

Ireland Topic 3: The Pursuit of Sovereignty and the Impact of Partition, 1912-1949 | Sample answer

What were the strengths and weaknesses of Éamon de Valera as a political leader?

Éamon de Valera became President of Dáil Eireann in April 1919 following his escape from prison and would go on to lead Ireland through the War of Independence and later the Second World War. He was the leading figure in Irish politics for the better part of four decades. He was effective and decisive and we also must commend his longevity and ability to consistently win the support of the public. However, he was also a very flawed political leader and is often criticised for his actions prior to the outbreak of Civil War, his role in the Anglo-Irish Treaty and a lack of reform in his time in office.

Throughout his political career, de Valera was unfailingly effective. He consistently showed his ability to achieve goals others could not. This was best seen in arguably his greatest political achievement, the swift movement towards an Irish Republic in the 1930's. De Valera and his Fianna Fáil ran in 1932 on dismantling the Anglo-Irish Treaty under the Statute of Westminster following Cumann na nGaedheal's refusal to do so. The Oath of Allegiance and the Governor General role was abolished shortly after he came to power. All mention of the King was soon deleted from the Constitution and in 1937 de Valera himself wrote the new Irish constitution. Though it was the first Inter Party government that finally declared a new Republic, much of the credit lies with de Valera for his effectiveness in office.

A hallmark of great political leaders is longevity and de Valera achieved levels of that unseen in Irish politics. His ability to adapt to a rapidly and ever-changing political landscape. He first came to prominence in a time where militarism and republicanism were far and away the main issues for Ireland where but later had to lead through a period of social and economic problems and then through the Second World War. He was not only a wartime leader but also a peacetime diplomat and he recognized the shifts in what the Irish public cared about. While many others who emerged during the early days of the Irish Republic did continue for decades in the political arena, such as WT Cosgrave and Richard Mulcahy, none retained his influence or standing for such a period.

De Valera was also a charismatic and massively popular leader. We saw this both in the loyalty he commanded within his own party and his support across the country. So devoted to him, his followers followed him out of the Dáil following the ratifying of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in

1922. The 44 TD's who were elected in the 1923 election also refused to take up their seats along with de Valera. He would then build a new party, Fianna Fáil and ensured they quickly became extremely popular and held an overwhelming majority in 1932. De Valera's ability to remain popular was a key strength of his as a political leader.

De Valera was also unerringly decisive. While this had negative consequences as we will see later but it also can be seen as a strength. We saw this best in his actions in 1939 at the outbreak of war. September 1st saw the German invasion of Poland and the 3rd saw France and Britain declare war but Ireland was declared neutral on the 2nd. De Valera then announced this was a state of emergency and the Emergency Powers Bill which gave the government further authority. De Valera's decisive action ensured the country was prepared to deal with the challenges of War. This is in contrast to the Unionists in the North where inaction led to the 6 counties being unprepared.

Despite all that, de Valera was very flawed and historian Tim Pat Coogan goes as far to suggest his failures outweigh his achievements. His most obvious error was his role in the Civil War. Although he did try to put an end to the war once it began, there's little doubt he was a primary cause of it. The dramatic move of leading his supporters out of the Dáil was a signal to those against the Treaty across the country to turn to militarism. He then went on a controversial tour of Munster where he spoke of "wading through Irish blood" towards freedom. Ronan Fanning concludes that De Valera's cardinal sin was the "rejection of the Treaty and his consequent culpability for the civil war".

His involvement, or lack thereof, in the Anglo-Irish Treaty is also held up as one of his gravest mistakes. He surprisingly announced he would not travel to London for talks and would instead remain in Dublin so the delegation would have to report back without agreeing to anything. However, Fanning and Coogan support the widely-held view that it may have been because he knew a satisfactory deal was impossible and those who went were to be sacrificial lambs. De Valera abstaining meant whatever deal returned would be contentious because there would inevitably be suspicions that the nation's best diplomat would have secured more. This exacerbated the divisiveness of the Treaty and shows a lack of foresight and awareness that de Valera often displayed.

Finally, he oversaw an era of cultural and economic stagnation and his lack of reform and the relationship he forged with the Catholic Church have all seen him frequently criticised. It's inarguable his greatest achievements were on the foreign front, be it the dismantling of the Treaty or during The Emergency however his most ardent supporters maintain he should be

commended for overseeing an era of stability but his social and cultural conservatism led to a glaring lack of change in society. The church exerted too much influence on policy due to their power in society. Despite the left-wing republicans he fought with in 1916 and governed with in the 1920's, he neglected the lower classes and poverty rates were extremely high.

Éamon de Valera had more influence on Ireland than any other man in this nation's history. We must recognise his decisive and effective actions as well as his incredible longevity and popularity but he was also flawed and his culpability for the Civil War and his refusal to attend Treaty talks are heralded as his worst mistakes. He also oversaw a time of an ailing economy and allowed the church to control social policy. It remains up for debate if his weaknesses and failures outweighed his strengths and successes.