

## SUMMARY

This thesis examines the extent to which the distribution of politicians' social background characteristics is associated with attitude variation within Irish political parties. It addresses the research question with qualitative and quantitative methods by examining the multi-dimensional interpretations of political issues by elite members and their substantive positions on those issues. To maximise the potential for a study of intra-party attitudes this thesis is a case study of Irish political parties. Ireland has been a puzzling case in political science for decades, as its party system has never been based on left-right competition, as is commonly found elsewhere. In Ireland, there is typically more attitude variation within parties than between them. However, the dynamics of Irish politics conforms to international trends as the membership of party elites are not demographically representative of the population.

The thesis begins by outlining the state of research on the potential explanations of intra-party attitude variation and the extent to which the social background of party representatives has been able to account for this variation in previous studies. It argues that instead of treating party affiliation and social background as competing explanations for attitude variation within a representative assembly, the two concepts should be treated as complementary explanations. The analysis treats party affiliation as a given delineator of attitudes within an assembly. It then assesses the degree of intra-party variation on substantive political attitude items and the extent to which intra-party attitudes are delineated by the social background characteristics of its members. To test the relationship between social background characteristics and intra-party attitudes, the thesis draws on data from surveys, interviews and parliamentary speeches.

What follows is the core analysis of the thesis, where the theoretical framework is incorporated into a statistical model and applied to the quantitative data. This analysis examines intra-party attitudes to economic, social, feminist and nationalist political issues. It finds particularly strong evidence that female representatives in Irish political parties are more left-

leaning and feminist than their male colleagues. This is interesting because older research on the Irish case presented contrary findings. Moreover, there are also significant attitudinal divisions based on age, education level and occupational class.

The thesis then examines the relationship between elites and voters for purposes of discovering whether socially representative parties would be attitudinally closer to voters. It is found here that greater social diversity would increase the variance of attitudes at the elite level, but overall congruence between citizens and representatives may actually be reduced.

A qualitative exploration of intra-party attitudes is then undertaken to determine the extent to which there is a multi-dimensional perception of political issues among parliamentary party members. Moreover, it examines whether any observed variation in affective responses is related to the descriptive characteristics of the respondents. Here it is found that there are striking intra-party divisions based on gender, age and social class on attitudes to economic policy, feminism and European integration.

Finally, the thesis examines whether the causal link between social background, attitudes and ultimately behaviour is likely to remain evident beyond affective perceptions and anonymous survey responses. The strategic incentives of political life may work to negate the effects of socialisation experiences on more behavioural measures of attitudes. The thesis examines whether social background is related to the position-taking in parliamentary speeches. It finds stronger evidence that that social background has some influence on the policy priorities of politicians, but less so on their stated positions.

The contribution of this thesis is that it takes a nuanced view of the relationship between social background, party affiliation and political attitudes. This is important if we are to understand whether the over-representation of demographic groups among political elites is a real problem for the health of democracy in Ireland and beyond. It finds that the variation in social background characteristics is significantly associated with attitudinal variation within Irish political parties.