The Irish State Administration Database

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Key Points

- The Irish State Administration Database (ISAD) constitutes a major research infrastructure for the humanities and social sciences in Ireland, and is of benefit to political scientists, historians, lawyers, sociologists and specialists in public policy. It should also be of interest to public servants and public representatives.
- This resource provides a dataset capturing the establishment, growth and evolution of Ireland's state administration from the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922 to the present.
- ISAD is a unique public resource that is freely available for all to use. As we approach the centenary of the State, ongoing funding will be needed to support continuous updating and deepening of the database.

Chronicling 100 Years of Irish State Administration

The centenary of the Irish state's foundation in 2022 will provide an occasion for reflection on one hundred years of change and achievement. There has already been significant focus on the politics and statecraft efforts of the 1916 – 1921 period, but the formal transfer of governing authority to the Irish Free State presents a new chapter in the national memory. The coming year allows us to take a fresh look at the evolution of the public bureaucracy over time, and the shifts in the roles it has played in the functioning of economic and social life in a national and international context. While the politics and personalities of the last century tend to attract most scholarly attention, what often escapes scrutiny is the way the 'machinery' of the state itself has functioned, the degree to which its capacity for policy making and implementation have adapted in the context of governments' changing political, economic, and social ambitions, and the implications for the quality of public governance considered in the light of key principles of efficiency and effectiveness, equity and fairness, responsiveness and accountability.

"ISAD not only provides a valuable research resource for work on the Irish state, but also can provide a framework for building a comparative research agenda"
N. Hardiman and C. Scott (2012) 'Ordering Things: The Irish State Administration Database' *Irish Political Studies*, 27(1): 1-22

Key questions include the extent to which Ireland has depended on the use of ministerial departments as the primary forum for developing and implementing public policies and how extensively agencies have been used to manage key functions such as service delivery and regulation. How have patterns varied over time and across different policy domains, and why? How different is the organisation of health-related services from those in sectors such as education, or transport? Is there greater dependence on arm's-length agencies to deliver government policies today than there was in 1922, or indeed in 1972? And how does the manner in which the national administration has been organised shape citizens' experiences of public services?

Fortunately there is now a valuable research resource to address these questions of organisation, capacity, and the changing shape of the Irish public service: the Irish State Administration Database (ISAD; www.isad.ie). This was established by a UCD Geary Institute for Public Policy team led by Professor Niamh Hardiman. Originally funded by the Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS, now the Irish Research Council, IRC), in 2008-10, it has been fully updated on a rolling basis. With nearly a century of comprehensive data on all national public organisations in Ireland, ISAD is now the world's longest time-series dataset of such organisations.

The purpose of creating ISAD was to produce an institutional framework resource for analysing state activity and capacity over time, in order to fill a major gap in our knowledge of the evolution of the Irish state's 'machinery of government' and its 'reach' over time. In other words, what does the Irish public administration do, how does it do it, and how has it evolved? To this end, the database contains a wide variety of descriptive data on the state's administrative apparatus. It has been developed in a manner that facilitates researchers in conducting their own data searches. It will continue to evolve, for example to include links to other databases, as is already the case with the *Irish Statute Book*.

The data

The database has been built by developing and linking two sets of data relating to 'units' and 'events'. Units refers to the organisations involved in making and implementing public policy. The research team had to make some choices about which organisations to include and which to exclude from the database, tending to exclude what were clearly temporary or transitory organisations, such as investigative tribunals and *ad-hoc* advisory committees. The strict division between state and non-state organisations is not always clear cut, since assessing what is public and what is not can be determined by reference to a range of criteria, including funding, authority, and accountability. The data therefore includes some privately appointed and financed organisations which nevertheless can be said to exercise a form of public power, such as the regulatory powers of the Law Society of Ireland the Advertising Standards Authority of Ireland, and Repak, an industry body that discharges statutory functions.

> *"Analysis of the Irish state's administrative system is an unaccountably neglected area of systematic academic inquiry. This is all the more difficult to account for in view of the dynamic relationship between government actors and the public bureaucracy in realizing political goals".*
> M. MacCarthaigh (2012) 'Politics, Policy Preferences and the Evolution of Irish Bureaucracy: A Framework for Analysis' *Irish Political Studies*, 27(1): 23-47

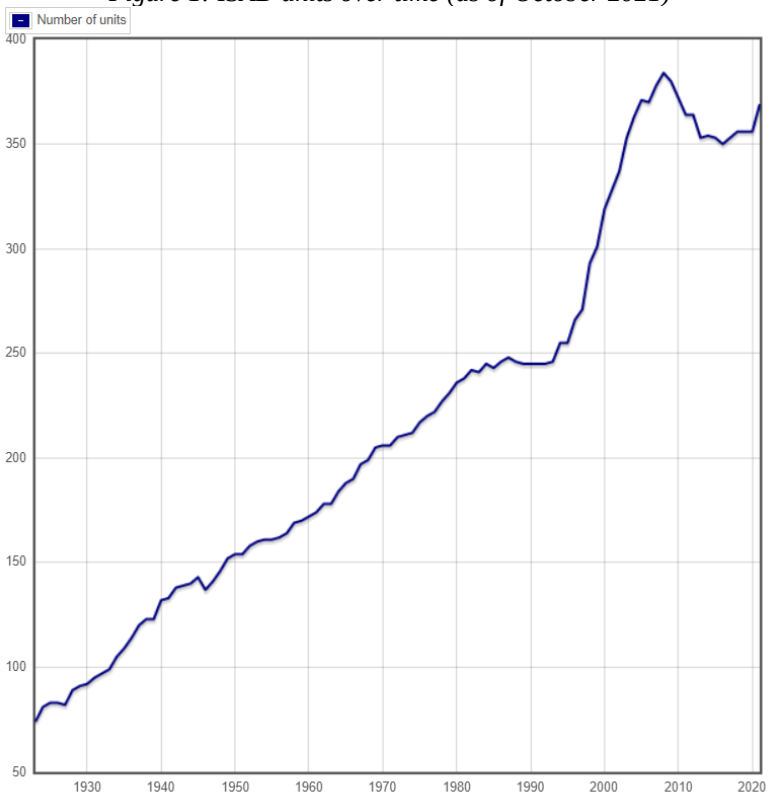
Each 'unit' is coded to include principal policy domains (e.g. health, education, transport), its principal function (e.g. regulation, service delivery, advisory) and its legal form (e.g. statutory corporation, company limited by guarantee). The units are also coded according to the United Nations COFOG (Classification of Functions of Government) scheme, which is an international standard for classifying the purposes of government activities. Figure 1 below provides a year-on-year profile of the number of these units from 1922 to 2021.

The second set of data – events – captures the life-cycle of each unit over time. Twelve types of events are coded in the database including, for example, birth, death, replacement, split and merger. Combining the units (i.e. organisations such as Ministerial Departments, state agencies, semi-state bodies, regulatory agencies, etc.) and their life-cycles (that is, the events they have experienced over time) provides a comprehensive inter-navigable 'family tree' of the genealogy of the Irish state administration over the last century.

The database is searchable in numerous different ways. A search could look at what happened to a particular unit such as a Government Department over time; or it could show how many units there were of any particular type (such as function, or policy area, or legal form) at any one time. Combining search items could establish, for example, how many organisations (or units) were principally concerned with regulation in the transport sector in a given year, such as 2020, compared to earlier years such as 1980 and 1930. The database thus provides a powerful tool to better understand not only

organisational evolution, but also the shifting trends in organisational structures to address particular policy areas. It is a valuable resource for investigating how the overall capacity of the state has changed in the course of its first century.

Figure 1: ISAD units over time (as of October 2021)

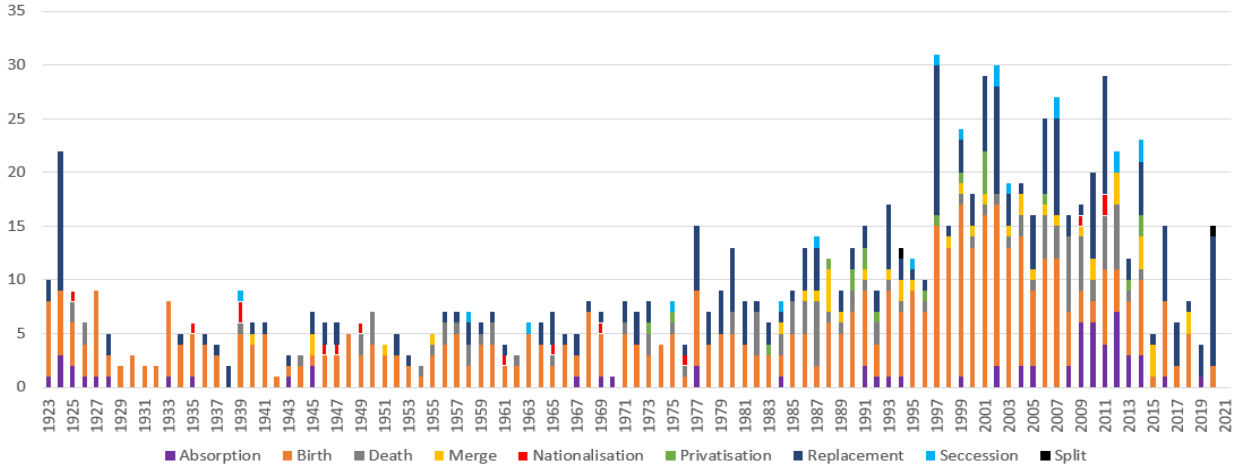


The shape of the government administration is largely framed by the 1937 Constitution which provides that there shall be no more than 15 members of the Government (i.e. full cabinet ministers), though there is no constitutional limit to the number of Departments, which first peaked at 18 in 1982 and again reached 18 in 2020. The *Ministers and Secretaries Act 1924* specifies the number of Ministers and the Departments for which they are responsible. This legislation is subject to amendment when the grouping of the functions carried out by Departments is changed, as may happen following a change of government. ISAD records show, for example, that the Coalition government which took office in 2020 established a wholly new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, on 2 August 2020. The *Ministers and Secretaries and Ministerial, Parliamentary, Judicial and Court Offices (Amendment) Act 2020* provides that the 1924 Act shall be applied to the new Department and Minister as if that Department had been established by the 1924 Act.

The establishment of agencies and their form is not subject to such constitutional or (necessarily) statutory regulation: changes at agency level are much more within the control of particular governments and Ministers, who may use both statutory and non-statutory means to establish and adapt agency mandates. It is therefore not surprising that the numbers and activities of agencies have seen far greater change than have the

Government Departments. But the accumulation of agencies over time brings new administrative challenges in areas such as policy coordination, performance, and accountability. Figure 2 captures something of the complexity of organisational evolution in the state administration at national level over the last hundred years.

Figure 2: ISAD events over time (as of October 2021)



Research using the database has assessed trends in the development of particular government functions outside of Government Departments, such as regulation and grievance handling. The evidence suggests that the regulatory capacity of the state through agencies was well established by the 1930s, buoyed by an inheritance of agencies with pre-Independence roots. In this early period of the State, there was an initial focus on moral regulation (e.g. censorship), and on the development of agricultural and industrial capacity: we can see a form of regulatory state *avant la lettre* emerging in Ireland, pre-dating even the growth of regulatory agencies in the United States associated with the New Deal, albeit in a very different register in a state with a comparatively very small industrial base. From this base, which evolved over the following decades, the aggregate number of regulatory organisations grew incrementally, with an acceleration between the mid-1990s and 2008. This may partly be explained by international public policy trends (including mandatory requirements to establish regulatory agencies in the case of some EU policy sectors). Changing

> *"State institutions mediate the challenges of globalization for the domestic political community: the concerns of specialists in comparative politics and in public administration are increasingly converging round an interest in the nature and functioning of state institutions"*
> N. Hardiman and C. Scott (2010) 'Governance as Polity: An Institutional Approach to the Evolution of State Functions in Ireland' *Public Administration*, 88(1): 170-189

international norms also played a role, for example in convergence around the value of putting functions such as regulation at 'arm's length' from government, to prioritize technical rather than political criteria in fields such as food safety and telecommunications.

Data from ISAD can tell us a great deal about the state's administrative capacity. The research team has undertaken various studies of the propensity of Irish governments to grow (or more recently reduce) the numbers of agencies in diverse fields. Government preferences play a large role here, against a backdrop of the incentives and constraints emanating from the political economy context. We may also see that institutional structures themselves can display varying degrees of inertia or resistance to change, or may display slow institutional change, or may be subject to more rapid shifts in continuity, form, and function.

ISAD is a unique public resource that is freely available for all to use. As we approach the centenary of the State, ongoing funding will be needed to support continuous updating and deepening of the database. This research infrastructure is a key resource to allow us to address new research questions and to support public policy practitioners in their understanding of the evolution of state capacity as we move to the second century of the Irish state.

The Irish State Administration Database is available at www.isad.ie.
Follow us on Twitter: @ISAD_UCD

"We need to develop our thinking not only about what a state is in general terms, but also about where the boundaries of 'public' and 'private', 'state' and 'civil society', are to be drawn"

Hardiman, N. (2017) 'Tracking the State in a Liberal Economy: Empirical Indicators and Irish Experience' in in King, D. and LeGalès, P. (eds.), *The Restructuring of European*

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