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Analysing the Irish State: Sources and Resources

Dr. Niamh Hardiman
UCD School of Politics & International Relations, University College Dublin, D. 4
Niamh.Hardiman@ucd.ie

Diarmuid Torney
St. Antony’s College, Oxford, UK
diarmuid.torney@politics.ox.ac.uk

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1. Introduction

This paper outlines a path-breaking research project within the College of Human Sciences at UCD, developing a data set on the establishment, growth and evolution of Ireland’s state administration from the foundation of the Irish Free State. The dataset will constitute a major research infrastructure for the humanities and social sciences in Ireland and could act as a model for the development of similar infrastructures in other European states. This project represents an innovative Irish contribution to enhancing the capacity of social science and humanities research in Europe.

The aim of the project is to develop a research infrastructure in the social sciences and humanities that will be of benefit to political scientists, historians, lawyers, sociologists and specialists in public policy. The objectives are threefold:

- to enhance research capacity in Ireland and to provide the basis for high level cross-national comparison;

- to establish a data set that will be housed in the College of Human Sciences at UCD, and made available to the scholarly community online;

- to develop knowledge and understanding of the evolution of the Irish state and its public institutions.

The Irish state is a relatively young state in the international system and it is thus possible to develop a longitudinal data set of its institutional evolution from the foundation of the state. The data set will be updated on a periodic basis to ensure that it remains a valuable resource for the academic and research community.
There is at present no single authoritative source of information about state structure, when departments were created, which agencies are responsible to which Departments, how many agencies there have been over time, which ministers have held what offices in which departments. The database will be of significant use to researchers analysing changes in state competence, modes of administration and regulation, and changing emphasis in the allocation of resources over time. It will also facilitate the study of shifts in the extent of political autonomy or integration of state agencies, analysing the extent of cross-departmental linkages in addressing policy tasks.

2. Theoretical Motivations

From the early 1980s onwards, the role of institutions in structuring political, economic and social life was re-affirmed in a literature that fell under the general rubric of ‘new institutionalism’ (March and Olsen, 1989: 33-53). The renewed emphasis on institutions was a reaction to the dominance of behavioural approaches in the 1960s and 1970s (Hall and Taylor, 1996). The data set is also grounded in the literature on the role of the state and the significance of the state as a unit of analysis in the social sciences (Levi, 2002: 33-53). In an era of globalisation, when the sovereignty and capacity of the nation state are increasingly questioned, it is important to build up our knowledge of state institutions as a means of analysing how the state has evolved, how it does its business and what it does. We cannot address the changing nature of the state without empirical data on its evolution.

This study is grounded in one of the analytical approaches subsumed under the ‘new institutionalist’ rubric. Historical institutionalism, true to its ‘historical’ label, takes time seriously and underlines the importance of studying institutions over time rather
than a snapshot at any one time. It also places emphasis on studying institutional fields rather than one institution in isolation (Pierson and Skocpol, 2002: 695-96). A longitudinal data set mapping the Irish state will provide a rich data set on how the state built up its institutional capacity overtime and just what kind of institutions were established at different junctures. It will enable us to analyse processes of change and transformation. Did the Irish state build its institutional capacity in an incremental process or in episodic periods of more intensive change? The data set will enable us to test one of the key claims of historical institutionalism, namely path dependency. Historical institutionalists argue that institutions are ‘sticky’ and tend to follow a path dependent trajectory with change occurring at critical junctures. The development of a rich data set mapping the Irish state will enable us to confirm or disprove this claim.

Increasingly, political scientists have been concerned to unpack the idea of the state as a unitary concept and collective actor, to examine the institutional complex of institutions with legal authority, which interact with and are responsive to a variety of social and economic interests, which have relationships of varying degrees of closeness with public officials and elected politicians. Thus our models of how policy is made and implemented have moved away from a focus on the formal structures alone, and take increasing account of the importance and continuity of many organized interests for shaping the content of, and indeed assisting in the implementation of public policy. Hence, to capture this interactive aspect of the policy process, we see a concern with ‘governance’ rather than ‘government’ as the object of study (Kooiman, 2003). And we see an interest in the variety of relationships between organized interests and policy makers, going beyond the older distinction between ‘liberalism’ and ‘corporatism’, to examine typologies such as policy networks and policy communities (Marsh, 1998; Rhodes, 1997).
Drawing on these theoretical concerns, the project developed from a series of substantive research questions about changes in the nature and functioning of the Irish state:

- **Organizational innovation.** When and why do we see changes in departmental organization and structure? Are changes driven by party priorities, societal demands, international pressures or other forces?

- **From government to governance.** The conventional model of state bureaucracy implies a hierarchical chain of command; this is found also in the statutory framework such as the Ministers and Secretaries Act 1924. But in reality, policy making has involved more complex interactions between politicians, public officials, state agencies, voluntary sector organizations, and interest groups. Over recent decades, policy processes have become even more complex, especially with the innovations entailed by social partnership, and the expansion in the number of state agencies.

- **Change in the scope of state intervention.** The boundaries between ‘public’ and ‘private’ have been redrawn in many different areas of life – in social services and family law as well as in economic regulation. In reality, state policy-making in many areas of policy displayed relatively little initiative for several decades after Independence. Responsibility for delivery of education and many social services was delegated to religious orders and professional bodies. These arrangements came under pressure for change for a variety of reasons; organizationally, we still know relatively little about how extensive the state’s response has been, and what the implications are for its capacity to make and implement policy in a range of areas.
• **Intergovernmentalism and transnational influences.** EU membership and other international obligations have been interpreted in varying ways – as entailing a ‘hollowing out of the state’ as initiative and discretion leaches away elsewhere, or as implying ‘shared sovereignty’ with a ‘Europeanization of the policy process’. The genesis and implications of these trends need to be analysed.

• **Public service reform.** Deliberate reform initiative has been undertaken in the Irish public service since the mid-1990s, but there is as yet relatively little sustained analysis of its significance. This is to some degree because of limited information about the extent of what has been happening, which this project will go some way to remedying. Do these reforms contribute to a ‘hollowing out of the state’? Do they increase efficiency and coordination across Departments? To what degree are they measurable at all?

• **From direct to indirect modes of rule.** Instruments of policy making and implementation have changed considerably. Where once it was taken for granted that the state would own and control a broad range of productive assets and public and infrastructural utilities, these assumptions no longer hold as securely. The role and legitimacy of the market as an allocative mechanism has grown, and privatization has become more extensive. Yet new modes of intervention and oversight have grown in parallel. The rise of regulatory agencies, especially under the influence of European standard-setting, is particularly noteworthy.

• **Coordination of the ‘core executive’.** Westminster-type systems are known to have a tendency for Departments to work in relative isolation from one
another with a relatively weak sense of ‘stateness’ to integrate them. Yet governments remain collectively responsible for policy outcomes. Understanding the degree of dispersal or coordination of policy decisions provides an explanatory challenge.

3. Project Methodology

At its core, this project is a research database of Irish state institutions at national level since Independence. The relevant units for the project include Government Departments, policy units within Departments, state agencies (broadly defined), government taskforces, commissions of inquiry, Social Partnership bodies. Inclusion of a given unit in the database will be determined on the basis of our theoretical interests, which centre on processes of policy-making at the national level. Sub-national bodies, for example, will not be included in the database. Given the arguably ad-hoc way in which the Irish state has developed over time, any such methodology will result in borderline cases for inclusion/exclusion in the database. Such decisions will be made on the basis of clearly defined, and theoretically grounded, criteria.

For all relevant units, the database will record relevant attributes such as creation, death, continuity and change in structures, transfer of functions between units, budgets, personnel, and links to relevant legal and policy documents. The database will make it possible:

- to profile trends in institutional evolution,

- to track changes in governance mechanisms;

focusing on key thematic areas including:
- economic governance;
- regulatory capacity;
- policy coordination.

The process of database specification and design is ongoing and will initially continue in parallel with data gathering, and will reflect the particular characteristics of the data which is available to the project, as well as the theoretical concerns outlined above.

Furthermore, it is anticipated that the development of the database will proceed incrementally. The first step will be to establish a complete picture of the Irish state as it currently exists. The next step will be to enter the overarching structures such as Government Departments and prominent public bodies for the entire period of existence of the Irish state. Once these two steps have been undertaken, further work will begin on entering other state bodies and more detailed data on those bodies already entered in the database.


At present, little systematic knowledge exists on the institutional history of the Irish state. Much is known about particular policy arenas and institutions, but overall knowledge is patchy, both laterally – in terms of coverage of the entirety of the state – and temporally, in that research has focused on particular critical junctures, and especially on developments in recent decades.

The general political science and public administration literature on the Irish state has an understandable tendency to operate at a level of generality that abstracts away from the complexities of institutional development and growth which this project will seek
to capture (Barrington, 1980; Dooney, 1976). John Coakley and Michael Gallagher’s standard text, *Politics in the Republic of Ireland* (2005), for example, provides (in Appendix 4) a genealogy of Irish Government Departments since 1924. This is certainly a useful starting point, and complements the discursive chapters which make up the volume, but the creation and evolution of Irish Government Departments is just one aspect of the institutional architecture of the Irish state. Basil Chubb’s *A Source Book of Irish Government* provides another useful starting point, but is once again somewhat general and slightly dated at this point. The value added of this project will be its comprehensiveness, both across policy areas and institutional forms.

Other scholarship on Irish politics and public administration has focused on particular policy areas or institutional spheres. Detailed historical studies have been undertaken of the Department of Finance (Fanning, 1978), the Department of Agriculture (Daly, 2002; Hoctor, 1971) and the Department of the Environment (Daly, 1997), for example. Frederick Charles King’s three volume edited collection, *Public Administration in Ireland*, comprising a significant proportion of contributions by senior civil and public servants, provides a useful mid-century snapshot, but is again patchy in coverage (King, 1944, 1949, 1954). Other scholars have focused on particular types of institutions, such as Garret FitzGerald’s careful and comprehensive examination of State Sponsored Bodies (FitzGerald, 1963), or Donald Leon’s work on Advisory Bodies in Irish Government (Leon, 1963).

The Report of the Public Services Organisation Review Group of 1969 (the so-called Devlin Report) spawned a considerable amount of writing on Irish public administration, and indeed itself represents a useful snapshot of the organisation of the Irish public service in the late 1960s. However, much of the writing that followed
concerned the question of whether or not the recommendations of the Report were being implemented.

Much more recently, attempts have been made to gain an understanding of the complexity of the realm of Irish public administration which lies outside the domain of Government Departments. The work of the think tank Tasc has attempted to examine issues of rationality of design and delegation, accountability and control in relation to public bodies in Ireland (Clancy and Murphy, 2006). According to this work, no comprehensive official directory of non-departmental public bodies exists, and further, that existing lists of public bodies are partial and overlapping, and define public bodies in different ways. The Committee for Public Management Research has been recently conducting research on the corporate governance of agencies in the Irish system (McGauran, Verhoest and Humphreys, 2005). This work, while valuable, takes a snapshot of institutional profiles at a single point in time. Moreover, there is still no agreed definition of what a state agency actually is: different conceptions will yield wide variations in the total count, but there is no systematic analysis of what the appropriate definition might be for any particular purpose.

While all of these strands of historical and contemporary research exist, there is no unified, detailed and comprehensive source on the historical development and contemporary form of the Irish state. Providing such a resource is the central goal of this research project.

5. Availability of Data

Work on the project to date has involved an initial search for, and examination of, the sources of data that can be used for the project. We noted above that our project represents the first systematic attempt to gather detailed data on the institutions of the
Irish state which seeks comprehensiveness both laterally, in terms of capturing the full breadth of institutions, and longitudinally, in terms of capturing the a full history of the Irish state since independence. Given this fact, the sources of data we will need to exploit are necessarily diverse, both in form and in location. This section outlines the results of our investigations to date, indicating the sources which we intend to exploit during the data gathering phase of the project.

**5.1 Institute of Public Administration Annual Yearbook and Diary**
The *IPA Yearbook & Diary*, published annually since 1967, contains information on all government departments and state bodies, both commercial and non-commercial, though coverage is uneven. For each Department, the *Yearbook* typically gives the structures of the department (divisions, sections, units, branches, etc) as well as information on agencies operating under the aegis of that department. For each state-sponsored body, the *Yearbook* gives a brief outline of the history and functions of the body, including details such as date of establishment, means of establishment and role. However, the information given sometimes contradicts information given in the annual reports of Government Departments. Furthermore, the presentation of information is not uniform across all departmental entries, thus presenting difficulties for this research project.

**5.2 Eolaire an Stáit/State Directory & Freedom of Information**
*Eolaire an Stáit*, known most recently in English as the *State Directory*, was first published under the title *Directory of State Services* in 1966. It continued under this name, except for 1972, until 1975. In 1976 the name of the publication changed to *State Directory*. It was published every year from 1976 to 1986, then in 1988, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1995 and 2000. The 2000 edition, the latest available, is very substantially bigger than any previous edition, due to inclusion of material for each
body required under the Freedom of Information Act. Since 2000, each State organisation has published the relevant Freedom of Information material on an individual basis, which appears to have brought to an end publication of the consolidated Eolaire an Stáit / State Directory. However, these ‘Section 15 Reference Books’, published by each Department and public body subject to the Acts, include among other information a general description of the department/body, its structure and organisation, and its functions, powers and duties. These Reference Books are produced at least every 3 years.

The State Directory gives, for every Government Department and a small number of other bodies such as the State Laboratory and the Revenue Commissioners, details of structure (divisions, sections, units, branches, etc.) staffing levels in the department as a whole and in each unit, and names (and, more recently, telephone numbers) of its members of staff.

5.3 Annual Reports & Strategy Statements

Under the Public Service Management Act, 1997, the secretaries general of Government Departments, and heads of certain other public bodies, must issue strategy statements at least every three years and also within six months of the appointment of a new minister. It is in this context that the requirement to publish annual reports arises: the secretary general must provide the minister with a progress report on the implementation of the strategy statement annually.

Certain departments have issued annual reports over various periods of time before the late 1990s, but it is only since the enactment of the Public Service Management Act that the issuing of annual reports has become consistent across Departments. Even now, however, problems of access arise in the case of the annual reports of
certain Government Departments. The usefulness of the annual reports of
Government Departments for this project also varies between Departments. In some
cases, detailed information is given regarding the structure of the Department, while
in other cases very little useful information is given.

While it has not been standard practice since the foundation of the state for
Government Departments to issue annual reports, there are a number of examples of
Departments that have issued such reports for most of the period (e.g. Departments of
Agriculture, Education, and Local Government) and other Departments which have
issued reports for particular periods of time (e.g. Departments of Marine and Labour).
Many of these are of limited use as they do not include detailed or systematic
information on characteristics relevant to this project, such as creation of new bodies,
organisational change and transfers of functions between bodies. However, annual
reports were published in the early years of the Department of Health (covering the
period 1945 to 1958), which contain quite detailed information on the establishment
of the Department and on administrative changes. Similarly, the new Department of
Social Welfare published its first report for the period 1947-9, and thereafter up until
1994/5, though some reports covered more than one year. Again, these reports contain
useful information regarding the setting up of the Department, its functions,
organisational form, and the various schemes it operated.

Many other public bodies have produced annual reports much more consistently than
most Government Departments. Examples of these include the Revenue
Commissioners, the Adoption Board, the Director of Consumer Affairs, the Labour
Court and the Registrar of Friendly Societies. However, most of these reports do not
give the detailed information on structure and function required by this project.
5.4 The National Archives

It is likely that detailed searches of the archives of an individual department would yield information about organisational change over time, the setting up of bodies under that department, etc. However, most of my time was spent looking through the ‘Establishment Files’ of the Department of Finance. These are a subset of the full set of Department of Finance files held in the National Archives, and are only held for the years 1925-1939.

The ‘Establishment Files’ of the Department of Finance, held for the years 1925 to 1939 in the National Archives, deal with matters of staffing, personnel, organisation and establishment of government departments, state bodies, commissions and other such bodies. While many of them refer to the appointment of individuals to particular positions, wages, allowances, overtime, retirement, and so on, a minority of the files (though a significant number in absolute terms) refer to broader issues of civil service organisation, reorganisation, appointment of state boards and so forth. The archives of the Department of the Taoiseach also contain many files relating to issues of establishment and reorganisation in the civil service more generally. These resources will provide useful in depth information on the earlier period, for which other sources are lacking, especially to build up the richness of the information in the database.

5.5 Irish Parliamentary Handbooks

The Handbook provides a guide to the legislature and executive, including detailed information on all Government Departments and several non-departmental bodies, such as the Tariff Commission, the Currency Commission, and the ESB, short biographies of TDs, and a short history of the State. It also contained entries for what are called ‘temporary commissions’, which give details of the chairpersons, secretaries and terms of reference. The information in these publications varies from department to department but in all cases gives at least some indication of the size and composition of each department. Details of internal structures of government departments are given in some cases, though this is not always clear. However, in the case of a number of departments it appears that they were too small to merit detailed description of internal organisation.

5.6 Blue Notes
The Blue Notes are a set of documents, prepared in 1937 by all Government Departments and collated by the Department of Finance, which give enormous detail on the development of each Department from 1922-23 until 1935-36 (O'Connor, 2001). Preparation of the Blue Notes revived a tradition, established under British rule, of keeping detailed consolidated historical records of the activities and development of a Government Department. The Blue Notes are organised by expenditure vote. For each Department or public body, they give historical background, functions, organisation, along with details of the changes in each subhead of the vote for each of the years in question.

5.7 Other Sources
Many other sources will provide useful information in the development of this project, particularly during the later stages of development where the emphasis will be on building up the richness of the data. Other such sources include the Irish Statute
Book, which is hosted on the internet by the Office of the Attorney General. It is our intention to provide links in the database to relevant primary and secondary legislation. The searchable Oireachtas debates will also provide a very useful source of information.

6. National and International Research Linkages

As part of the initial phase of this project, a range of senior and retired civil and public servants have been contacted, all of whom were open to contributing their knowledge of the Irish public administration with the project. This included high-level contact with a number of Government Departments, among them the Departments of the Taoiseach, Finance and Communications, Marine and Natural Resources.

A central value of this project is the scope available to engage in comparative study of state structures and their evolution. The *Norwegian State Administration Database* is based at the Stein Rokkan Centre for Social Studies in Bergen, Norway, which charts the development of the Norwegian state from 1947 to 2003 (Lægreid et al., 2003). The British Whitehall Programme, funded by the ESRC from 1994 to 1999 (Rhodes, 2000a, b, c), ran a project entitled *Organisation of Central Government Departments: a History 1964-1992* (McLean, Clifford and McMillan, 2000). This project produced a database which captures continuity and change in the structures of Central Government in Britain during the period in question.

7. Conclusion

The *Mapping the Irish State* project is an ambitious research initiative which will make it possible to analyse the evolution of state structures over time and to capture the dynamics of change across as well as within policy fields. It will generate data
with which to analyse state capacity for effective policy making and implementation. It will facilitate assessment of competing explanations for change in state structure and policy performance. It will provide the data to facilitate analysis of changes in state functions, modes of governances, and types of policy intervention. It will make it possible to engage in systematic cross-national comparative study of state capacity and state functions, a field of study that has hitherto been limited by the marked variations in legal systems and structures of public administration. It will provide the basis for further research projects about sectoral policy dynamics and state-society interactions. Conceptual and empirical papers will be produced at regular intervals: further inquiries about the project are most welcome.
References


