

Symposium: ‘1997-2022 - A Generation of Change’

Economic Crisis, Exacting Voters and Twenty-Five Years of Electoral Transformation in Ireland 1997-2022

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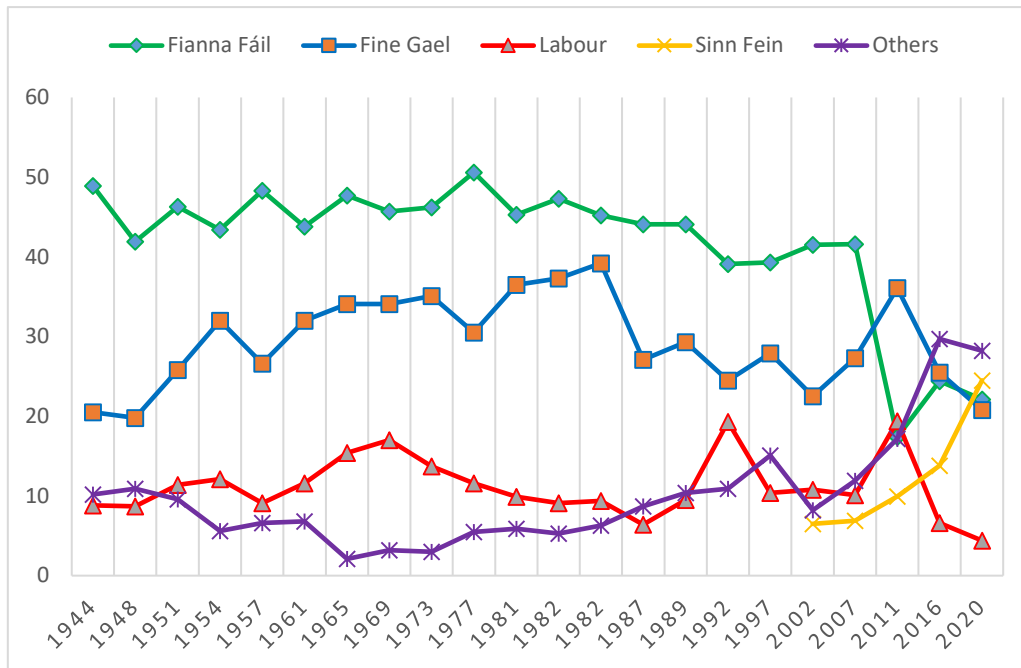
1. INTRODUCTION

Voter attachments and loyalties to Irish political parties have been declining for decades, elections have become unpredictable and government formation more complicated. This paper will review changing voting patterns at general elections from 1997-2020 using data from the Irish National Election Study (2002-2020), RTE exit polls and electoral indices. It begins in this introduction by exploring the history of voting patterns before presenting data on some early signs of ideological re-orientation among Irish voters on the left-right economic dimension. It reviews data on anti-establishment sentiment and outlines how these attitudinal positions are contributing to the changing shape of the party system. The penultimate section highlights aspects of continuity in Irish politics with data on candidates and the long standing localist orientation of a notable share of Irish voters.

Ireland had a stable political system from the foundation of the state until the close of the twentieth century. Party competition was rooted in the state building conflicts of the War of Independence and the Civil War (1919-1923), the essential political implications of which had dissipated from party politics by the 1950s. Electoral competition delivered a two and a half party system fixed on the centre right and conservative duopoly of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. The parties were distinguishable on the basis of their respective radical and moderate nationalism and minor differences in the sociological bases of their support. The Labour Party provided the ‘half’ in the two and a half party system and the system dynamic remained largely stable for at least eighty years (see Figure 1). Periods of electoral volatility in the late 1940s and again in the 1980s were notable for the emergence of small political parties such as Clann na Poblachta and the Progressive Democrats. These parties were initially successful securing seats in the Dáil and terms in coalition government but ultimately they delivered temporary interruptions to the long standing equilibrium in the party system.

Partisan attachment to the foundation parties in the system underpinned the rather stable and enduring voting patterns. Marsh et al. (2008) have argued that when partisan affiliations weakened, leaders, policies and particularly for Fianna Fáil, a perception that it was competent at governing came to structure voter decision-making. Fianna Fáil dominance slowly eroded from the 1970s and although its vote declined, the party retained its leading position at elections until 2011 when its vote collapsed. Fianna Fáil mismanagement of the economic crisis led to a massive economic vote against the party (Reidy, Breen and Suiter, 2018) and it has not regained its reputation for competence or many of the voters it lost in 2011. The Fine Gael vote also trended downwards during the 1980s but it peaked briefly in 2011 when it assumed pole position in the system in the midst of the economic tumult caused by the *Great Recession* before returning to a downward trajectory (Reidy and White, 2017). As support for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael declined, there was notable growth in support for new political parties including the Greens, Socialist Party, People Before Profit, Sinn Féin, the Social Democrats and a large array of independent candidates. The imposition of water charges during the 2011-2016 Dáil term provided an important mobilisation moment for parties on the left, especially Sinn Féin and the party successfully leveraged this issue to build wider electoral momentum.

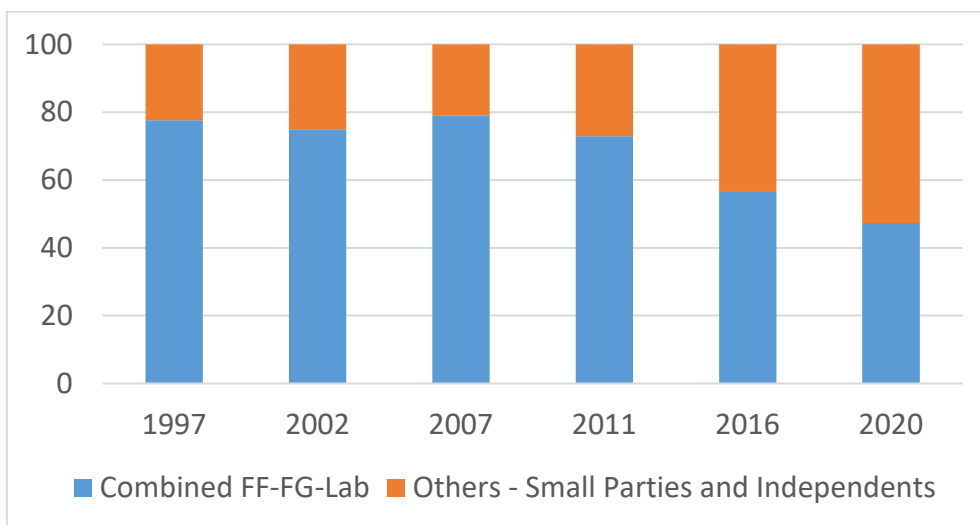
Figure 1: Distribution of first preference votes at general elections (1944-2020)



Source: Coakley and Gallagher (2018); Official Results, Houses of the Oireachtas (2020)

Figure 1 presents an overview of first preference votes at general elections and the picture of overlapping lines from the late 1990s marks a clear departure from the stability of voting patterns in earlier decades. In their chapter on voting behaviour at the 1997 general election, Michael Marsh and Richard Sinnott remarked upon the increasing unpredictability of Irish elections (Marsh and Sinnott, 1999). The assessment was prescient and Figure 2 organises the data in a more striking display of the declining fortunes of the old parties (Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour) in the party system. That votes for these parties combined dropped below 50 percent in the 2020 general election was a much remarked upon point of discussion (Gallagher, Marsh and Reidy, 2021). The 2011 election is highlighted as the major point of acceleration in the shifting fortunes of parties in the system but the election itself delivered what Peter Mair (2011) described as a ‘reordering’ of parties (see also Marsh and Mikhaylov, 2014), it was not until the elections of 2016 and 2020 that ‘systemic change’ became substantially apparent (Little, 2021).

Figure 2: Changing pattern of first preference votes cast for the ‘old’ party system



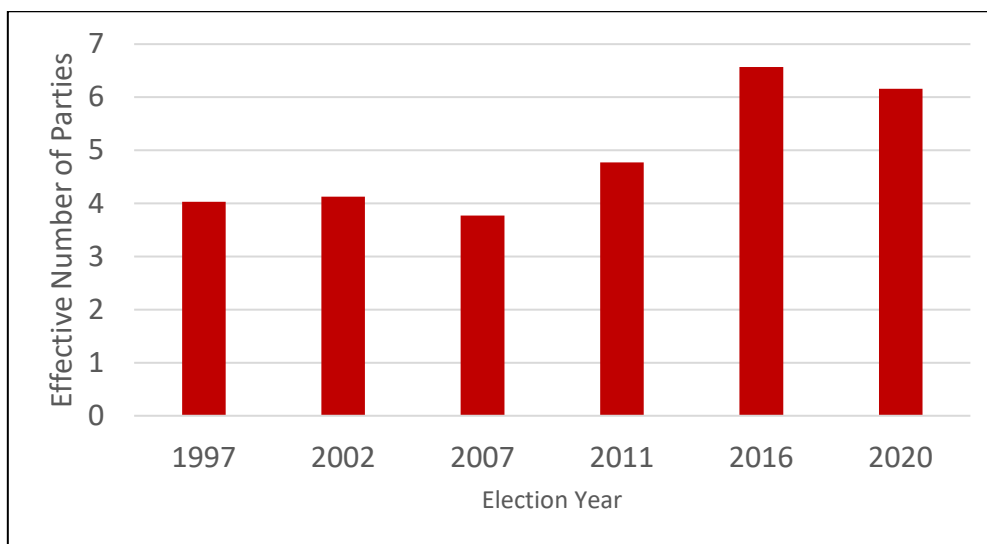
Source: Coakley and Gallagher (2018); Official Results, Houses of the Oireachtas (2020)

The major question, as yet unanswerable, that emerges from an interrogation of Figure 1 is whether the volatility of voting patterns in the last twenty-five years is the new equilibrium of party politics, or whether the party system is in a period of flux that will ultimately evolve into a stable balance of new parties in the system?

2. ACCELERATING SYSTEM CHANGE

Since the 1980s, voters have had a wider array of political parties to choose from at elections. The emergence of the Progressive Democrats and the nascent Green Party marked an important changing point in electoral competition. Moving into the 1990s, Sinn Féin contested general elections successfully. And in 1997, Joe Higgins was elected for the Socialist Party, an early indicator of an emerging vote on the far left of the ideological spectrum. The signs of party system fragmentation were clear. Figure 3 provides data on the effective number of elective political parties at each general election since 1997. This is a measure of party system fragmentation developed by Laakso and Taagepera (1979). It provides an overview of the number and relative strength (measured by votes) of the parties in the system. After a brief period of instability at the foundation of the state, the effective number of parties was stable and below four until 1992 when it started to trend upwards (Weeks, 2018). Fragmentation peaked in 2016 but it remained high again in 2020. Fragmentation is common in PR systems and contributes towards the tendency for coalition and minority governments. Indeed, coalition government has become a norm in Irish politics and the 2016 result delivered a minority government with the lowest numerical strength of any Irish administration.

Figure 3: Effective number of elective political parties (1997-2020)

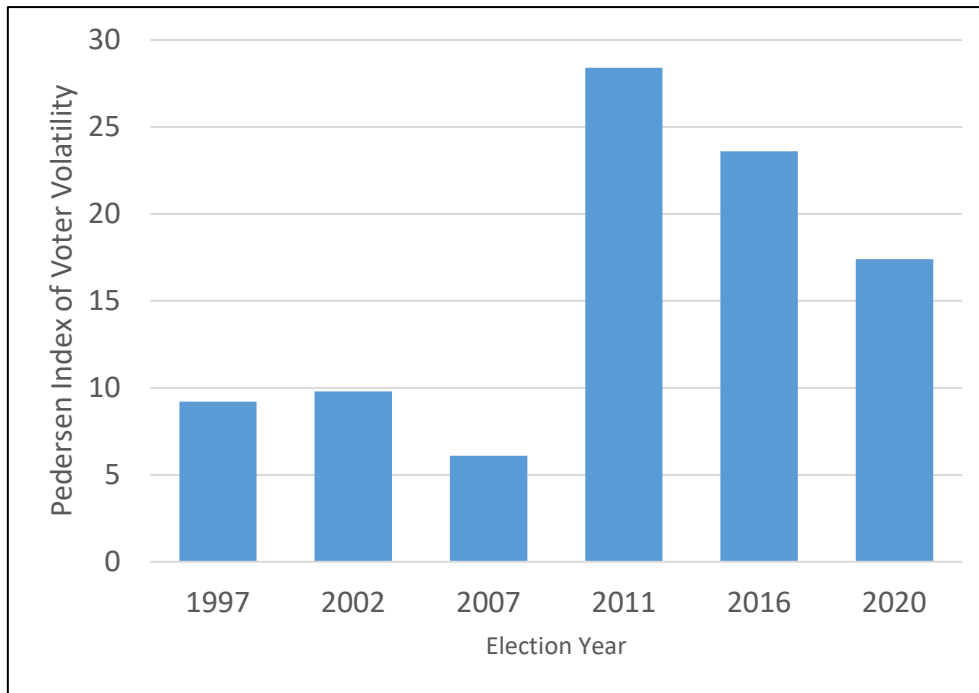


Source: *How Ireland Voted* Book Series (1997-2020); Coakley 2021

Figure 4 reports data on the Pedersen Index for general elections from 1997-2020. The index is a measure of voter volatility capturing the net change in the party system from individual level vote switching (Pedersen, 1979). Elections are dynamic events and political party fortunes vary over time but a large share of Irish voters have been changing the party they support at successive elections. As early as 1987, Peter Mair argued the party system was vulnerable to electoral shocks arising from the increasingly unaligned electorate (Mair, 1987). The process of dealignment was sharply crystallized for Fine Gael in its 2002 election result when its support level dropped to just 22.5 percent of the vote and in 2011 for Fianna Fáil when it secured just 17.4 percent of the vote. The Labour Party surged to 19.4 percent in 2011 but suffered a sharp drop in 2016, and a further erosion in 2020. Sinn Féin, the Green Party, the Social Democrats and parties of the far left have also seen their support levels rise, and fall, at recent elections. Volatility has increased and affects support levels for all parties.

Writing in the aftermath of the 2011 election, Peter Mair noted that it was the third most volatile election in Western Europe since 1945 (Mair, 2011). That volatility levels remained high in 2016 was also widely discussed and the data from 2020 clearly indicate that electoral volatility continues to trend above the long-term average of ten percent (see Coakley 2020 for a discussion). The party system had been changing prior to 2011 but that election proved to be a major rupture and later elections though less volatile show no signs that voters are forming enduring new attachments to political parties that might prove durable.

Figure 4: Pedersen Index (1997-2020)



Source: Dassonneville, Ruth (2019). Net Volatility in Western Europe: 1950-2014. Dataset. KU Leuven: Centre for Citizenship and Democracy; How Ireland Voted 2020

The data presented in Table 1 underscore the volatility that is now a feature of Irish elections. RTÉ exit polls have asked voters about the timing of their vote decision since 1997. Some caution needs to be applied to the interpretation of specific data points as voters can often find it difficult to pinpoint the precise moment at which they made their final electoral choice. But there is a clear trend with just over 50 percent of voters arriving at their final decision during the campaign (see Reidy and Suiter, 2018). This trend is stable and covers five of the six elections. Voters deciding during the campaign may be influenced by policy manifestoes, debates, candidates and events while voters that arrive at their vote choice before the campaign may be partisans or have a long standing preference for a party. For some time now, this group has been a minority, although at a stable level.

Table 1: Timing of voter decision making at general elections

| | 1997 | 2002 | 2007 | 2011 | 2016 | 2020 |
|------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Day of the election, or day before | 12 | 10 | 13 | 20 | 15 | 8 |
| Week of election | 15 | 14 | 17 | 21 | 21 | 16 |
| 2-3 weeks before | 25 | 30 | 22 | 23 | 23 | 28 |
| Before election called | 48 | 46 | 48 | 36 | 41 | 48 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Source: RTÉ exit polls (1997-2020)

3. IDEOLOGICAL REORIENTATION?

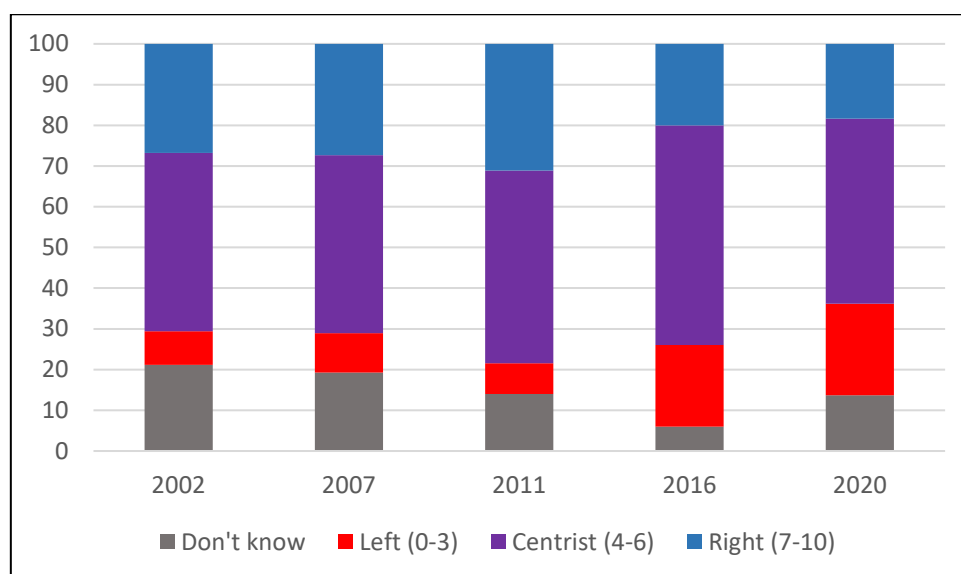
Psephologists have been grappling with the question, what explains the transformation of the electoral landscape in Ireland. Weak party attachment, amorphous cleavage structures and economic crises are all part of the fabric of change. Two specific factors that draw from these overarching structures are highlighted here: left-right orientation of voters and anti-establishment sentiment.

Political competition in many European states is rooted in a left-right divide with origins in the processes of industrialisation. Ireland's delayed industrialisation meant that the central axis of political competition was already embedded by state foundation conflicts. A large majority of voters supported parties of the centre right but economic ideology was considered peripheral to decision making (White, 1974). However voting patterns did

display evidence of coherence as many voters were located on the right of the scale and voters had accurate assessments of the location of parties on the left-right dimension (Mair, 1986). Evidence from early election studies confirms a largely centre right orientation of voters but Marsh et al. (2008) found weak signs that this orientation informed party choice. That this pattern began to shift in the early 2000s, and was amplified by the economic crash starting in 2008, is generally agreed. The 2011 general election is widely identified as the start of an important change in the ideological re-orientation of Irish voters. Parties of the left performed well and there were signs of an emerging left-right basis to voter decision making. However the extent of this change and whether Ireland is developing a distinct left-right cleavage is a matter of some debate.

Muller and Regan (2021) take the view that a significant and potentially lasting left-right divide in politics has emerged. Their analysis notes that income levels have become an important predictor of vote choice. The data presented in Figure 5 are taken from five waves of the Irish National Election Study. Voters were asked to place themselves on a scale from left (0) to right (10) and it is clear that the share of voters on the left increased and the number on the right declined at elections in 2016 and 2020. The mean position of voters also moved below five having generally been between five and six at immediately preceding elections and indeed closer to ten at elections in the 1960s and 1970s when these measures were first collected at Irish elections (Mair, 1986; Muller and Regan, 2021). Voters that declared ‘don’t know’ in response to the question are included to show that this group are also trending at a lower level compared to elections in the early 2000s.

Figure 5: Left-right orientation of voters

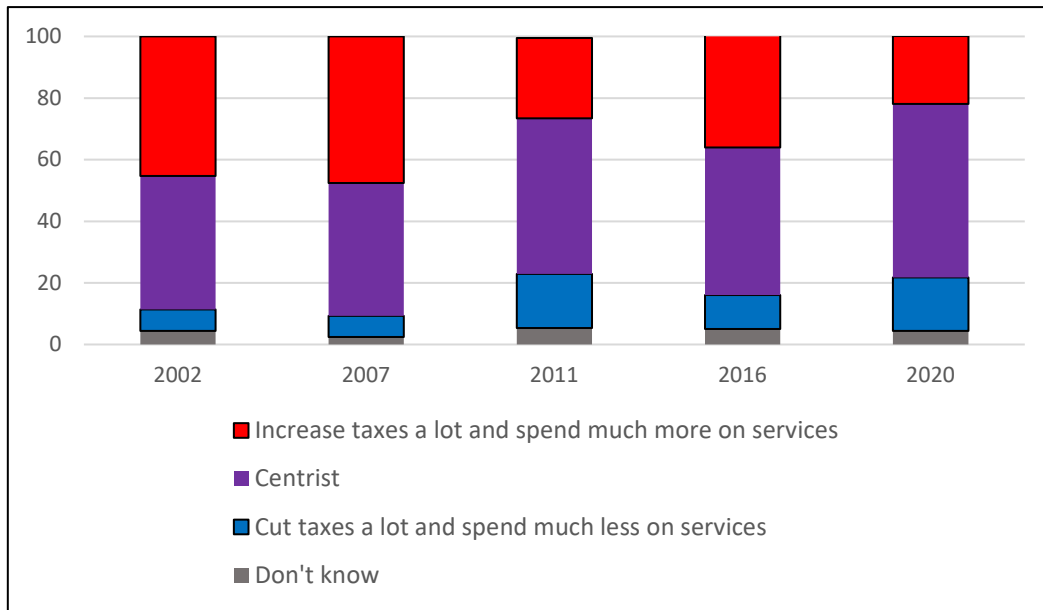


Source: RTE exit polls (1997-2016); Irish National Election Study 2020

But the data on the left-right orientation of Irish voters are mixed and a different picture emerges from election study questions that approach the left right dimension from the point of government spending and taxes as can be seen in figure 6. Here it is clear that the right leaning position has increased and indeed most voters are centrist in their orientation, especially in 2020. Marsh and McElroy (2016) described a ‘muted’ basis to class voting and Marsh and Cunningham (2021) retained a cautious assessment that there were signs that the contours of a left-right divide might be taking shape. Given the divergent views expressed by voters on the major components on this dimension, caution is merited but it is important to conclude that voters do have opinions on the left-right divide, they shape their decisions and this dimension has been evolving over the last twenty five years.

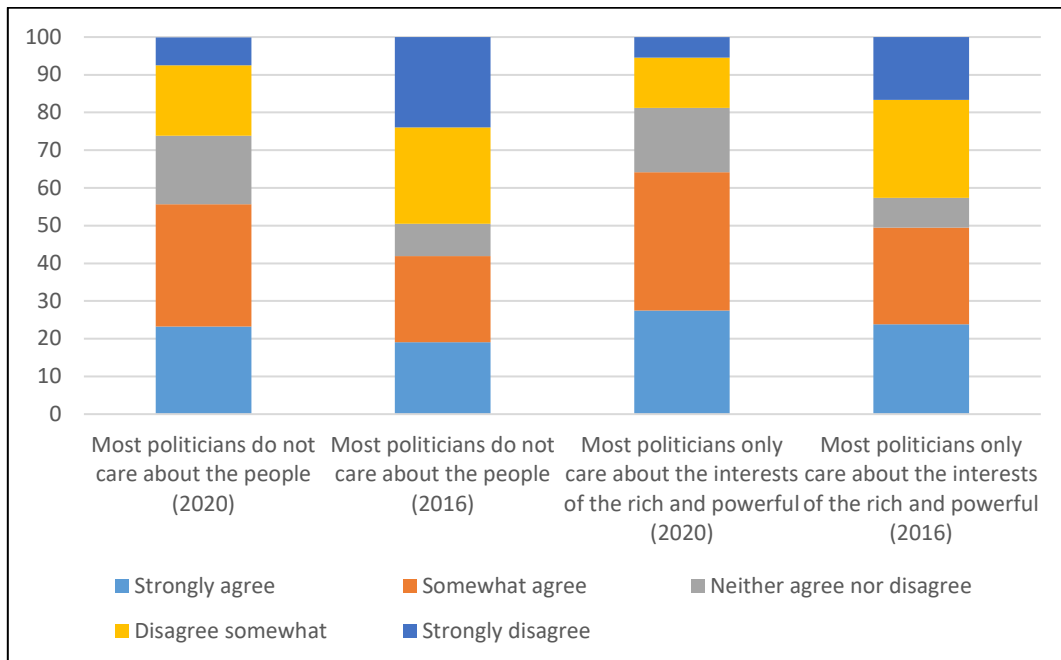
Anti-establishment sentiment has been a feature of party competition from 1927 when Fianna Fáil first contested general elections (Mair, 1979). It featured periodically at elections but has returned with some intensity at elections in 2016 and 2020 when it was measured directly in the election study (Reidy and Suiter, 2018a). Figure 7 reports data from two questions on this dimension on voter attitudes towards politicians. By 2020 a majority of voters had critical views of politicians with an increase evident between 2016 and 2020. Anti-establishment voters lean significantly towards Sinn Féin, parties of the far left and independents (Reidy and Suiter, 2018a) and a case can be made that the ability of these parties, and individual candidates, to mobilise voters on this dimension also contributes to the notable changes in voting patterns since 2011.

Figure 6: Tax-spend orientation of Irish voters



Source: RTE exit polls (1997-2016); Irish National Election Study 2020

Figure 7: Anti establishment/anti system sentiment among Irish voters



Source: Irish National Election Study (2016, 2020)

4. STABILITY

Voting patterns have changed and the party system has been substantially reshaped but there are important aspects of continuity at elections. Ireland has long had a candidate centred electorate (Marsh et al., 2008) and this unusual feature of politics has persisted. When asked which is more important in making their vote choice: candidate or party, a majority of voters identified the candidate in four of the last five elections (see table 2). The only election where party was more important was the 2011 election that was deeply polarised by the impact of the *Great Recession*. The electoral system is often cited as contributing to the personalised nature of politics. That all the larger parties often run more than one candidate in a constituency means that voters choose between candidates from the same party, thus candidate characteristics come into play.

Table 2: Candidate centre preferences of voters

| | 2002 | 2007 | 2011 | 2016 | 2020 |
|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | Candidate | Candidate | Candidate | Candidate | Candidate |
| FF | 57 | 55 | 48 | 55 | 60 |
| FG | 66 | 65 | 41 | 46 | 56 |
| GP | 41 | 43 | 37 | 63 | 35 |
| Lab | 69 | 60 | 40 | 54 | 37 |
| PD/Renua | 74 | 55 | - | 78 | - |
| SF | 44 | 52 | 36 | 45 | 40 |
| AAA/PBP | - | - | - | 64 | 55 |
| SD | - | - | - | 78 | 53 |
| Total | 59 | 60 | 42 | 53 | 54 |

Source: Derived from INES 2002-2020 question ‘Which was more important when voting today? Candidate or party? (candidate reported here).

Related to the candidate centred nature of voting is the question of what political objectives voters consider when making their vote choice. RTE exit polls have asked questions on this feature since 2007 and the data from 2007-2016 are presented in Table 3. A substantial minority of voters are prioritise localist considerations when it comes to voting. Policy considerations and preferences for cabinet composition and the choice of Taoiseach come some distance behind ‘choosing a candidate to look after the needs of the constituency’ The 2020 exist poll asked a variation of this question and some 47 percent of voters wanted a candidate that ‘put local issues first’. Independent voters (77 percent) and Fianna Fail voters (54 percent) were most likely to prefer a candidate focused on local issues. The localist nature of voter preferences is well established, described by Farrell, Gallagher and Barrett (2018: 205) as ‘steadfast and unchanged’.

Table 3: Localist preferences of Irish voters

| | 2007 | 2011 | 2016 |
|--|------|------|------|
| Choosing a candidate to look after the needs of the constituency | 39 | 37 | 41 |
| Choosing the set of ministers who will form the government | 12 | 12 | 33 |
| Choosing between the set of policies set out by the parties | 24 | 41 | 13 |
| Choosing who will be Taoiseach | 22 | 7 | 9 |

RTE Exit Polls (2007-2016)

5. CONCLUSION

The days when Irish politics could be described as *sui generis* and not usefully explained by the frameworks of comparative European politics are past. Low levels of partisanship and electoral shocks have led to a fragmented party system. There are hints of a more defined left-right divide and a stronger role for class in shaping voting behaviour. Anti-elites and anti-establishment sentiment is widespread and particular prevalent among the ‘newer’ political parties. Government formation has become notably more complicated and election campaigns feature long debates on possible coalition permutations, a direct consequence of evolving voter preferences and the changing shape of the Irish party system. While party preferences may have been transformed in the last twenty-five years, there are elements of continuity in the core priorities of voters, elections remain candidate centred and influenced by local considerations.

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