

Tribal split between 'Gaelic' FF and 'English' FG names

By Paul O'Brien, Political Editor

In their decades of political rivalry, Fianna Fáil have relished any opportunity to deride Fine Gael as "West Brits".

Now, research may fuel further rounds of such slugging in the Dáil.

The research showed FF TDs are significantly more likely than FG to have surnames of exclusively Irish origin, with the opposite true for surnames of English origin.

Conducted by Dr Eoin O'Malley of DCU and Dr Kevin Byrne of TCD, the research sought to determine whether there really were "tribal" differences in Irish politics. The researchers examined Irish surnames and found significant tribal differences between the two parties.

They identified the surname origin of every TD ever elected — more than 1,100 in total — and found that while 64% of FF TDs have surnames of exclusively Gaelic origin, only 51% of FG TDs do.

The opposite pattern is seen for Old English (ie, Norman) and New English surnames, with 22% of FG TDs bearing names of that origin, but only 12% of FF TDs.

"While a surname of a given origin isn't enough to predict a politician's party, there is a bias in affiliation toward FF TDs having Gaelic surnames and FG TDs having Old and New English surnames," they said.

"There is, respectively, a less than one-in-1,000 and less than one-in-500 probability of these differences arising by chance, meaning the tribal polarisation between FF and FG is statistically significant.

"In addition, FF has significantly more TDs with Gaelic surnames than would be expected given the Irish population, while FG has more deputies with Old and New English surnames than a random sampling of Irish citizens would warrant."

The researchers suggest that the Old and New English "formed a strong element of the support base for constitutionalist politics that eventually went on to be represented by FG, whereas higher levels of support from the larger Gaelic strand in Irish society might be what made FF historically stronger".