

# Measuring Patterns of Party Support in Ireland

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## I INTRODUCTION

The Irish party system has, until recently, been classified as an exception to the European norm, as a system of "politics without social bases". This thesis has been subjected to increasing scrutiny over the past few years, however, on the grounds that members of different social groups do have different propensities to support the main parties. Even in the year in which John Whyte's famous "politics without social bases" analysis was published (Whyte, 1974), Table 1 shows that non-manual workers were nearly three times more likely than manual workers to support Fine Gael.

Fine Gael gained considerable ground after 1974. This was at the expense of Labour among manual workers and of Fianna Fáil among non-manual workers. By February 1983, at the height of the Fine Gael surge, this created a party system that looked almost European in terms of the social distinctiveness of party support. (We must, of course, overlook the fact that it was Fianna Fáil rather than Labour that was the party of the manual worker). As Table 1 shows, manual workers split 54 per cent to 36 per cent in favour of Fianna Fáil, while non-manual workers split 55 per cent to 33 per cent in favour of Fine Gael.

Recently the Irish party system has experienced the formation of the Progressive Democrats (PDs). While the PDs were formed as a breakaway of the anti-Haughey faction from Fianna Fáil, the loser has been Fine Gael. By October 1986, when PD support levels had stabilised from their early heady levels, Fianna Fáil support was almost unchanged from its (albeit low) level of February 1983. Fine Gael support, in contrast, had collapsed, particularly among non-manual workers. The result was a distinctly non-manual tendency in the social profile of PD support.

One of the main problems facing researchers attempting to explore more fully the social bases of Irish politics has been the lack of a full-scale academic election study. Discussions have had to rely either on evidence from opinion polls (reviewed in Laver (1986b)) or on data from aggregate sources (reviewed in Laver (1986a)). One of the problems with the opinion poll data has been not its reliability, which seems to be good, but rather the fact that sample sizes of about 1,000 that are quite sufficient to estimate a single parameter (the national level of party support, for example) do not support the more complex tables needed for proper causal modelling. The other problem, and the one to which the rest of this paper is addressed, is that it has been necessary to work with the standard market research classifications of "social grade" that have been used to describe the respondents. Reported results, because of small sample sizes, collapse even these categories. Outside the farming electorate, two general classifications are typically reported. These are non-manual workers (A, B and C1), and manual workers (C2, D and E). These have shown, as we have seen, clear but none the less rather modest differences between the support shares within the main social grades won by the respective parties.

Table 1: *Occupational Profiles of Support for Major Irish Parties 1974, 1983, 1986*

% party share of support within occupational grade	Party			
	<i>Fianna Fáil</i>	<i>Fine Gael</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>Progressive Democrats</i>
November 1974				
ABC1	51	32	17	—
C2DE	65	12	23	—
February 1983				
ABC1	33	55	12	—
C2DE	54	36	10	—
October 1986				
ABC1	39	34	4	23
C2DE	54	26	6	13

*Source:* November 1974; Irish Marketing Surveys (1974). February 1983; Market Research Bureau of Ireland (1983). October 1986; Market Research Bureau of Ireland (1986).

In their analysis of the most recent British Election Study, Heath, Jowell and Curtice (1985) mount an extensive critique of the use of market research classifications of social grades. These, they argue, lump together a range of different socio-economic groups into the same categories and thereby mask many important features of the social bases of party support, most notably the

difference between the self-employed and employees. Heath, Jowell and Curtice find a far sharper social patterning of party support when they use a set of "sociological" groups that takes account of the middle class employee sector on the one hand (the salariat) and the middle and working class self-employed sector (the petty bourgeoisie) on the other. They distinguish these both from routine white collar employees and from blue collar employees. Tables 2 and 3 compare the social bases of party support in Britain revealed by market research grades with those revealed by those sociological categories used by Heath, Jowell and Curtice that are relevant in a comparison with the position in Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

As can be seen, the political distinctiveness of the social grades in Britain, with Conservative vote shares ranging from 35 per cent in the C2DEs to 57 per cent in the ABC1s, is much less than the political distinctiveness of the social classes defined by Heath, Jowell and Curtice, for which Conservative vote shares range from 30 per cent to 71 per cent. It seems likely, therefore, that the relatively modest degree of social patterning thus far found in Ireland is at least in part a product of the use of the crude market research classifications.

Table 2: *The Political Distinctiveness of Social Grades in Britain (June 1983)*

% party share of support within occupational grade	Party		
	Conservative	Alliance	Labour
ABC1	57	28	15
C2DE	35	22	43

Source: Adapted from Heath, Jowell and Curtice (1985, p. 26).

Table 3: *The Political Distinctiveness of Social Classes in Britain (June 1983)*

% party share of support within social class	Party		
	Conservative	Alliance	Labour
Salariat	54	31	14
Routine Non-manual	46	27	25
Petty Bourgeoisie	71	17	12
Working Class	30	20	49

Source: Adapted from Heath, Jowell and Curtice (1985, p. 26).

The rest of this paper reports the results of a survey of 1,065 electors carried out in a single constituency, Galway West, by the Centre for the Study of Irish

1. See below for a discussion of how these categories can be adapted to the Irish context.

Elections (CSIE).<sup>2</sup> Obviously, national levels of support for parties cannot be inferred from these data, even though Galway West is a large five seat constituency comprising a very wide geographical and social spread. Specifically, levels of PD support are higher than the national average, a product of the fact that the local party has a very experienced high-profile candidate in Bobby Molloy. This does not matter, however, for our main purpose, which is to analyse the differences between the patterns of support revealed by the social grade analysis with those revealed by the sociological class analysis. There is no reason whatsoever to suppose that Galway West is atypical with regard to these differences.

The CSIE survey collected information on both the market research categories and the sociological classes used by Heath, Jowell and Curtice. This enables, for the first time, an exploration of the extent to which the use of market research categories has conditioned the "politics without social bases" thesis.

Obviously, the Heath, Jowell and Curtice categories need some adaptation before they can be used in Ireland. In Galway, certainly, the number of supervisory or skilled manual employees is insufficient to merit the separate consideration that these receive in the British election study, and these have been combined with other manual employees to form the "working class". On the other hand, the relative size of the Irish bourgeoisie is larger than that in Britain, enabling a distinction to be made between a "bourgeoisie" on the one hand, comprising self-employed professionals and those owning medium to large scale businesses, and a "petty bourgeoisie" on the other hand, comprising other own-account workers, small shopkeepers, self-employed tradespeople and the like. The farming electorate is also, obviously, much more important in Ireland than in Britain. Within the farming sector, the distinction between "small farmers", with less than 50 acres, and "large farmers" with more than 50 acres, has proved an effective social distinction in many earlier studies of political behaviour. Since this classification is common to both the social grade and the social class analyses, it will not be considered in the following discussion, which concerns only the *differences* between these approaches.

In the analysis of the social bases of party support in Ireland, therefore, we can use seven "classes". These are: the salariat, the bourgeoisie, the petty bourgeoisie, routine white collar workers, the working class and small and larger farmers. The first five of these are considered in the discussion that follows.

2. The survey was based on a tightly-controlled interlocking twenty-cell quota sample, commissioned by the *Today Tonight* programme on RTE. Interviewing took place over the weekend of 1-2 November 1986. See Byrne, Igoe and Laver (1986) for a report of the basic survey findings.

## II SOCIAL GRADE OR SOCIAL CLASS AS THE BASIS OF PARTY SUPPORT?

Table 4 illustrates the by-now-familiar-looking set of modest differences between manual and non-manual workers in terms of their profiles of party support. In this regard the CSIE study simply reproduces earlier findings.

Table 5, however, shows how the sociological classes do in fact have quite different profiles of party support. It is immediately obvious that differences between groups are much sharper for the classes than for the market research classifications. Instead of varying between 35 for non-manual workers and 48 per cent among manual workers, for example, Fianna Fáil support varies from 20 per cent among the salariat to 59 per cent among the petty bourgeoisie. Rather than varying from 31 per cent among non-manual workers to 25 per cent among manual workers, PD support varies from 44 per cent among the bourgeoisie to 20 per cent among the petty bourgeoisie. Large variations can be seen within social categories that had hitherto been classified together.

Table 4: *The political distinctiveness of social grades in Galway West (November 1986)*

% party share of support within social grade	Party			
	Fianna Fáil	Fine Gael	Labour	Progressive Democrats
ABC1	35	27	7	31
C2DE	48	20	7	25

Source: Centre for the Study of Irish Elections/Today Tonight Poll.

Table 5: *The political distinctiveness of social classes in Galway West (November 1986)*

% party share of support within social class	Party			
	Fianna Fáil	Fine Gael	Labour	Progressive Democrats
Salariat	20	30	8	41
Bourgeoisie	34	18	4	44
Routine non-manual	38	28	9	24
Working Class	45	21	9	24
Petty Bourgeoisie	59	20	0	20

Source: Centre for the Study of Irish Elections/Today Tonight Poll.

The actual patterns of party support revealed by the social classes, as opposed to the market research categories, are quite striking. In the first place we see that

one of the things that has hitherto been concealed is a considerable variation of party support within the middle class. Fine Gael, for example, turns in both its best and its worst performances within this sector, doing relatively well among the salariat and relatively badly among the bourgeoisie. Fianna Fáil, in contrast, does much better among the bourgeoisie than the salariat, while the PDs do well among both. We see, therefore, a strong social patterning of party support *within* the group of non-manual workers. In the second place we have identified, in the petty bourgeoisie, a sector of the non-farming electorate that is *much* more likely than any other to support Fianna Fáil. Quite a clear overall picture emerges. Fine Gael does best among white collar employees, as opposed to the bourgeoisie. The PDs do best among the upper middle class, regardless of whether they are employees or self-employed. Fianna Fáil does best among the working class and, especially, among the petty bourgeoisie.

### III CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the use of "sociological" classes rather than market research categories produces a clearer patterning of party support in Galway West. There is no reason to suppose that this finding would be any different at a national level. This suggests strongly that at least a partial explanation for the apparently weak social patterning of party support at national level in Ireland has been the use of inappropriate categories of social classification that have masked rather than highlighted the patterns that in fact exist in the electorate. The "politics without social bases" thesis may be more a product of the data thus far available than a reflection of reality. The patterns of party support revealed by the redefined social classes are strong. Certainly, they are strong enough to argue that party politics in Ireland does, indeed, have social bases.

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