer to orders of worth as conventions. Such references take place in concrete settings and are not regulated by ordering principles that would clearly assign specific events or situations to a specific order of worth. On the contrary, Boltanski and Thévenot emphasize that critique and justification often revolve around the question which order of worth is appropriate to evaluate a specific action and thus to either criticize or commend it.

From this perspective the question of clientelism is not one of distinguishing between traditional and modern practices or between monolithic political cultures with different values. It primarily regards two orders of worth, namely the civic and the domestic *cités* or worlds in the sense of Boltanski and Thévenot (1999, 2006). Both orders of worth refer to different notions of the common good and consequently value actors, objects, actions, and communications differently. And both orders of worth can be invoked in order to judge the merits and problems of political institutions and behaviors.

The appearance of a critical reflection on the relationship between deputies and voters in Ireland can be understood as an indication of the dynamic character of political culture (Kusche 2016, 185-9) and the role of critique. From the point of view of normative democratic theory the civic world seems to be the most likely reference when it comes to the relationship between politicians and voters. The public representative or the elected official are typical worthy subjects, provided the understanding of the common good focuses on collectives. By definition they represent more than just themselves or have been chosen by a collective (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 185-8). Worth in this order accordingly requires the renunciation of the particular and manifests itself in relations of delegation. In its pure form this is incompatible with any other common world, among them the domestic world. The latter values tradition and hierarchy and regards duty, consideration, and harmony as efforts that contribute to this common good (ibid., 165-71). In this world, the relation of worth between different persons, behaviors, or objects is based on authority, subordination, respectability, and honor, which privileges relationships centered on giving, receiving, and thanking (ibid., 171-4). As essentially one-to-one relationships they are very different from relationships relevant in the context of the civic

world, which are based on the creation of collectives and thus on the association of many individuals (ibid., 191-2).

Yet, it is possible to mobilize political support, most importantly in the form of voting, as part of a reciprocal relationship that provides voters with benefits and favors in return for their vote. This is called political clientelism (Hicken 2011) and it implies elements of both the civic and the domestic world. Elected officials relying on relationships based on giving and reciprocating do not contradict the proposed theoretical framework. Rather the theoretical framework indicates that the presence of elements from different orders of worth opens up the possibility of critique (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 219-31). This critique can draw on one order of worth and point out that certain elements belonging to a different order of worth undermine essential procedures to determine worth and eventually the common good.

With regard to Irish politics in general and the relation between politicians and voters in particular, the diagnosis of clientelism can thus be treated as an accusation in the sense of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006, 219-23). It originates in the civic world and is directed at what is seen as a problematic amalgamation between elements of the civic and the domestic world in Irish politics. Whether this amalgamation is best described by referring to it as clientelism is a question of its own. Indeed the majority of today's Irish political scientists would argue that there is actually no political clientelism in Ireland (Gallagher and Komito 2010, 242-4). Understanding the diagnosis of clientelism as a critique in the sense of Boltanski and Thévenot does not contradict this, but offers a framework for understanding why the accusation is made nonetheless.

Insofar such a critique concerns the heavy engagement of deputies in constituency service and casework, it pertains to the interpretation of what it means to be a representative (Kusche 2017). However, depending on what is seen as the reason for certain interpretations of this role, the critique may well extend to some formal rules of democratic politics in Ireland. Conventions for critique and justification are thus not the same as institutions (Diaz-Bone 2009). Rather, they secure the capacity to interpret rules and due to their plurality interpretations may differ. With regard to the extent and the possible consequences of such contestations, the theoretical approach does not make predictions but simply offers an analytical framework. Before this is applied to the Irish case, the next section introduces the empirical material and methods used for this analysis.

4.   Empirical Material and Methods

In order to map the emergence and development of the critique of clientelism outside scholarly debate I draw on parliamentary speeches and newspaper articles (see also Kusche 2016, 200-6). Practical reasons for this choice of empirical material are their continuous availability over decades and the easy

access provided by the website of the Irish parliament (*Oireachtas*) and online newspaper archives respectively. Although the search algorithms used in online archives are not transparent for the user, research indicates that there is no systematic bias in retrieving documents (Deacon 2007).

From a theoretical point of view, parliamentary debates represent a continuous forum for political communication that at least potentially goes beyond routine procedures related to legislation and can reflect on both specific political practices and on democratic politics as such. Their public character makes them a focus of observation for those parts of mass media that cover political issues and processes. Provided that a specific critique gains some importance it should be expected to have a detectable impact both in parliament and in quality media outlets. Since newspapers lend themselves to retrospective analyses, material from the two most frequently read Irish quality papers, the Irish Independent and the Irish Times (Brandenburg and Zalinski 2008, 168), is used in order to address the role of the critique in the media.

The first immediate result of the search was that the term 'clientelism' had not been in use before the early 1980s either in the Irish parliament or in the two newspapers (including letters to the editor). The same applies for the term 'brokerage' in connection to politics, which rarely occurred at all despite its appropriateness for describing Irish politics according to political scientists. Therefore, in a second step, I identified other potentially relevant terms based on their presence in items with references to either clientelism or brokerage. As a result, a second search focused on occurrences of 'parish pump politics,' 'stroke politics,' 'gombeen politics,' and 'gombeenism.' In order to capture possible links to the recent financial and economic crisis in Ireland, the period of analysis runs up to the year 2012.

Between the two newspapers analyzed, there is a huge imbalance regarding the frequency of use both for 'parish pump politics' and 'clientelism.' This imbalance is already noticeable in the 1940s, when there is a single article in the Irish Independent referring to parish pump politics but five in the Irish Times. The earliest occurrence of the term 'clientelism' is also in the Irish Times (in 1981). However, the fact that the Irish Independent picks up the terms at about the same time, although less extensively, shows that they are not just of idiosyncratic interest to one newspaper. The huge differences between the two papers in terms of coverage can best be seen as an indication of the special status of the Irish Times, which is generally regarded as the best quality newspaper in Ireland (Brandenburg and Zalinski 2008, 168).

The analysis of the contributions and articles combines elements of qualitative content analysis with a deeper interpretation of selected items. The coding for specific categories as proposed by Mayring (1983) permits to get an overview of the debate and possible changes over time as well as to address specific questions related to the topic of critique. The unit of analysis in the case of the newspapers is an article. In the case of the parliamentary protocols the unit of

analysis is the contribution of a member of the *Dáil* or the *Seanad*. Such a contribution is a speech in most cases, but can also be a short interjection, provided that at least one relevant search term occurs in it.

Important categories used to structure the material concern the actors or structures to which a critical statement refers as well as the negative, neutral or positive valence of statements. At first sight, it may seem that the terms used to search the material already indicate a negative valence themselves. However, this is not necessarily true. Quite a number of statements refer to clientelism or parish pump politics in order to clarify that the issue at hand should not be left to them. Although this may sound negative, it is as such just a demarcation regarding the scope of the issue. Consequently, a statement that "[i]ncineration is not a parish pump politics issue; it is one which affects the entire country" (Humphreys 2011) is categorized as neutral. In contrast, the statement that "it is important for all of us to think in regional terms now and get away from the old parochialism and parish pump politics that for long bedeviled politics and public life" (Kemmy 1989) is categorized as negative due to the use of the verb 'bedevil.' On the other hand, a positive statement would use one of the relevant terms, but interpret it in a way that frames the addressed issue or behavior as a normal or even laudable aspect of political work. An example is the statement that "[w]e are often charged with clientilism [sic], a code for saying that we stay close to our voters" (Lenihan 2005).

These distinctions make sense from a theoretical point of view as well. By characterizing something political as only of local importance or interest, the term 'parish pump politics' designates it as less worthy within the context of a civic world, in which worth is accrued by speaking in the name of large collectives (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 187). Being less worthy with regard to a specific common principle is not negative as such and is not the same as being irrelevant (ibid., 134). The same applies in principle for the use of the term 'clientelism.' There is a difference in the sense that the term itself hints at the presence of something that does not belong to the civic world. Yet, since conflicts between different orders of worth can be pacified by compromises (ibid., 277-81), clientelism in politics can also be referred to as such a compromise and thus is in itself not necessarily a critical term.

In order to gauge the scope of critique I coded the critical statements according to their foci: Criticism of county councils, counties, or health boards was categorized as critique addressing the local level of governance. Criticism of specific bills or programs or of specific government departments was categorized as programmatic. When the critique focused on specific deputies, parties, members of government or the opposition, it was categorized as partisan. In contrast, a critique that referred to deputies in general, the public administration, the electoral system, the political system, politics in general, or structures of government, was categorized as systemic. A further category, for statements that refer to the nature of voters or people in general in a critical manner, was

only relevant for newspaper articles. If no focus of the criticism was discernible, it was coded as open. Especially newspaper articles sometimes discuss several views of the matter. The respective article was then coded in more than one of the categories. The provision of an extended definition or explanation of the term 'clientelism' was taken as an indication for the depth of a contribution, in contrast to only using the term itself.

Based on the content-analytical structuration of the material, contributions and articles that are especially elaborate in their discussion of the link between politicians and voters were selected for more detailed interpretation. The scope of the present article does not allow a complete presentation of these interpretations, which are based on the notion of sequential analysis (see Kusche 2016, 194-200). Instead a few especially significant quotes were chosen for discussion below.

5.   Examples of the Critique

In the debate that revolves around the relationship between politicians and voters in Ireland, all contributors agree that the competition for votes focuses on servicing individual constituents and their problems to a large degree. Whether this focus is deemed appropriate or not is, on the other hand, the subject of critique and justification. In terms of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006, 133-8) it is more specifically a matter of determining whether established tests of worth pertaining to the civic world are actually working. The competition for votes in regular elections to the national parliament can be regarded as such a test, in which the judgement comes at the ballot box on election day (ibid., 192-3). The critique questions this test from several angles. Partly it focuses on specific actors or political actions; partly it questions rules of the political system as such.

In the latter case, it is mainly two types of rules that are criticized: those pertaining to the electoral procedure and those pertaining to the working of the public administration. The following quote from a *Dáil* debate in 1990 illustrates the first kind of criticism and also the way it is linked to academic works.

It is recognized by political scientists, indeed, it is generally recognized and accepted, that multiseat constituencies with PR[2] give rise to a very strong degree of clientelism in any political system throughout the world, and Ireland is no exception. We term it parish pump politics. It is an extremely wasteful form of political activity, which relates directly to our type of electoral system. […] We have a bureaucratic monstrosity which

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[2]   PR stands for proportional representation. In the Irish context, references to multiseat constituencies with PR mean the electoral system of the single transferable vote (STV), often also abbreviated as PR-STV.

arises from our electoral system, involving an incredible amount of paperwork and duplication. People call to Deputies with queries relating to medical cards, free travel, housing and social welfare problems. If Deputies do not perform this constituency work they will not be re-elected, due to the competition which is part of the multi-seat system. Not only is there cross-party competition but internal competition within parties. That is common to all large parties. (Martin 1990)

Intra-party competition is regarded as a direct result of the existing electoral rules and in its turn as the cause of a form of political activity that is deemed worthless, mainly because several people end up doing the exactly same thing individually. The electoral procedure, which is supposed to be an expression of the general will from the point of view of the civic order of worth (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 192), is thus accused of leading to actions that do not foster collectives but undermine them and aim at establishing one-to-one relationships between deputies and voters instead.

The same accusation is apparent in an example from the Irish Times, which stems from the same period of intensive discussion on the topic:

At the end of the day, however, STV as a system is designed for individuals and not for parties. Often the most bitter of contests in a constituency are those between candidates of the same party. And the result is a fostering of the worst aspects of clientelism, the desperate currying of favours with the electorate that, in effect, depoliticises elections by pushing ideological issues into the background. (Smyth 1989)

The author stresses the affinity between the Irish electoral system and a competition between individuals instead of parties. He characterizes the resulting relationship between politicians and voters as largely non-political, since ideological issues are displaced by politicians' efforts to ingratiate themselves with the voters. The fact that the author calls this behavior desperate seems to indicate the lack of volition on the part of the politicians, who under the existing electoral system see no other way to gain sufficient numbers of votes.

The attribution of the problem to the electoral system is by no means uncontroversial. The most prominent alternative attribution focuses on the centralization of the state and public administration. The following example elaborates especially forcefully some implications of the weakness of local government:

The Minister is playing the game of retaining the power to himself, of deciding whom he is going to grant aid, informing his party members, TDs and councillors before the public get to know to whom he is going to allocate money. He will leak the information to selected TDs and councillors so they will put out the word that the Minister is a marvellous man, that a project is to receive £10,000 or £15,000, that Fianna Fáil are a wonderful party and were it not for them they would not receive the grant. […] Politicians should not have to act like a wet nurse for their constituents. Certain senior politicians, former Ministers and TDs feel a need to hold their constituent's hands […] pretending their role is to get them a house. They bring in mothers and daughters to sit down before the housing advisers. That is an abuse of their position. That is

not what democracy is about. Democracy is about empowering people to use the structures that exist and not requiring intercession of councillors, former Ministers and so on. (Byrne 1991)
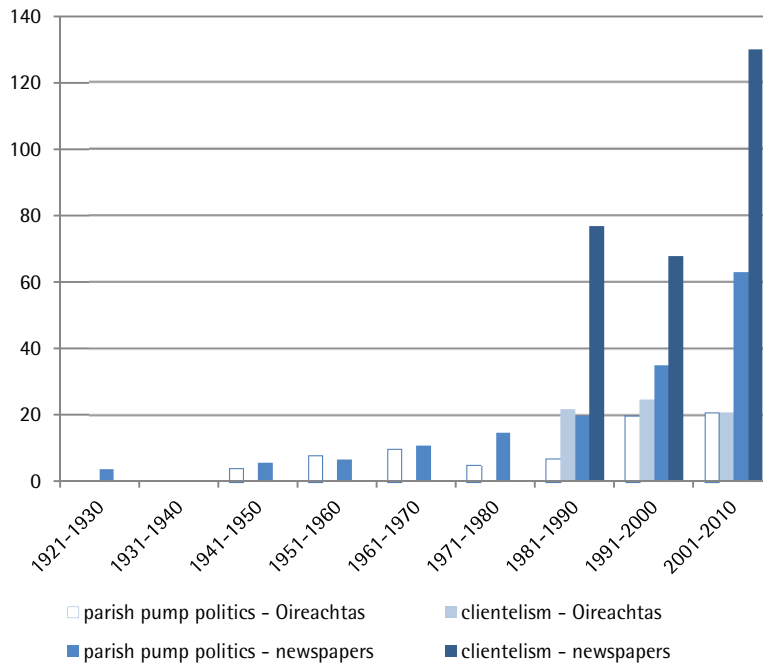
The speaker stresses the non-democratic features of politicians' actions that aim at a close, but very asymmetrical relationship with voters by offering help with administrative agencies or by linking the allocation of grants with their personal influence and party affiliation. Attributes like "marvellous" and "wonderful" and the comparison with a wet nurse are at odds with common ways to evaluate political decisions or politicians and mark the practices as not belonging to the civic world of democracy.

Although all of the above quotes originate in the late 1980s and early 1990s, their concerns are formulated in almost identical ways twenty years later during the years of the financial crisis. Once again, the electoral system is a target for criticism and especially the newspapers focus very much on its supposed short-comings. At least in the *Oireachtas* however, criticism is also directed towards administrative structures that are described as hierarchical, patriarchal, and authoritarian (Higgins 2011).

6.   Focus and Frequency of the Critique

Of all the terms included in the search, 'parish pump politics' turned out to be the only one in regular use in parliamentary speeches since the 1940s. The terms 'gombeen politics' and 'gombeenism' are not used before the 1980s in connection with the relationship between politicians and voters or the focus of deputies on their own constituency and the uses are infrequent, compared to 'clientelism.' Against this background and considering the timing of academic literature on the topic, two phases of critical reflection can be distinguished. Until the early 1980s problems regarding the relative weight of national and local concerns in the work of parliamentary deputies are primarily framed as parish pump politics. The social scientific analysis of this topic takes off in the 1960s (Chubb 1963) and takes up the notion of clientelism in the 1970s (Gibbon and Higgins 1974; Bax 1976; Sacks 1976). From the 1980s on, this term spreads both in parliamentary debates and in newspaper articles. It does not replace the older term 'parish pump politics,' but becomes more widely used soon, especially in the newspapers (Fig. 1). In fact, the introduction of the notion of clientelism into parliamentary debate and newspaper coverage in the 1980s creates a resonance unprecedented by older contributions and articles that refer to parish pump politics. Therefore the following analysis will focus on the period between 1981 and 2012.

Figure 1: Number of Articles/Speeches Referring to Parish Pump Politics or Clientelism (Kusche 2017)

parish pump politics – Oireachtas

clientelism – Oireachtas

parish pump politics – newspapers

clientelism – newspapers

When we distinguish between the critical, neutral, and positive valence of contributions in the *Oireachtas* that use at least one of the four terms, we see that critical statements are the most frequent ones in most, but not all years (Fig. 2). We also see peaks around the years 1988-1990, 1993, and 2010-2012. The latter is clearly linked to the fallout of the financial crisis in Ireland, which was not only regarded as an economic phenomenon but also as a result of political failures. In hindsight it cast doubt on the whole success story of the Celtic Tiger, which had started in the early 1990s (Kirby 2010). It raised the question of whether Ireland had essentially remained the same old problem-ridden country despite the years of economic prosperity.

Figure 2: Critical, Neutral, and Positive Statements in the *Oireachtas* Using 'Clientelism,' 'Parish Pump Politics,' 'Gombeen Politics,' or 'Gombeenism'
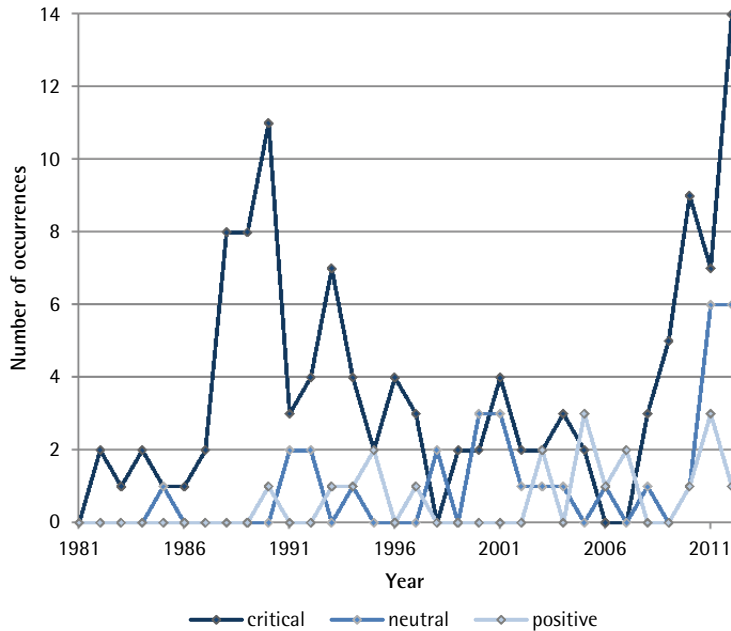

The former two peaks fall in a period of relative political instability, which saw three elections within six years. The second of these elections in 1989 broke with the established pattern of party competition in Ireland. The largest party *Fianna Fáil*, which until then had refused to form coalition governments, for the first time entered into such a coalition. This change of strategy increased the number of possible future constellations for government formation. At the same time it indicated that *Fianna Fáil*, which had been in government without interruption from 1957 until 1973, now preferred to stay in power even if it meant to share it with a small coalition partner (Weeks 2010, 151). This move made *Fianna Fáil*'s sustained claim to dominance in Irish politics in some sense more explicit and thus possibly rendered a critical reflection on how Irish politicians attempt to secure a voter base more relevant. Interestingly, the years 1981 and 1982, when clientelism was "discovered" as an issue outside the academic realm, had also been a time of electoral upheaval, with three elections within an 18-month period, a deep crisis of public finance and talk about reforming the *Dáil* (Ferriter 2005, 695).

However, reflection did not neatly follow party lines. Looking at the speakers who referred to clientelism in order to characterize Irish politics, we find

representatives from various parties, among them *Fianna Fáil*, even if we only look at the critical statements (Fig. 3). Yet, at least in the first years of talk about clientelism in the *Oireachtas*, none of the two largest parties *Fianna Fáil* and *Fine Gael* joined in. Striking is the role that the Marxist Left played in these years. This category encompasses a number of small parties that have replaced each other as a result of splits and fusions with other parties over time (McCabe 2015, 159). In relation to the number of their deputies they clearly play a disproportionate role as critical voices with regard to the relationship between politicians and voters.

**Figure 3:** Critical Use of 'Clientelism' in the *Oireachtas* by Party
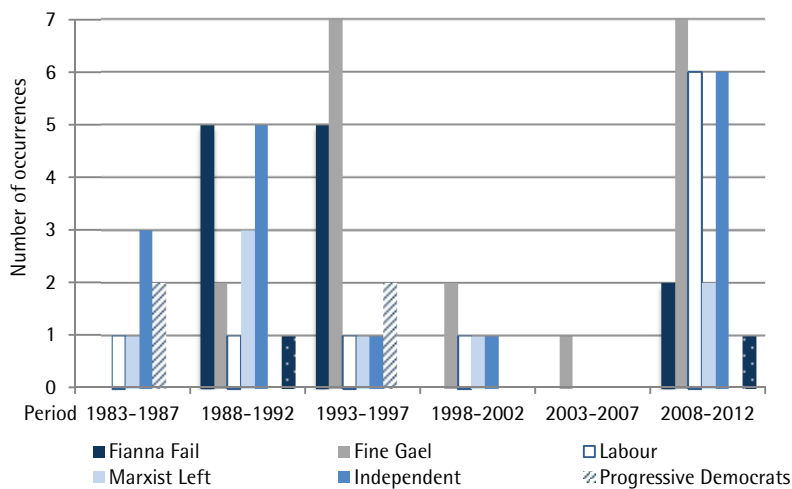
Not shown in Figure 3 are the few explicitly positive statements regarding clientelism, which have been made over the course of thirty years in the *Oireachtas* (n=10) and which have overwhelmingly come from *Fianna Fáil* TDs (n=8). Only in this very restricted sense does the critical reflection reveal an opposition between the long-time dominating party *Fianna Fáil* and the rest.

Although we cannot expect that all statements referring to clientelism grasp its social scientific and analytical background, it is arguably a more sophisticated term than 'parish pump politics' or the pejorative 'gombeenism/gombeen politics.' The latter are especially rare in the *Seanad*, the upper chamber of the *Oireachtas*. About one third of the references to clientelism in the *Seanad* come from senators who were elected from the two university panels, although they make up only one tenth of the *Seanad*. Three statements of other senators refer to either their own academic work on the topic or to publications of others when talking about clientelism. This suggests that the peculiar formation of the second chamber of parliament in Ireland, which due to its weak influence on

matters of legislation is often dismissed as a 'talking shop' (Gallagher 2010, 223), has played a significant role in establishing a perspective on Irish politics that draws on the notion of clientelism. On the other hand, this role is by no means exclusive. References to academic works related to clientelism can also be found in the *Dáil* and it was there that the term was first used in a parliamentary debate.

Figure 4: *Oireachtas* – Focus of Critique
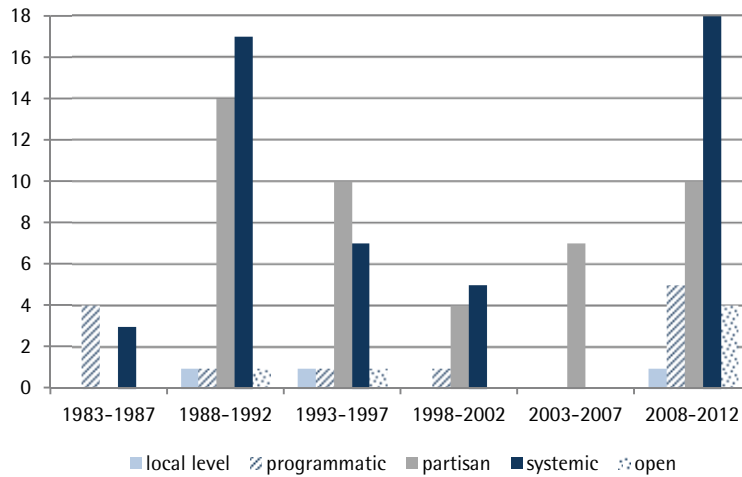
The results show that there are two major types of critique (Fig. 4 and 5). The first is partisan in the sense that the respective speakers criticize specific actors, which in a democratic political context inevitably has party political connotations. Those who do not agree with such accusations may easily attribute them to partisan differences and thus deny the relevance of the critique. In contrast, the second type of critique aims at aspects of the political system in general. This second type of critique is by far the most frequent in the newspaper articles (Fig. 5). Especially in the late 1980s and early 1990s, critique cast in partisan terms also plays a relatively large role in the newspapers, but over the whole thirty-year period it is much less pronounced than in the *Oireachtas*.

Figure 5: Newspapers - Focus of Critique
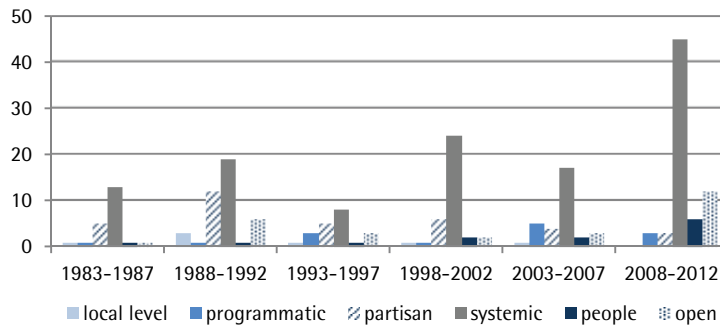
In sum, a closer look at the critique revolving around the notion of clientelism in Irish politics reveals important changes in the course of time. In the 1980s, it found three inroads into political discussion outside academia: representatives from the smaller parties, especially those on the (radical) left, active or former academics, especially senators in the upper house of the *Oireachtas*, and newspaper coverage of social science research on Ireland. The notion was however quickly adopted by others as well and became an established reference point when talking about Irish politics. Two pronounced peaks of explicitly critical uses can be discerned: one in the late 1980s and early 1990s and another one in the years of the financial crisis, especially 2010 to 2012. The first peak follows a period of strong interest in the concept in the newspapers, which is indicated not so much by the number of articles, but by the share of those that provide some in-depth discussion. It falls in a period of significant change with regard to party competition due to *Fianna Fáil*'s decision to govern as part of coalitions as well. This both increased the space of political possibilities and indicated *Fianna Fáil*'s willingness to secure the power to rule the country – two reasons to reflect more thoroughly on the base of political power in Ireland.

In contrast, the second peak of critical contributions, which coincides with the financial crisis, is neither preceded nor is itself a period with a broad effort at analytical depth. It can best be interpreted as a sudden reaction to the shock that the collapse of the Celtic Tiger boom had caused. In the search for explanations for what had gone wrong the accusation of clientelism aided in going beyond narrow economic considerations and indicating fundamental political problems at the heart of the crisis.

7.   Institutional Change

Critique using the accusation of clientelism has been closely linked to demands for and the justification of institutional changes. The first ever reference to clientelism in the *Dáil* was made in a debate about the establishment of an Ombudsman office and expressed the hope that the latter would help to reduce the former (De Rossa 1983). Significantly, the decision to establish the office of Ombudsman had already been taken with the Ombudsman Act in 1980. However, it took four years until the first Ombudsman was actually appointed. In subsequent years, its restricted competences, especially with regard to the many semi-state organizations with public administrative tasks, were frequently criticized (Office of the Ombudsman 1998, 6). However, only in the aftermath of the financial crisis were its oversight rights extended to many of those organizations by the Ombudsman (Amendment) Act 2012.

Critique of the constituency service focus also fed into the Comhairle Act 2000, which provided for the establishment of a Board that was supposed to improve the access to information on public services to ordinary citizens. Yet, only the Citizens Information Act 2007 finally made way for the establishment of Citizen Information Centers all over the country, which could actually fulfil this task. The accusation of clientelism also fed into the work of the Joint Committee on the Constitution, composed of members of both houses of the Irish parliament, and of the later Convention on the Constitution, when examining the possibility of changing the electoral system (Joint Committee 2010; Convention 2013).

These examples indicate the impact that the critique of clientelism has had on the debate about institutional change in the Irish political system over the years. It would be too bold an assumption to see the critique as the direct cause of decisions regarding institutional changes. Changing patterns of government coalition building as well as deep economic and political crises are the most likely immediate triggers for debates on institutional changes. However, the changing political culture that is indicated by the flourishing of the accusation of clientelism established an interpretative framework in which institutional change in Irish politics was framed as both necessary and as a matter of better separating national-level politics and local citizens' concerns.

This framework did not remain uncontested. The fact that political efforts to initiate or at least consider institutional changes were hardly continuous and often half-hearted is one indication of resistance. The infrequent voices disagreeing with the critique and explicitly justifying the advocacy of deputies for individual constituents' concerns as a vital part of democracy are another one. The following quote from a *Dáil* Debate in 2011 provides a recent example of this recurring type of defensive argument:

> There is much debate on the radio and elsewhere concerning new ideas from some wonderful people […]. Somehow these people envisage a democracy that is not about knocking on doors and asking for votes; it is airy-fairy and nebulous, hypothesizing that there should be some other way of getting elected. There is no other way than looking for votes, which is the most basic and proper way of electioneering. […] I have no truck with those who decry clientelism, as it is mentioned in a denigrating fashion. People ask why Deputies should look after people's rights or take up a cause when they should be thumping a table, putting forward amendments and speaking to legislation. We should do this but there must be balance that takes in constituency work, dealing with people before coming to this Chamber to do the national business. (O'Rourke 2011)

The speaker denies that there is anything wrong with the way Irish politicians attempt to get people to vote for them and rejects the notion of clientelism. She emphasizes that constituency work is about safeguarding people's rights and thus an inherent part of the work of national deputies, an argument that can be traced back to the 1980s (e.g. Flynn, 1989a, 1989b).

Continuities notwithstanding, the recent crisis in Ireland has added a few twists to the critique that has been analyzed here. On the one hand, it coincides with an increasing number of contributions, especially in the newspapers, that use a term like clientelism in conjunction with others like localism, cronyism, nepotism, and corruption. As part of such lists its distinctiveness gets blurred, as it seems to be used as one of several, almost synonymous designations of the misery of Irish politics. On the other hand, a few contributions both in the *Oireachtas* and in the newspapers actively attempt to reframe the discussion revolving around clientelism. They point out that other problems may actually be more relevant than small real or imagined favors for ordinary citizens. For example, a deputy from the radical left Workers and Unemployed Action Group describes the real clientelism as a relationship between tax evaders and the superrich on the one hand and parties on the other, with the latter being the clients of the former (Healy 2011). He thus points to the regulations of party financing and donations as a far more relevant topic. At about the same time a commentator in the Irish Times notes with regard to the rekindled debate about reforming the electoral system:

> [S]everal of the party manifestos in this election are proposing radical changes, for example the introduction of list systems, which will diminish, dilute and dull the voice of the individual voter under PR-STV. Such measures appeal to received, reductionist ideas rooted equally in misdirected rage and metropolitan snobbery about what is called clientelism. Politicians, we are instructed, need to be relieved of the burden of canvassing personal support so as to be enabled to concentrate on affairs of state, blah-blah. This crude understanding arises from profound ignorance of the subtlety and potential of the existing system, and is encouraged by politicians seeking simultaneously to ingratiate themselves with pseudo-progressive sentiment and relieve themselves of the burden of accountability to their electorates. (Waters 2011)

The author depicts the personal ties to voters that the Irish electoral system encourages not as a problem but as an asset in terms of political accountability. He attributes the criticism of these ties partly to an anger that focuses on the wrong target and partly to "metropolitan snobbery." In other words, he denies the validity of the critique and accuses it of factually distinguishing between the metropolitan region of Dublin and the rest of the country in terms of worth. Such a distinction cannot be justified within the civic order of worth. By identifying it as the foundation of the critical stance towards the constituency focus of many deputies the author thus delegitimizes this critique.

It is too early to determine whether such arguments announce a distinctive shift in the critical reflection on Irish democracy and the link between politicians and voters in particular. Considering that the beginnings of this reflection coincided with the deep political and financial crisis of the early 1980s, it is however conceivable that the even deeper crisis of the last years will alter the direction and content of critique significantly.

8.   Conclusion

Over the course of thirty years a distinctive critique has focused on the strong emphasis of most Irish deputies on constituency work and the attempts to forge personal links with voters by helping them with individual problems. The most immediate effect of this critique was that long-established patterns of political behavior were no longer taken for granted in Ireland. They were questioned with regard to their consequences for the way in which voters relate to the Irish state and politics and for the priorities of politicians competing for votes. The notion of orders of worth, as proposed by Boltanski and Thévenot (1999, 2006), has proven helpful in order to understand the justification for this critique as well as the justification for its rejection, which has surfaced from time to time. The analysis has also shown how social science research, mass media coverage and parliamentary debates contributed to spreading the notion of clientelism as an interpretation of deficits or at least peculiarities of Irish democracy. This did not happen in unison since social science argued for academically more appropriate concepts early on. Yet, it had to accept the resonance that specifically the notion of clientelism quickly created elsewhere.

Although this article focused on describing the dynamics and patterns of the critique and found a lot of continuity, the Ireland at the advent of the financial crisis was no longer the one of the early 1980s. Many demands linked to the diagnosis of clientelism back then were subsequently met, like the Ombudsman Office or Citizen Information Centers. The ongoing critique could however focus on the slow pace of such innovations and on the meagre financial resources often provided for them. Moreover, it could not help noticing that in spite of citizens' improved access to the administration, the deputies' focus on

constituency work prevailed. In this respect, the Irish political system continues to incorporate elements of the domestic order of worth.

Whether this poses a problem or not is not decided once and for all. Looking back at the last thirty years, it was frequently regarded as one. The accusation of clientelism formed the focal point of the corresponding critique, which the financial crisis has rekindled once more. However, it is entirely possible that in the future this critique may abate in favor of a compromise between the civic and the domestic world that accepts the brokerage role of deputies as a feature of Irish democracy without questioning its implications for the relationship between the particular and the general too much. The institutional changes that the critical discourse has helped to bring about over the course of several decades may render such a compromise less prone to further critique, at least in the long run.

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