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How Generational Replacement Undermined the Electoral Resilience of Fianna Fáil

Cees van der Eijk and Johan A. Elkink

Introduction

The Irish general election of 25 February 2011 saw then governing Fianna Fáil, which had been the largest party continuously since 1932, lose almost 60 per cent of its vote share, at the cost of 57 of its 77 Teachtaí Dála (TDs—members of parliament. Except for the Greens, the junior partner in the incumbent government coalition, all other parties increased their share of the vote and their number of seats. The 'winner' was Fine Gael, which since its inception in the 1930s had always been the second largest party, generally at a respectable distance from Fianna Fáil. For the first time in its existence Fine Gael found itself as the largest party in the Dáil. Yet the party did not emulate its best ever result, and its success is therefore located within historically known boundaries. Thus, as O'Leary (2012: 337) stated, 'the watershed election of 2011 was essentially about the demise of Fianna Fáil rather than the gains of the other parties' (see also Gallagher 2011, and Chapter 1 in this volume).

In some ways, the election result of 2011 was not unexpected. The previous local elections and European Parliament elections, which had taken place in June 2009, had

already revealed very large losses for Fianna Fáil (Little 2011: 1307; Marsh and Mikhaylov 2012). Yet, both of these were second-order elections (cf. Reif and Schmitt 1980; Marsh and Mikhaylov 2010), which are easy venues for temporary defections of voters who in a subsequent first-order contest return to their 'default' party of choice. More importantly, the party was predicted to suffer further losses by all opinion polls leading up to the general election—predictions that eventually turned out to be quite correct (O'Leary 2012: 335). But this does not alter the question of how it was possible for a party that had dominated Irish electoral politics for such a long period to collapse so quickly and to an extent rarely seen, even when looking at elections from an international perspective (Mair 2011: 284).

Although massive electoral meltdowns are relatively rare, Fianna Fáil is by far not the only large and traditionally important party in established democracies to suffer such a fate. In the recent past, the Dutch Social Democratic PvdA, for example, lost 48 per cent of its vote share in 2002, and the Scottish Labour Party lost 42 per cent of its proportion of the votes in the 2015 UK general election. Canada provides other examples of dramatic instances of large parties being trounced electorally. In 1984, the Liberals lost 70 per cent of their 1980 vote share, while in 1993 the Progressive Conservatives saw their previous vote share drop by 63 per cent. More recently, the 2012 parliamentary elections in Greece saw both long-standing and dominating parties suffer huge losses: New Democracy lost 44 per cent of its votes while its long-standing rival PASOK lost no less than 70 per cent of its previous vote share.

One of the obvious questions in these instances of electoral meltdown is what caused them. In the case of Fianna Fáil all available evidence points to the handling of the 2008 economic crisis by the Fianna Fáil-dominated government (cf. Marsh and Cunningham 2011; see also Chapter 3 in this volume). Although this interpretation is generally shared, it does raise additional questions. After all, the 2008 economic crisis could have caused the dramatic

loss of Fianna Fáil only if much of its support at earlier elections was of a 'soft' kind, not sufficiently strong to prop up the preference expressed on the ballot in times of adversity. In this chapter we will assess whether or not this was the case, and the extent to which the underlying strength of party choices in elections has changed over time.

Our empirical analyses will be directed and inspired by three kinds of perspectives. First, historically existing patterns of party support and electoral competition in Ireland, as documented in the extant literature on the Irish party system. Second, one of the factors that generally tends to erode such patters and thus pave the way for electoral change—namely generational replacement. Third, the perspective that citizens may have preferences for more than one political party, and the consequences of this for electoral change.

The Irish party System and Patterns of Party Support and Electoral Competition

Electoral stability and change are often understood in terms of relationships of positive (or negative) affect that segments of the population develop for particular political parties. According to Lipset and Rokkan's seminal analysis (1967), these relationships generally reflect the dominant political divides at the time that most of the electorate was mobilized for the first time, divides that tend to perpetuate themselves through socialization and social organization. In Ireland, this cleavage structure is traditionally not defined by class or religion, as it is in many other European countries (Mair 1987; Sinnott 1995). The electoral divide between the two major parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, is sometimes interpreted in terms of its origins in the Irish civil war of the early 1920s, with Fianna Fáil and the precursor of Fine Gael representing the warring sides in that episode. Carty (1981: 81–2) suggests that this civil-war division has endured over successive generations by way of family

socialization, which would make this divide an electoral cleavage, although not necessarily anchored in the kind of social divisions envisaged by Lipset and Rokkan. Other interpretations of the substantive nature of the cleavage separating Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael focus on a distinction between corporatism versus social democracy (Mair 1987: 141) or centre versus periphery (Garvin 1974). Irrespective of their interpretation of the bases of the cleavage between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, many analysts of party competition after the foundational period of the Irish party system emphasize its enduring relevance, often with a suggestion of a high level of incompatibility between support for these two parties. While they are both catch-all parties in a socio-economic sense—Fianna Fáil even more so than the somewhat more middle-class-oriented Fine Gael—there is a strong sense that members of Fianna Fáil families would never vote Fine Gael, and vice versa: 'Part of the folklore of Irish elections has been that experienced party activists could identify the voting of entire families and could say with some certainty that a particular house was a Fianna Fáil or a Fine Gael house' (Sinnott 1995: 148). Other authors seem to confirm this alleged incompatibility between supporting Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Marsh (2006b: 499–502) demonstrates with INES data from 2002 that, among those who feel attached to either Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael, supporting the other party is very rare: 'Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael partisans each like their own party and do not like the other. This is particularly true of Fianna Fáil partisans, even Fianna Fáil voters, who almost uniformly have a poor view of Fianna Fáil.' Marsh also notes that Irish citizens do not see parties in black-and-white terms, and display somewhat positive feelings towards more than just one party, but that such shared affections are particularly rare between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

When seen against this background, it is of particular interest that the electoral changes from 2007 to 2011 could have occurred only because of large-scale individual-level switching from Fianna Fáil to Fine Gael (cf. Marsh and Cunningham 2011). Yet, it must also

be emphasized that more recent research shows that support for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael is not entirely mutually exclusive, at least for non-identifiers (e.g., Marsh et al. 2008). How compatible such preferences are, and whether this has changed over time will be addressed in our empirical analyses.

Generational Replacement and its Implications

One of the most important sources of electoral change is the continuous replacement of generations, with new ones coming of an age eligible to vote, and older ones passing away. If incoming voters were socialized into carbon copies of those who had died, the consequences of this replacement would be neutral. But that is an unlikely scenario. The political conditions that influenced the development of orientations and political preferences of older generations during their formative years have been replaced by other conditions for later generations. As a consequence, transmission of political preferences and identities from older to younger generations is overlaid with other socializing influences that are specific to the period during which generations form their political orientations and preferences. Under relatively stable political and social conditions, this may result in apparently successful intergenerational transmission of party preferences that manifest themselves in stable election results. Yet, stability of parties' vote shares does not reflect the strength and exclusivity of the underlying choices. Indeed, if the root causes that generated electoral divisions have disappeared, parental and other socializing transmission of political preferences does not extend to emotional depth and conviction with which these preferences are held in later generations.

This makes it possible for party preferences to be stable as far as they are expressed on the ballot, yet increasingly vulnerable to sudden change owing to external shocks (van der Eijk et al. 1992). Such processes appear to have been at the basis of the weakening of

electoral cleavages and resulting electoral losses of cleavage-based parties in many Western countries in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s (Franklin, Mackie, and Valen 1992; Franklin 2009). In the twenty-first century most Irish citizens have been socialized long after the conflicts that gave rise to the Irish party system (and that formed deeply held partisan identities of the generations directly involved in those conflicts), so the question arises whether the dramatic 2011 losses of Fianna Fáil could have occurred because of lack of fervour of its erstwhile supporters, particularly those of younger generations. An additional reason why younger voters are likely to have a higher potential for vote switching is that they have not yet had the opportunity to be 'immunized' against such change. Immunization is the psychological effect of the act of choosing, which, after having repeatedly voted for the same party, leads to a strong loyalty to that party (Butler and Stokes 1969; Miller and Shanks 1996; van der Eijk and Franklin 2009: 49–53). These various considerations lead us to focus in our analyses on possible generational differences.

Preferences for Multiple Parties

Election outcomes are definitive in political terms (relating to government formation and policymaking), but they are often much less definitive as reflections of voters' preferences. As Powell (2000: 160) argues eloquently, choice does not tell us enough about voter preferences to understand electoral behaviour adequately, but the additional information that is required for that purpose cannot be derived from the ballot, not even in the single transferable vote electoral system that is used in Ireland. Voting for a party does not necessarily involve a strong preference for it, nor does not voting for a particular party imply rejection or antipathy. Additionally, some voters may have made their choice with confidence and without hesitation, while others will have been deeply uncertain and hesitant about the

choice that they eventually made. In order to understand how definitive choices are, and thus also what the potential is for changes in those choices, information is required about the electoral attractiveness of each of the parties for a voter. From this we can derive which parties are held in a positive regard by a voter, or between which she hesitates. Such information can be obtained only from surveys in which the relevant questions were asked. If such data are available, then we can, at least in principle, address questions about the potential for changes in individual voters' choices, and, in the aggregate, about the potential for changes in parties' vote shares. In the context of the changes from the 2007 Dáil election to the 2009 European and the 2011 general election, this may help to gauge to what extent the dramatic electoral loss of Fianna Fáil was predicated on 'softness' of preferences among its erstwhile voters, and perhaps also to what extent it is potentially reversible.

An empirical approach to gauge the potential for electoral volatility that has acquired considerable traction since the 1990s is based on so-called non-ipsative electoral preferences (van der Eijk et al. 2006). These are *absolute* preferences for each of the parties and candidates that one can vote for—or in Downsian terms 'utilities' (Downs 1957)—in contrast to *relative* preferences that are expressed on the ballot. Such non-ipsative preferences define, at the individual level, the parties that a voter may consider supporting in an election (so-called consideration sets; on this see Pieters and Verplanken 1995; Wilson 2008) and they constitute a basis for deducing how easy or how difficult it would have been for the individuals concerned to have marked the ballot differently than they actually did.

Aggregating this over individuals yields an indication of the potential for electoral volatility at the aggregate level. This approach can be used in a generic way that just focuses on the ease with which voters could have switched from one party to each of the others (van der Eijk and Niemöller 1984; Kroh et al. 2007), or in a specific way that focuses on the

aggregate electoral consequences of specific changes in the context within which voters make their choices (van der Brug et al. 2007; Walter and van der Eijk 2016).

Non-ipsative preferences for parties can be measured in different ways. The three most widely known are: (1) the so-called feeling thermometers used in the American National Election studies and subsequently in election studies in many other countries; (2) questions about how strongly one likes or dislikes each of the parties, as used in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES); and (3) questions about how likely it is that one will 'ever' vote for each of the parties ('propensity to vote' or PTV questions). Of these three the last—the PTVs—have been demonstrated to be most strongly related to actual electoral behaviour (van der Eijk and Marsh 2011): the party supported on the ballot is almost always the one with the highest preference score. More importantly, such questions have been included in various surveys of the Irish electorate, including the Irish National Election Study (INES).[1] We therefore focus on these questions in our attempt to shed further light on the 2011 electoral collapse of Fianna Fáil.

Data and Analytical Design

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[1] The actual wording of the question is 'We have a number of political parties in Ireland each of which would like to get your vote. How probable is it that you will ever give your first preference vote to the following parties? Please use the numbers on this scale to indicate your views, where "1" means "not at all probable" and "10" means "very probable".' In INES 2002 and 2007 this question was asked for each of the following: Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Greens, Labour, Progressive Democrats (PDs), and Sinn Féin, and 'an Independent candidate'. In the 2011 INES the PDs were not included in this question, but instead the United Left Alliance (ULA) was; moreover, the response options in 2011 ranged from 0 to 10.

We are interested in the changing strength over time of party preferences for Fianna Fáil, and in the possible role of generational replacement in this. Because the passing of generations is a slow and gradual process, this requires observations over as long a time period as possible. We therefore complement the data from the INES of 2002, 2007, and 2011—which span almost a decade—with the Irish samples of the European Parliament Election Studies (EES) of 1989, 1994, 1999, 2004, 2009, and 2014[2]—which jointly provide a window of observations of twenty-five years. All these studies were designed as representative sample surveys of the Irish electorate, and all were fielded in the immediate context of an actual election.[3] Yet, at the same time, these surveys also pose comparability problems. Although both INES and EES aim to be representative surveys, they differ in sampling and fieldwork procedures, in response rates, in modes of interviewing, and so on. As a consequence, none of them presents an accurate aggregate perspective on the Irish adult population at the time of the surveys,[4] and each is subject to its own particular kind of biases.

Within a single survey this can be ameliorated in principle by weighting, but such a strategy is more problematic when dealing with multiple surveys that are not even fully comparable in terms of criteria to be used in weighting. We therefore refrain from weighting, and rely instead on within-survey comparisons between groups (such as generations), the results of which are subsequently used in over-time comparisons of the surveys. An

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[2] Details of these studies, and links to repositories from where data and documentation can be obtained freely, can be found at <http://eeshomepage.net>/, accessed 15 January 2014.

[3] In this chapter we do not use the data of the INES samples of 2003, 2004, and 2006, as these were not fielded in the context of an actual election, which endangers the comparability of responses to the questions we analyse.

[4] This is immediately visible in comparing distributions in the survey and in the population in terms of, e.g., whether or not people turned out to vote, or of party choice, or of age groups, etc.

additional complication is that the INES and EES surveys were conducted in different political contexts—namely, the Dáil elections and the European Parliament elections respectively (in 1989 these two elections were held on the same day, but on all other occasions they did not coincide). Although party choice in European Parliament elections is predominantly determined by domestic political considerations (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Oppenhuis, van der Eijk, and Franklin 1996; van der Brug and van der Eijk 2007), the relative weight of these considerations is not the same as in Dáil elections, which also invalidates direct comparisons.[5]

Within each of the surveys we compare groups distinguished on the basis of generations and of age. In terms of generations we distinguish three groups—referring to them as cohorts, a more specific and therefore preferred term in social research (Glenn 2005). The oldest cohort consists of people born before 1940. This broad group reached adulthood mainly before the widespread modernization of Irish society of the 1960s. The older members of this group experienced first hand the foundation period of the Irish party system, while for most of the younger members of this cohort their parents had this direct experience. This group is therefore most likely to hold partisan preferences and identities defined by traditional electoral cleavages. In 1989, when the first of our surveys was fielded, this group was 50 years or older. By 2014 many of this group had passed away, and the survivors were aged 75 and beyond. Our second cohort consists of people born between 1940 and 1960. When this group reached adulthood, the party system was well established. In 1989 they were aged 30 and older and were in the prime of their lives; by 2014 they were aged 55 and older, with many having retired by then. The third cohort that we distinguish consists of people born in

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[5] Our decision to rely mainly on between-survey comparisons of within-survey comparisons ameliorates all these incomparabilities, as it requires only the (relatively mild) assumption that any biases in the various surveys apply equally to the groups that we compare (age groups and cohorts).

1960 or later. In 1989 this was a relatively small group consisting only of those under 30, but by 2014, when they were under 55, this cohort had grown considerably by incorporating all those who became eligible to vote after 1989.

We also compare four age groups: the over-70s, those aged 50–70, the 30–50-year-olds, and those under 30. Obviously, at any given moment in time, these age groups are unequivocally linked to cohorts, but across the surveys they are not.[6]

When comparing information over time, three kinds of processes have to be distinguished that impinge on the phenomena under consideration: cohort effects, ageing or life-cycle effects, and period effects (Glenn 2005; Neundorf and Niemi 2014). Cohort effects refer to more or less stable characteristics of cohorts that are generally thought to be the consequence of socialization, and shared exposure to important events during people's formative years. Cohort effects are unique to cohorts. Age or life-cycle effects refer to the changes in attitudes, preferences, and behaviour that emanate from the social and physical consequences of ageing (which include the differences in expectations, opportunities, and constraints associated with different stages in the life cycle). Period effects refer to the consequences of events that affect everyone, irrespective of cohort or age. In this chapter we use these conceptual distinctions. We will not, however, perform a fully elaborated estimation of cohort, age, and period effects because of the comparability problems already referred to and the occasionally small sizes of groups that we focus on in our analyses.

How Strongly Do Fianna Fáil Voters Prefer Fianna Fáil?

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[6] Possibilities for more refined age and cohort distinctions were limited in view of the numbers of observations in the samples and subsamples (e.g., Fianna Fáil voters) in the various studies.

We use the responses to the propensity to vote (PTV) questions (see n. 1) to gauge the strength of electoral preferences for Fianna Fáil and other parties, or, conversely, the 'softness' of these preferences. By contrasting vote choice and these electoral preferences, we can therefore assess the strength of preferences underlying choices for Fianna Fáil, or, looked upon from the opposite perspective, the plausibility that these choices could have been different, or that they may lead to vote switching at a next election.

At the level of individual voters, choices for Fianna Fáil are very certain if the voter has a very strong preference for this party and no other party. Choices are less certain, however, when Fianna Fáil is the most preferred party, but not very strongly preferred. The certainty (or vulnerability to change) of a given choice can thus be assessed on the basis of the PTV score for the party in question (or, for a group of people, by the percentage of people with a very strong preference for Fianna Fáil as expressed in their PTV scores). Using this perspective on the underlying strength of preference for Fianna Fáil yields Table 7.1, which reports the percentages of Fianna Fáil voters who expressed the highest possible preference for Fianna Fáil (score 10 on the PTV scale).[7]

< INSERT TABLE 7.1 >

The percentages reported in Table 7.1 are within-survey comparisons that can, as stated earlier, be compared more validly over time than, for example, the proportions of the entire

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[7] In all our analyses Fianna Fáil voters are those who say in the post-election interview that they would vote Fianna Fáil if a general election were to be held today. This provides a wider basis than the actual vote in the most recent elections (particularly for European Parliament elections), it minimizes the effect of the difference between the EU and the Dáil election contexts, and it avoids otherwise pervasive recall errors and biases. In INES 2011 this question was not asked, and reported vote (for those who voted) or choice if voted (for non-voters) was used instead.

sample giving Fianna Fáil a score of 10.[8] The row labelled 'all' shows an unmistakable

decline of the percentage of Fianna Fáil voters who express the maximum strength of

preference for Fianna Fáil. This decline is located after 2007, while the fluctuations up to and

including that date do not display any clear trend.[9] In other words, the strength of the

underlying preference for Fianna Fáil of those who actually voted for Fianna Fáil has

declined considerably since 2007. This decline is even more telling when considering Fianna

Fáil's loss in first preference votes in elections after 2007. Those losses presumably involved

predominantly the departure of less committed erstwhile voters, and should therefore have

led to a more committed remainder of support. However, Table 7.1 demonstrates that the

underlying preferences for Fianna Fáil have declined considerably among the remaining

Fianna Fáil voters, which implies that even this remainder is vulnerable to further losses.

The first row of Table 7.1 gives data for all; the remaining rows present the same kind of

information for the cohorts and for the age groups that we distinguish, and yield some

interesting findings. Within each of the studies we see that Fianna Fáil voters in earlier

cohorts have stronger underlying preferences for Fianna Fáil than those in later cohorts.

Obviously we see the same difference when comparing older age groups with younger ones

within each of the studies. There are a few exceptions to this (e.g., in 2014), but these are of

minor magnitude in comparison to the general pattern. When looking at the figures over time

for the various cohorts, we see that none of the cohorts is immune from the effect of the

shock of the economic crisis in 2008. Moreover, we see that the differences between the age

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[8] If Fianna Fáil was over-represented in a sample, the percentage of the entire sample scoring Fianna
    Fáil at 10 on the PTV scale would also be over-represented. To avoid such problems hampering our
    longitudinal perspective, we focus here on the percentage scoring 10 among Fianna Fáil voters
    only, and not on that percentage among all respondents in the samples.

[9] This can be seen most clearly when comparing only EES surveys, or only INES surveys.

groups in each of the surveys do not seem to reflect an ageing effect of the kind in which growing older would lead to stronger underlying preference for Fianna Fáil. Were that to be the case, we should have seen that those who were 30–50 years old in 1989 would have stronger underlying preferences for Fianna Fáil twenty years later, in 2009, when they had become 50–70 years old. In 1989 67.4 per cent of Fianna Fáil voters who were then 30–50 years old awarded Fianna Fáil a PTV score of 10; but, even though they have aged twenty years, the corresponding percentage in 2009 has not increased, but has rather decreased to 45.6 per cent. Similarly, the under-30s in 1989 who aged to become the 30–50-year-olds in 2009 show not a strengthening of preferences but rather a weakening (percentage scoring Fianna Fáil at 10 on the PTV scale declining from 61.3 to 38.1). A problem with this comparison is that it stretches beyond the onset of the economic crisis of 2008, the moment of a strong period effect, but, even after accounting for this, there is no evidence of an ageing effect.[10]

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[10] We are aware that the cohort and age distinctions used here, in conjunction with the timing of the studies, do not result in tables that are easily perused for the presence of cohort and age effects. However, as explained in n. 4, practical considerations prevented more refined distinctions. Nevertheless, approximate accounting for the period effect can be done by comparing the difference between the EES 2004 and EES 2009 percentages for the last two cohorts (these differences are 12.6% and 20.0% respectively), with the decline in percentages mentioned in the main text for the groups that were under 30, and 30–50 in 1989, and who had aged to 30–50 and 50–70 in 2009 (these declines are 21.8% and 23.2% respectively). In other words, the declines in percentages of cases scoring Fianna Fáil lower after having aged twenty years exceed the approximate period effect for the two cohorts in which these cases are located. As ageing effects would have resulted in increases rather than decreases of these percentages, it is clear that there is no evidence whatsoever for such ageing effects.

All in all, then, Table 7.1 provides clear evidence of a strong period effect that is located in 2008, and that is not limited to particular groups, but that has an across-the-board character. Table 7.1 also provides evidence of distinct cohort effects, with earlier cohorts being more certain of their votes for Fianna Fáil than later cohorts. The implication of this is that the gradual replacement of earlier cohorts by later ones had placed the party by the time of the economic crisis in 2008 in a more vulnerable electoral position than it had been earlier. Finally, Table 7.1 does not provide any evidence of ageing effects, which means that the higher commitment within older as compared to younger age groups in each of the studies is predominantly driven by cohort differences.

The Vulnerability of Fianna Fáil Potential Electoral Support

The decreasing strength of the underlying preference for Fianna Fáil—as shown in Table 7.1—is not the only factor that makes the party electorally vulnerable to shocks such as the 2008 crisis. A quite different factor is the co-occurrence of electoral preferences for Fianna Fáil and other parties. A respondent who, for example, has a very strong preference (as expressed in her PTV score) for Fianna Fáil, and a similarly strong preference for, for example, the Greens, can easily vote for either party. Even if she did vote for Fianna Fáil in a given election, her continued support for Fianna Fáil cannot be taken for granted, as it is vulnerable to switching. Empirically, this cannot be ascertained on the basis of only the PTV for Fianna Fáil, but it requires the PTV scores for all parties to be taken into consideration. When doing so, we should consider not only the potential of some Fianna Fáil's actual voters to change and switch to another party, but also the complementary possibility of people who

voted for other parties to switch to Fianna Fáil because they have a strong (but shared) electoral preference for Fianna Fáil.

Analysing co-occurring preferences for several parties is easiest done in terms of parties' so-called potential electorates and the overlap between these. This represents the share of the vote a party could obtain in a given election if in its competition for votes with other parties everything went its way while at the same time its competitors did as badly as possible. These potential electorates of parties sum to more than 100 per cent, or, in other words, they overlap, as has been demonstrated repeatedly for Ireland in previous research (Marsh 1996, 2006a; Marsh and Cunningham 2011). From PTV scores one can derive for each party estimates of the magnitude of its potential electorate, of the magnitude of the overlap of their potential electorates with each of the other parties, as well as with all other parties together. This, in turn, makes it possible to determine the size of a party's 'unique' electorate, which is the component of a party's potential electorate that is non-overlapping with the joint potential of all other parties. This unique component is important in the sense that it reflects electoral support that is effectively uncontested by other parties, and that can therefore be interpreted as a share of the votes that a party can expect to obtain in a worst-case scenario, whereas the potential electorate reflects the share of the votes that it could obtain in a best-case scenario. The details of these procedures are specified in the Appendix to this chapter. Neither of these two scenarios, the best case and the worst case, are likely ever to materialize, but they define useful anchors for assessing the actual electoral performance of parties. Finally, the ratio of the unique to the potential electorate reflects the extent to which parties are dependent on the outcome of electoral competition with other parties for the same voters; the higher this ratio, the less vulnerable they are. Armed with this repertoire of measures, we now turn to an empirical analysis of preferences and support for Fianna Fáil.

In Table 7.2 we report a perspective of Fianna Fáil's electoral vulnerability that is based on the co-occurrence of respondents' electoral preferences for multiple parties. The rows present a comparison of the percentage of Fianna Fáil's unique potential electorate (which is not contested by other parties) to its total potential electorate, or, in other words, the degree to which the party's vote share in each of these elections is vulnerable—that is, dependent on the success of its competition with other parties. A high ratio indicates that the actual support of a large proportion of potential voters can be taken for granted; a low ratio indicates that the party has actively to compete for the actual support of a large share of those who may potentially vote for it.

< INSERT TABLE 7.2 >

In many ways Table 7.2 shows similar patterns to Table 7.1. In each of the years the ratio of unique to total potential electorate is highest for earlier cohorts and lowest for more recent cohorts. We see, therefore, also that in each of the years the ratio is higher in older age groups and lower in younger ones. With respect to the cohorts, the earliest cohort (comprising those born before 1940) is most distinctive, and the two more recent cohorts resemble each other more than the earliest one. When looking at the development over time we see, as we did in Table 7.1, a clear period effect of 2008 that affects all cohorts, including the earliest. The two earliest cohorts (born before 1940, and born between 1940 and 1960, respectively) show no trend prior to 2008, but the most recent cohort does, which reflects the continuous expansion of this cohort by the influx of those who become eligible to vote. These patterns are clearly indicative of cohort effects. Just as in Table 7.1, we fail to see any clear signs of an ageing (or life-cycle) effect, which, as discussed earlier, would have shown itself in fewer multiple electoral preferences and thus a higher ratio of unique to total potential electorate. Finally, Table 7.2 shows a clear increase of uncontested support in 2014 compared to 2009 and 2011. To some extent this reflects that the numerator of the ratio (the unique potential electorate)

has declined less than the denominator (the total potential electorate), which one would expect to occur with electoral losses: those who had other attractive alternatives to Fianna Fáil switch, leaving among Fianna Fáil voters a larger proportion that does not see other parties as a viable alternative. Whether the increasing 2014 numbers reflect also something else cannot be ascertained at the time of writing, and requires data from later election surveys.

The main story that Table 7.2 conveys is that Fianna Fáil has over time become more vulnerable to the vagaries of electoral competition. Part of this is a reflection of the weakening of intensity of the choice for Fianna Fáil over time, as displayed in Table 7.1.

Not only has the intensity of support for Fianna Fáil decreased over time; this support also shows greater overlap with support for other parties—voters who have a strong or weak support for Fianna Fáil increasingly often combined this with strong or weak support, respectively, for other parties.

Our main conclusion from the data presented in Tables 7.1 and 7.2 is that, over the past decades, Fianna Fáil has become more vulnerable to the consequences of external shocks and to the unpredictable outcomes of the electoral tug-of-war with other parties for the votes of the same groups of people. The increased vulnerability to the consequences of external shocks is reflected in gradually weakening certainty (or commitment) of a choice for Fianna Fáil. The increased vulnerability to the outcomes of electoral competition—and thus indirectly also to external shocks that figure in election campaigns—is reflected in a gradually decreasing ratio of unique to total electoral potential. Both seem to be driven over the long run by 'demographic metabolism': the process of generational replacement with later cohorts having weaker preferences for Fianna Fáil and a larger number of other parties for which they also have preferences compared to earlier cohorts. This generational replacement has been overlaid with the period effects brought about by the 2008 economic crisis.

Compatibility or incompatibility of electoral preferences for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael

The previous section concluded with the observation that, in more recent cohorts, voters who have a preference for Fianna Fáil also have, more than those in earlier cohorts, electoral preferences for other parties. This conclusion can be specified further by examining the overlap of such preferences with Fine Gael. This more refined focus is motivated by the contention in the extant literature that shared affections between these two parties are particularly rare. Fine Gael is also of particular importance because of its size, and because of the explicit appeal that the party made in the 2011 election campaign to Fianna Fáil supporters to 'lend' their vote to Fine Gael.[11] Indeed, the shifts recorded in the 2011 election result were possible only because significant numbers of voters switched from Fianna Fáil to Fine Gael (Marsh and Cunningham 2011: 180).

The extent of co-occurring preferences for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael can be expressed in a coefficient of dyadic overlap between the potential electorates of these two parties (see the Appendix to this chapter for the detailed definition of this coefficient). This coefficient is 0 if there is no overlap at all between these potential electorates, and 1 in the case of complete overlap (which would imply that the potential electorate of the smaller of the two is entirely contained within that of the larger one). Table 7.3 reports the values of this coefficient for the entire sample of each of the surveys we use, as well as for subgroups defined in terms of cohorts and age groups.

< INSERT TABLE 7.3 >

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[11] *Irish Times*, 23 February 2011 <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/fg-asks-decent-ff-people-for-votes-1.872219> (accessed 1 June 2016).

The results in Table 7.3 show that for the entire period from 1989 to 2014 there has always been a substantial degree of 'shared affections', as reflected in the coefficients of dyadic overlap. They also show that, with very few and minor exceptions, in each of the studies more recent cohorts and younger age groups exhibit higher degrees of such co-occurring preferences than earlier cohorts or older age groups. It is telling, though, that by far the lowest coefficients were recorded for the oldest age group in 1989 and 1994. This group consisted at those times of people born before 1920 or 1925 respectively, or, in other words, the group whose formative political experiences are closest to and most affected by the foundational period of the party system, and to the civil war that spawned the formation of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. This unique group passed away at an increasing rate after 1989, which helps to explain the somewhat higher numbers in the 70+ age group since 1999. These sparse observations lend strong support to the thesis that in the more distant past support for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael was indeed incompatible and that civil-war experience (either direct or inculcated via parental transmission) was one of the foundations of that incompatibility. But, as these traumatic events receded in the past, they became increasingly less important for new entrants who reached voting age. For obvious reasons, any mutual exclusivity of preference remained probably strongest among those who identify themselves with either of these political parties, but that is a group that has also shrunk as a consequence of generational replacement (Mair and Marsh 2004; Marsh 2006b; Marsh et al. 2008: ch. 4). The notion of incompatible electoral preferences for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael was evidently relevant for generations that had dominated the electorate through the 1960s and 1970s, but has increasingly become irrelevant since then.[12]

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[12] This interpretation is, of course, not new, and its basic tenets have been documented and evidenced in earlier studies of Irish voting behaviour and, to some extent, in studies of second and subsequent preferences as expressed on the ballot.

The fluctuations over time that are reported in Table 7.3 for each of the cohorts reflect mainly non-systematic fluctuation, while the coefficients increase over time for each of the age groups. These patterns suggest a clear presence of cohort effects: once having acquired its political identity in its formative years, a cohort does not change much in terms of the overlap of electoral preferences for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. The earliest cohorts record the smallest degree of dyadic overlap of preferences for these two parties; more recent cohorts display considerably higher co-occurring preferences for them. As cohort members age over time, this pattern of trendless fluctuation is therefore also indicative of the absence of any age or life-cycle effects. The observation that the coefficients for age groups increase over time is entirely consistent with this, as these categories become over time populated with members of more recent cohorts.[13] In contrast to Tables 7.1 and 7.2; we do not see in Table 7.3 a clear period effect in the form of a step change from before to after 2008, which emphasizes by its absence even more the important role of generational replacement.

Concluding Remarks

The dramatic vote loss by Fianna Fáil in the 2011 elections is generally attributed to its handling of the 2008 economic crisis in government. The evidence for this interpretation is

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[13] One might wonder why this increasing co-occurrence of preferences for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael does not reflect itself clearly in the first row of coefficients in Table 7.3. The reason for this is that the samples of the studies vary in their distributions over age groups and cohorts. Proper weighting of the samples would diminish this problem and should result in a clearer pattern of increasing coefficients in this first row. For reasons explained in the section about data, proper and comparable weighting is obstructed by differences in availability and coding of weighting variables in the various surveys.

compelling, and this chapter does not contest it. But this interpretation does not address the underlying question why the crisis could have this spectacular electoral consequence. In this chapter we have argued that the continuous process of generational replacement has weakened the electoral resilience of the party in at least two complementary ways.

The first of these is a gradually decreasing strength of electoral preference for the party among its own voters (as illustrated in Table 7.1). This does not necessarily have to result in immediate electoral losses, and, indeed, the results of the 2007 Dáil election did not suggest that Fianna Fáil would be particularly vulnerable. Yet the weakening of the strength of the electoral preferences underlying actual votes for Fianna Fáil contributed to conditions enabling a sudden and dramatic loss of votes on the occasion of an appropriate and sufficiently strong external shock. The economic crisis of 2008 clearly provided such a shock, and brought about a large loss of Fianna Fáil vote shares in the European Parliament elections of 2009 and the Dáil elections of 2011. The second component of Fianna Fáil's weakened resilience (or, when seen from the opposite perspective, its increased electoral vulnerability) consists of a growing co-occurring of electoral preferences for multiple parties (as illustrated in Table 7.2), a phenomenon that includes a growth in shared affections for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael (as illustrated in Table 7.3). Both components are clearly propelled by generational replacement of earlier cohorts (in which Fianna Fáil was less vulnerable) by later ones (in which Fianna Fáil is more vulnerable). One implication of this is that, had the 2008 economic crisis occurred some twenty-five years earlier, its electoral consequences would have been less extensive than they were in 2011.

In the 2011 election Fianna Fáil was the party that most dramatically suffered the consequences of these developments. Although we have focused in this chapter on Fianna Fáil, it has to be noted that increased vulnerability to electoral change is not restricted to this party only. Other Irish parties, among them first and foremost Fine Gael, are affected in

similar ways by the same gradual generational replacement. It is, therefore, plausible that, had Fine Gael, not Fianna Fáil, been the leading government party in 2008, the fate that befell Fianna Fáil in the elections of 2009 and 2011 would have afflicted Fine Gael instead (on this, see also O'Malley and Carty in Chapter 12 in this volume).

The changes in strengths and structure of electoral preferences that have been demonstrated in the previous sections also indicate that what clearly in the past has been an electoral cleavage between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael has gradually lost most of its relevance for cohorts entering adulthood over the past few decades. As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, this seems to be an almost unavoidable evolution in political systems in which the root causes of an electoral cleavage have been pacified. The waning of what once was an electoral cleavage opens the way for more open electoral contests for votes in which no parties are sheltered from external shocks or from electoral competition. That makes all of them vulnerable in the electoral sense discussed, and implies that none of them can take for granted the support of substantial segments of the electorate. Instead, citizens increasingly perceive more than one party as a potentially worthwhile recipient of their vote, and elections will be decided on the basis of competition for the actual support of these voters. That makes parties more vulnerable to external shocks than they were in the past, but it also offers electoral opportunities

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Appendix: Definition of Various Kinds of Potential Electorates and their Overlaps

All measures and coefficients used in this chapter are derived from individual-level responses to the propensity to vote (PTV) questions (see main text, n. 1).

Let PTV_{iJ} be the score of respondent i ($i = 1 \ldots n$) to PTV question for party J ($J = A \ldots K$),

then individual-level contributions to party J's potential electorate are obtained by:

$$PV_{iJ} = f\,(PTV_{iJ})$$

with f being a monotone non-decreasing function and $0 \leq PV_{iJ} \leq 1$.

In this chapter we defined transformation function f as a linear function with 0 and 1 as values for the lowest and highest PTV scores respectively. In some of the surveys the PTV responses were to be given on a 10-point scale (from 1 to 10), and in others on an 11-point scale (from 0 to 10). In the 10-point scale the values of PV_{iJ} (the transformed PTV scores) thus progress from 0 to 1 with increments of 0.11111…, while in the 11-point scale they progress from 0 to 1 with increments of 1. This particular transformation is supported by Tillie's calibration (1995) of PTV scores with magnitude estimation procedures.

An interesting form that such non-decreasing functions can take are step functions of zeros and ones. Such functions define so-called consideration sets with the threshold for inclusion defined by the location along the PTV scores of the 0 to 1 step. In this chapter we do not use this form of f, but comparison of the linear function that we use and a step function with the two or three highest PTV scores transformed to 1 and the others to 0 generally lead to similar substantive conclusions.

Aggregating PV_{iJ} over i yields the magnitude of party J's electoral potential (sometimes also referred to as potential electorate) as a proportion of the total sample:

$$EP_J = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n} PV_{iJ}}{n}$$

When considering a pair of parties, *J* and *K*, the individual-level contribution to their joint

electoral potential is

$$PV_{i(J\cup K)} = f\left(PTV_{i(J\cup K)}\right) = f\left(max(PTV_{iJ}, PTV_{iK})\right)$$

Consequently, at party level (aggregate level) the joint electoral potential (or joint potential

electorate) of parties *J* and *K* is:

$$EP_{J\cup K} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n} PV_{i(J\cup K)}}{n} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n}(max(PV_{iJ}, PV_{jK}))}{n}$$

The joint electoral potential of a set of three parties (*I*, *J*, and *K*) is then:

$$EP_{\cup(I,J,K)} = EP_{I\cup J\cup K} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n} PV_{i(I\cup J\cup K)}}{n} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n}(max(PV_{iI}, PV_{iJ}, PV_{jK}))}{n}$$

which can obviously be extended to sets of parties of any magnitude in an analogous fashion.

The overlap between the potential electorate of two parties *J* and *K*, as a proportion of

the total sample, is then:

$$EP_{J\cap K} = EP_J + EP_K - EP_{J\cup K}$$

The overlap of party *J*'s potential electorate with all other parties can subsequently be defined

as:

$$EP_{J\cap(K=A,\dots,K,K\neq J)} = EP_J + EP_{\cup(K=A,\dots,K,K\neq J)} - EP_{\cup(K=A,\dots,K)}$$

The unique electorate of party *J* is then the part of its electoral potential that is not contained

in the joint potential of all other parties:

$$UEP_J = EP_J + EP_{\cup(K=A,\dots,K,K\neq J)} - EP_{J\cap(K=A,\dots,K,K\neq J)}$$

The overlap of the potential electorate of two parties $EP_{J\cap K}$ defined above is expressed as a

proportion of the entire sample, and is obviously dependent not only on the degree of shared

electoral preferences, but also on the size of the parties involved. When focusing on

competitive relations between parties, it may be preferable to express it in a form independent

of party sizes. That leads to the following coefficient of dyadic overlap of potential

electorates, as used in Table 7.3 of the main text:

If $(EP_J + EP_K) \leq 100$:

$$DOEP_{JK} = 1 - \frac{EP_{J \cup K} - min(EP_J, EP_{KJ})}{(EP_J + EP_K) - min(EP_J, EP_{KJ})}$$

And if $(EP_J + EP_K) > 100$:

$$DOEP_{JK} = 1 - \frac{EP_{J \cup K} - min(EP_J, EP_{KJ})}{(100) - min(EP_J, EP_{KJ})}$$

Table 7.1. Percentage of Fianna Fáil voters giving Fianna Fáil the maximum score (10) on PTV scale

	EES 1989	EES 1994	EES 1999	INES 2002	EES 2004	INES 2007	EES 2009	INES 2011	EES 2014
All	66.4	64.9	56.0	59.1	63.7	59.6	44.4	31.7	45.9
<1940	72.3	70.4	72.4	62.7	68.1	68.0	61.9	46.2	44.4
1940–60	67.4	65.5	58.6	57.2	66.4	58.2	45.6	39.7	46.1
>=1960	61.3	57.8	46.7	60.0	58.1	55.3	38.1	23.5	46.2
Age 70+	84.6	71.4	75.0	67.4	75.0	70.5	61.9	46.2	47.9
Age 50–70	67.4	71.7	68.8	57.2	69.6	57.8	45.6	39.7	43.8
Age 30–50	67.4	62.5	50.7	59.0	52.2	55.6	38.1	20.0	43.6
Age <30	61.3	56.1	44.2	60.6	65.5	53.9	38.1	32.4	55.0

Table 7.2. Ratio of unique to total potential electorate of Fianna Fáil (%)

	EES	EES	EES	INES	EES	INES	EES	INES	EES
	1989	1994	1999	2002	2004	2007	2009	2011	2014
All	29.8	24.1	19.0	18.8	22.7	22.0	12.1	6.1	24.4
<1940	37.5	32.3	25.5	26.6	33.3	28.3	19.5	17.1	41.4
1940–60	23.7	24.1	20.0	17.2	21.7	23.7	16.1	9.7	21.4
>=1960	26.9	16.6	16.9	15.9	17.1	17.2	9.1	5.9	20.0
Age 70+	52.2	40.0	30.0	29.0	36.2	30.0	19.5	17.1	38.6
Age 50–70	35.6	30.1	23.7	18.5	26.1	25.4	16.1	9.7	23.8
Age 30–50	23.7	21.8	18.3	16.9	15.9	18.3	10.0	5.9	18.4
Age <30	26.9	14.8	15.8	13.3	18.4	19.6	10.0	6.3	14.6

Note: Ratios expressed as percentages.

Table 7.3. Coefficient of dyadic overlap of electoral preferences for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael

	EES 1989	EES 1994	EES 1999	INES 2002	EES 2004	INES 2007	EES 2009	INES 2011	EES 2014
All	0.47	0.55	0.54	0.44	0.51	0.49	0.43	0.45	0.56
<1940	0.33	0.38	0.44	0.34	0.40	0.35	0.42	0.38	0.37
1940–60	0.49	0.53	0.54	0.44	0.52	0.48	0.36	0.38	0.50
>=1960	0.52	0.61	0.58	0.48	0.55	0.54	0.45	0.47	0.63
Age 70+	0.21	0.28	0.46	0.33	0.42	0.34	0.42	0.38	0.36
Age 50–70	0.39	0.42	0.45	0.42	0.48	0.48	0.36	0.38	0.52
Age 30–50	0.49	0.57	0.56	0.44	0.59	0.53	0.40	0.44	0.64
Age <30	0.52	0.61	0.62	0.54	0.50	0.60	0.57	0.47	0.68

Abstract

This chapter focuses on party switching. The civil-war cleavage that differentiated the two main Irish parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, has been gradually diminishing in importance in recent decades. This trend reached a crescendo in 2011, when the incumbent Fianna Fáil party saw a dramatic decline in voter support, with swathes of its core voters switching to the main opposition party, Fine Gael. This volatility must be seen from the perspective of a generational replacement. To understand the potential for electoral switching, as opposed to change after the fact, the chapter investigates the configuration of voters' preferences expressed through propensity to vote questions in the INES. The general framework provides theoretical tools better to understand the scale of Fianna Fáil's defeat, as unique commitment to that party had declined markedly from the position a generation previously and it was thus more vulnerable to punishment following the crisis.