

## *Chapter 8*

# **STABILITY AND CHANGE IN THE STRUCTURE OF ELECTORAL COMPETITION, 1989-2002**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

**Elections, almost by definition, are seen as occasions in which political parties compete for votes. In reality, that competition may be limited. It could be that many voters are effectively “out of competition”, having made a standing decision to support a particular party that allows no effective consideration of any other party (Mair, 1987, pp. 63-4). For example, a voter may be extremely committed to Fianna Fáil and would never dream of giving their first preference vote to any other party. In this case all Fianna Fáil has to worry about is making sure that this voter actually turns out to vote on Election Day. Other voters may be genuinely trying to make up their minds about which of a number of parties to vote for. If a voter is only considering the merits of *two* parties in particular – say, Fine Gael and Labour – then that voter is “open to competition” between those two parties (and “out of competition” for all the other parties). Other voters may be seriously considering voting for one or other of three or more parties and are thus open to competition between a range of parties. The existence of voters who are open to com-**

petition allows parties to compete with one another for votes (and not simply compete over which party can mobilise the largest proportion of “its” voters).

The traditional picture of the Irish electorate was one in which a large number of voters were removed from competition between parties. Instead, voters followed loyalties established during and after the Civil War. Thus, you were either a Fianna Fáiler or a Fine Gaeler and a Fianna Fáiler would never seriously consider voting Fine Gael while a Fine Gaeler would never seriously consider voting Fianna Fáil. The more common view nowadays is of an *available* electorate, one prone to violent swings towards or away from particular parties; an electorate cut from its traditional moorings and free to float on whatever political tide is flowing. In short, many commentators believe that we now have an electorate that is open to competition between a range of parties; that we have, in fact, a large number of “floating voters”.

Certainly we have seen some striking changes in Irish party politics over the last 25 years. At various times the electorate has moved clearly towards or away from particular parties: towards Fine Gael in the early 1980s and away from that party in 1987 and 2002; towards Labour in 1992 and away from it in 1997; towards the Progressive Democrats in 1987 and away again in 1989; and towards the smaller opposition parties (Greens and Sinn Féin) in 2002. While these changes could be due to the extreme volatility of a small section of the electorate, they may also signify an electorate that is relatively unattached and so open to offers at each election – although not easily persuaded twice perhaps. This volatility has been encouraged by changes in the traditional options for government. Fianna Fáil became open to coalition in 1989 when Charles Haughey and Des O’Malley formed the first Fianna Fáil-Progressive Democrats government; Fianna Fáil went on to govern

with Labour and then again with the Progressive Democrats. Fine Gael governed with Labour in 1994-7, in a government which also included Democratic Left. Labour has thus governed in two quite separate constellations since 1992 and of course kept both options open in the 2002 campaign. The Green Party is now also seen to be “coalitionable”, although circumstances have not yet favoured its entry into government, and even Sinn Fein can be spoken of as a potential partner for Fianna Fáil. There is then a certain degree of promiscuity characterising the relationships between Irish parties which might lead us to expect both wider competition and, in the absence of firm, long-term alliances (and no-alliances), a lack of structure in that competition.

At the same time, however, there are also some signs of a greater distinctiveness in the options provided to voters, at least with respect to the smaller parties. Judged in terms of their support base, the Green Party, the Progressive Democrats and Sinn Féin appear to be far from “catchall” parties (as was the Worker’s Party/Democratic Left before it merged with the Labour Party). Each is quite distinctive in terms of its social support and, to a lesser degree, the sorts of issues it appears to prioritise (Garry et al., 2003). It remains to be seen what impact this has on competition. The existence of such parties could close off competition by providing an “ideal home” for certain sections of voters, and several such “niche” parties might provide more shape to electoral competition. The Progressive Democrats and Sinn Fein may provide a right and left pole for a party system that has long been seen as concentrated at the centre of the political spectrum. If so, these parties could help provide a structure to a competition that might otherwise appear amorphous.

Against this background, this chapter draws on data from the ISPAS 2002 survey to explore the changing political inclinations of the Irish electorate and to

establish some parameters of electoral competition. Using a battery of questions pioneered in the Netherlands (van der Eijk and Niemoller, 1983) that have now been employed extensively in electoral research in some other countries (van der Eijk and Oppenhuis, 1991; Oppenhuis, 1995; van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996) this chapter seeks to establish the extent to which the electorate is open to a real competition for votes between parties and the extent to which this competition is structured in predictable ways. With the aid of comparable data from a post election survey carried out in 1989 it also explores the extent to which the degree and structure of competition has changed over the 13 years between the two surveys.

#### MEASURING COMPETITION

Questions that are asked in surveys about party preference typically focus on the outcome of the choice voters make – did you (or will you) vote for party A, B or C? – and ignore the other options that voters may consider (how likely is it that you would vote for A, how likely is it that you would vote for B and how likely is it that you would vote for C?). Typically, surveys ask respondents who they would vote for if an election were to be held tomorrow (or who they voted for in the last election). What surveys do not ask is whether the party indicated by the respondent is the respondent's very *clear-cut* choice or whether the party is indicated after genuinely trying to decide between *a number of* parties. Yet this unasked question is important. Unless we have some way of finding the answer to it we cannot establish the likelihood that things might change, or might have been different. The questions used here ask respondents to indicate for each party how likely it is – on a scale of 1-10 – that a given party would ever get their vote. The end points of the scale are labelled as follows: 1 means that a respondent would never vote

for that party and 10 means that the respondent would certainly vote for that party.<sup>1</sup> The use of the word “ever” here is intended to get people to think in a somewhat more general way about a party, and provide a context wider than the immediate one. These questions measure the utility that each individual voter would derive from voting for each party and we thus refer to them as “party utilities” (Tillie, 1995).

#### **CHANGE AND STABILITY IN THE DEGREE OF COMPETITION**

We can use this party utilities question to examine the voter's orientation towards the various parties competing at any particular time. In 2002 we asked about Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Labour, Greens, Progressive Democrats, Sinn Féin and “independents”, although this last category is obviously a poorly defined one as independent candidates themselves vary a lot. The first thing to find out is how voters rate parties. This is shown in Table 8.1, which also

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<sup>1</sup> “We have a number of political parties in Ireland each of which would like to get your [first preference] vote. How probable is it that you will ever give your first preference vote to the following parties? Please use the number on this scale to indicate your views, where ‘1’ means ‘not at all probable’ and ‘10’ means ‘very probable’” [*Interviewer shows card containing names of each of the parties and a row of 10 boxes against each and, according to the response, ticks one box on each line*] In the Irish context there is of course a potential confusion about what is meant by vote: is it a first preference, or any lower preference, some of which may be effectively indicating an extreme dislike of the party. However, the ISPAS survey explored differences between the specific term “first preference vote” and the more general “vote”. Each form of the question was asked of half of the respondents. A comparison of the two halves shows no statistically significant differences between the two sets of results, which implies that this aspect of the wording has no impact on the responses. The 1989 question used a different preamble but is substantially the same: “Some people always vote for the same party. Other people make up their mind each time. Please tell me for each of the following how probable it is that you will ever vote for this party in a general election.”

gives comparable data for 1989.<sup>2</sup> In 2002, 78 per cent gave a high score to at least one party, a high score being 8, 9 or 10. Thirteen per cent gave a medium score (6 or 7) and 9 per cent a pretty low score (below 6). We might expect that for voters giving a low score the main area of competition is between choosing whether or not to vote at all rather than choosing between competing parties.<sup>3</sup> As the table shows, since 1989 there is a 7 per cent decline in the percentage giving a “high” score, something that might be expected given the significant drop in turnout over the period.

**Table 8.1: Distribution of scores for most favoured party, 1989 and 2002**

	Score of Most Favoured Party (%)			Number of cases
	High (8-10)	Medium (6-7)	Low (1-5)	
2002	78	13	9	2342
1989	85	10	5	954

*Source:* 2002 ISPAS survey, weighted to provide representative social background and 1997 vote; 1989 European election study, weighted by social background and 1989 National election vote. Missing data and those who give all parties 1 excluded.

The next aspect to explore is the *number* of parties who get the highest score a respondent provides. To what extent do voters see one party as better than the rest (however poorly they rate that party), and to what extent do voters see several parties as equal? Table 8.2 shows the figures, again for 2002 and 1989. Sixty-nine per cent give one party a lead over the rest in 2002 with the other 31 per cent putting 2, 3, 4 or more parties in first place. The

<sup>2</sup> See van der Eijk and Oppenhuis, 1991 for some comparative data on other EU countries.

<sup>3</sup> Those with low scores for their most favoured party or parties are much less likely to report having voted in 1997 or to be able to indicate any preference for a forthcoming general election.

distributions are almost identical in 1989. (I have excluded from subsequent analysis the 4 per cent of the sample who gave a “1” to each of the seven parties, treating them essentially as non-respondents, but left in those who rated all parties equally but did so with a score in excess of 1).

**Table 8.2: Number of parties given best score, 1989 and 2001**

	Number of Parties with Highest Scores (%)							Number of cases
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
<b>2002</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2342</b>
<b>1989</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>954</b>

*Source:* 2002 ISPAS survey, weighted to provide representative social background and 1997 vote; 1989 European election study, weighted by social background and 1989 National election vote.

I now examine the relationship between how voters rate their “best” party and how many parties they rate together in first position. Do those voters who show a clear preference for one party always rate that party highly? Do those who seem to be undecided between several parties give them a low score? This is shown in Table 8.3, which again gives comparable figures for 1989. Most voters who have a clearly favoured party score that party highly. The 69 per cent of respondents in 2002 whose highest score was for a single party break down as follows: 64 per cent give that party a high score (between eight and 10) and only 5 give it a relatively low score (between 1 and 7). In contrast, the 31 per cent whose highest score was for more than one party break down as follows: for 23 per cent their highest score is “high” and for 8 per cent their highest score is “not high”.

**Table 8.3: Distribution of scores for best party and numbers given best score, 1989 and 2002. (Cell entries are percentages of sample)**

<b>Highest score for:</b>	<b>2002</b>		<b>1989</b>	
	<b>High (8-10)</b>	<b>Not High (1-7)</b>	<b>High (8-10)</b>	<b>Not High (1-7)</b>
<b>One party</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>More than one party</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>5</b>

*Source:* 2002 ISPAS survey, weighted to provide representative social background and 1997 vote; 1989 European election study, weighted by social background and 1989 National election vote. Missing data and those who give all parties '1' are excluded.

So, amongst those who tie two or more parties in first place, almost three-quarters also score these parties highly (although those with ties are much less likely to score their best parties highly than are those who have a clearly favoured party). Even so, amongst the 23 per cent who are very likely to vote for one of two or more parties but cannot discriminate between them at present, there is considerable room for real competition. Once again the figures for 1989 are very similar, although "tied" favoured parties were more likely to be scored highly in 1989.

These "tied" voters, particularly those giving two or more parties a "high" score, correspond most obviously to the popular notion of "floating voters" but do not by any means constitute all the voters to whom this "floating voter" label might reasonably be applied. There are also those voters for whom the gap between best and next best party is very small, say 1 or 2 points. Putting these two groups together, we see that 44 per cent rate at least one party highly and rate at least one other party as either

equal or not more than 2 points behind. These voters are clearly “in competition”. They may be contrasted with the 43 per cent who seem “out of competition”, having a clear preference for a particular party which they rate highly (“clear” in the sense that the next most preferred party is more than two points away). The remainder – 13 per cent – have no strong preferences at all. This distribution of these three types of voter – those “in competition” (or floating voters), those “out of competition” and a residual group of apathetic or alienated voters – is somewhat changed from 1989. The size of the “out of competition” group is almost the same (42 per cent in 1989 as opposed to 43 per cent in 2002) but the group “in competition” was 53 per cent in 1989. One reason for the decline – evident in Table 8.3 – is that in 2002 fewer voters without a single top party rate their joint top parties in the 8-10 range. Another reason is that fewer of those with a clear top party rated their second party as being within 1-2 points of it. What this suggests is that there is actually a slightly smaller group of voters “in competition” now and more who are apathetic or alienated.

#### **WHO COMPETES FOR THE FLOATING VOTERS?**

Having established that a high proportion of voters are “in competition” or “floating voters”, I now want to see which particular parties they appear to be floating between. Floating voters are not necessarily those who may finish up anywhere. As we have seen, many have two, three or more parties for whom they are likely to vote. Another way to put this is to say that floating voters form part of the potential support for more than one party. (It is a “potential” support because it is not the same as actual votes.) Using the concept of potential support we can then ask of each party: how much of its support does it share and with whom does it share it?

**It could be that some parties are more insulated from the chilly wind of competition than others. In other words, a party may have lots of voters who score it very highly and do not score the other parties highly at all. In contrast, another party may have voters who score that party highly but also score other parties equally, or nearly equally. To start with we need a measure of each party's potential support. One measure is to take the proportion of the electorate who rate that party most highly.<sup>4</sup> This has the advantage of simplicity but ignores the small differences that might exist between parties in any voter's mind. A more nuanced measure would use the full range of information given by the utility scores and that is the one employed here. Following van der Eijk and Franklin (1996), I construct this by transforming the utility scores into a 0-1 scale and treating the transformed scores as probabilities. Remember that the lowest point (1) on the scale was labelled as "would never vote for this party". Hence a probability of zero is justified, as is a 1 for the 10<sup>th</sup> point on the scale ("would certainly vote for this party"). The remaining scores are mapped evenly onto the space between 0 and 1 (i.e. .11, .22 etc.). The average of these scores can be seen as a measure of that party's potential support in the electorate. Obviously low scores contribute very little. It takes nine voters with a score of 2 (transformed to 0.11) to make 1 potential supporter and so the bulk of potential support comes from respondents giving a party a high score.**

**The next step is to examine how one party's potential support overlaps with the potential support of another party. This can be calculated by contrasting the sum of the potential support for each party with the potential support**

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<sup>4</sup> Analysis using this measure shows much less overlap between the support for different parties than is shown in Tables 8.4 and 8.5 but the pattern of overlap is similar, with sharing spread across the spectrum and Fianna Fáil supporters less inclined to share than any other party.

**for a combination of the two. This latter is obtained from each voter's score for the most highly rated of the two parties. If the same voters rate each party equally, the support for the two parties will overlap completely; if support comes from an entirely different set of voters there will be no overlap. We have already seen that there is substantial evidence of overlapping support. Our analysis will tell us where overlapping occurs and how big it is. In this manner we may find out how potential support for Fine Gael, for instance, overlaps with that for Fianna Fáil, and for the Progressive Democrats, for Greens and for Labour. Thus:**

Proportion of support of party A shared with party B = (potential support for party A + potential support for party B — potential support for AB) divided by potential support for A

**However, we would also like to know how far each of this overlapping is due to the same voters and how far it comprises different sets of voters. In other words, does a party share all of its support with other parties or is there some unique source of support that is effectively “out of competition” and belongs to that party alone. We can calculate this for a party by comparing the potential vote for all parties combined with that for all parties except that one:**

Proportion of potential support of party A that is unique to party A = potential support for all parties (A, B, C and so on) minus potential support for all parties except A.

**Figure 8.1 may help to explain the nature of overlaps and in particular how these may be asymmetric. It shows the degree of overlap between the large potential support of party A and the smaller potential support for B. A shares 30 per cent of its support with B; 70 per cent is not shared but is unique to A. Party B on the other hand shares 75**

per cent of its vote with party A and has only 25 per cent unique to itself.

**Figure 8.1: Example of high party B/party A and low party A/party B overlap**

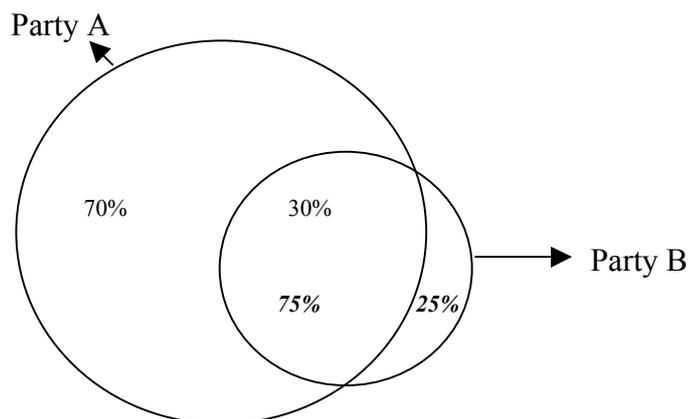


Table 8.4 shows for each party its potential support, the extent to which each other party has a share of that support and the extent to which it has a unique support shared with no other party. The table is most easily read downwards. For example, the potential support for Sinn Féin is 21 per cent. The support that belongs to Sinn Féin uniquely is five per cent. The overlap between the Sinn Féin potential support and that for the Green Party is 68 per cent, for Labour is 67 per cent and so on. The table can also be read across, in which case it shows, for example, Sinn Féin's share of each party's potential support.

**Table 8.4: Overlap of each party's potential support, 2002**

<b>Potential Electorate of (%):</b>							
	<i>SF</i>	<i>Green</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>IND</i>	<i>Fine Gael</i>	<i>PD</i>	<i>FF</i>
<b>Potential support</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>% of support that is unique</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Shared with:</b>							
<b>SF</b>	<b>10</b> <b>0</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Green</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Labour</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>IND</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>10</b> <b>0</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Fine Gael</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>10</b> <b>0</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>PDs</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>10</b> <b>0</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>FF</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>10</b> <b>0</b>

*Source:* 2002 ISPAS survey, weighted to provide representative social background and 1997 vote.

The most obvious point to make about the “potential support” figures is that they sum to much more than 100, indicating that there is a substantial overlap in the support for different parties. Remarkably, however, support levels are far more similar than we might expect. Most parties fail to translate most of their potential support into first preferences at the polls. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael do best. Those parties each have more unique support than other parties but even in the case of Fianna Fáil this amounts to only 20 per cent – one-fifth – of its potential support, giving it a base of just over 10 per cent [ $52 * 0.20$ ] of the

electorate.<sup>5</sup> At the other extreme the Progressive Democrats share 99 per cent of their support with at least one other party. All this confirms the fact that parties share supporters, but who shares with whom? The rest of the table gives us the answer: each party shares with all the others.

Thus Sinn Féin's largest percentage (80 per cent) is shared with independents; the smallest (58 per cent) with the Progressive Democrats and Fine Gael (61 per cent). What is most striking here is perhaps the degree of overlap. Fianna Fáil has both the largest potential vote and the largest vote that is unique to the party. Not surprisingly, then, it also seems to share its voters with other parties much less than is typical elsewhere. But even so, it shares 54 per cent of its support with Fine Gael and 57 per cent with independents, sharing least with Sinn Féin (29 per cent). In addition to the degree of overlap, the general pattern of the overlapping support is also remarkable. The differences between the percentages are quite small, whether we read down the columns or across the rows. Hence the share of the Fine Gael vote taken by each of the other parties varies only from 55 per cent to 65 per cent if we exclude Sinn Fein's 30 per cent share; and Fine Gael's share of each of the other parties' votes ranges from 54 per cent of Fianna Fáil's to 74 per cent of the Progressive Democrats vote.

Looking back to 1989 there has been remarkably little change in the degree of overlap between the parties and thus the general openness of the electorate. There are of course changes in the party system. In 1989 Fine Gael was stronger, Sinn Fein had no parliamentary representatives

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<sup>5</sup> In assessing these potential votes it should be born in mind that the average of the highest transformed scores is less than 1, being 0.86 in 2002 and 0.89 in 1989. This is because some voters give no score over zero, and substantial numbers do not give a maximum score to their most preferred party.

and the Green Party had just one while the Worker's Party was a significant force with several TDs. No question was asked with respect to independents in 1989 (or the Worker's Party in 2002) so comparisons are limited. Table 8.5 shows the differences between 2002 and 1989. Positive numbers indicate an increase in 2002, negative numbers indicate a decrease.

**Table 8.5: Changes in the overlap of each party's potential support between 2002 and 1989 (%)**

	SF	Green	Labour	Fine Gael	PD	FF
<b>Potential support</b>	+8	-4	+2	-5	-2	-1
<b>Unique share of potential support</b>	0	-2	-1	-2	-2	-5
<b>Shared with:</b>						
<b>SF</b>	—	+9	+13	+14	+17	13
<b>Green</b>	-25	—	+4	+5	+5	-2
<b>Labour</b>	-9	+6	—	+10	+11	+4
<b>Fine Gael</b>	0	+3	+5	—	-12	-2
<b>PDs</b>	-1	+5	+8	-5	—	+5
<b>FF</b>	+5	+3	+8	+4	+11	—

*Source:* 2002 ISPAS survey, weighted to provide representative social background and 1997 vote; 1989 European election study, weighted to provide representative social background and 1989 National election vote

Potential support for each of the parties has changed somewhat since 1989, most obviously for Fine Gael (down 5 per cent, a change that roughly matches Fine Gael's fate in the polls over that period) and Sinn Féin (up 8 per

cent). Fianna Fáil's potential support is little changed but that party would appear to have to compete more for the votes it gets as the uniqueness of its support is less pronounced. In fact no party increased its proportion of "unique" support. In the main body of the table showing overlaps between pairs of parties the numbers are generally small with almost all change being smaller than 15 percentage points and 16 of the 30 entries being 5 percentage points or less. The biggest changes largely relate to Sinn Féin. Its potential electorate was smaller in 1989 and consequently it took a smaller share of the potential vote of all the other parties. The other major changes since 1989 are the increased Labour share of the Fine Gael vote, a smaller Fine Gael share of the Progressive Democrats vote and a very significant drop in the Green share of the Sinn Féin vote. There is some sign of increased overlap between all parties but the main pattern is one of stability, both in terms of the potential support for each of the parties and the degree to which the support for each of the parties overlaps with one another's.

#### **STABILITY AND CHANGE IN THE STRUCTURE OF COMPETITION**

In this section I look at the overall structure of overlapping preferences to see to what extent they can be said to form a pattern. One way to do this is by examining Table 8.4 to see how far there seems to be some order evident in the way overlaps increase down the columns. In the Table the parties are presented in the left-right and top-bottom order that appears to best display a pattern of overlaps peaking once at the cell on the main diagonal (where the entry is 100 per cent). If there is an order we should see the highest degrees of overlap between adjacent parties and the least between parties furthest away from one another. So we should see a big overlap between Fine Gael and the Progressive Democrats, and a small one between

**Sinn Féin and the Progressive Democrats. By this criterion we might conclude there is some sign of a pattern but that it is not very strong. Even if we leave aside the independents on the grounds that this is not a coherent category, there are anomalies. Looking down the columns in Table 8.4, Fianna Fáil's share of Sinn Fein support is too high and the PDs share of the Fine Gael vote is too low. As we have seen before, the gradient – the degree of increase or decrease – is also very small. This suggests that while there may be a structure it is not a very strong one. What the information in Table 8.4 does not tell us is how strong the structure is and whether or some other ordering of the parties might result in a more strongly structured party system.**

**A more systematic way to analyse the underlying structure, and one which will enable us to make comparisons with 1989, is by the use of unfolding methods (Coombs, 1964). These methods attempt to construct a single spatial representation of both persons and stimuli, in our case voters and parties. The positions of voters and parties in this so-called joint space should be such that the distances between voters and parties reflect (inversely) the preferences that are observed empirically. In other words, the higher a voter's preference for a party, the smaller the distance between them in the spatial representation – in more formal terms this is referred to as the assumption of single-peaked preferences. These relations should hold to a satisfactory degree for all persons and for all parties. If such a space can be constructed, the position of voters as well as parties on the dimensions that define the space can be calculated, and used to characterize them in further analyses. (These positions can also be used in the substantive interpretation of the dimensions, which is usually done by taking into account other known characteristics of the stimuli and of the subjects. I do not**

have enough space to do this here but will deal with it in a later paper.) These dimensions can be thought of as being both cognitive in character (they indicate where voters perceive candidates as well as themselves) and evaluative (distance on these dimensions determines, in an inverse way, the level of preference). An interesting aspect of such representations is that, if they can be constructed, they indicate that *all* voters involved evaluate *all* parties to a large degree on the basis of *the same criteria*. Inability to construct such a spatial representation of the observed preferences can indicate several things. It may signify that not all parties are evaluated on the same criteria; it may signify that voters do not have (to a sufficient degree) the same perceptions of parties or it may mean that not all preferences given by individual voters are based on the same criteria.

The number of parties is rather small for unfolding analysis. Therefore, it only makes sense to investigate the extent to which preferences for these parties can be represented in one-dimensional spaces.<sup>6</sup> Various algorithms for one-dimensional unfolding exist, all of which are designed for specific types of data. In this chapter we will use the unfolding algorithm MUDFOLD (Van Schuur, 1984, 1988). The advantage of MUDFOLD over other available programs is that it provides a goodness-of-fit measure – the H-coefficient – that can be used to compare the strength of a common dimension over time. It also allows us to compare the strength of scales containing different sets of stimuli. H attains an upper limit of 1 if the constructed scale represents the data

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<sup>6</sup> Multi-dimensional spatial representations would pose so few restrictions on the data that very different configurations would all fit the data perfectly, which implies that they would be trivial. Unidimensional representations of three or more stimuli will not by necessity fit well, so that if they do fit, a relevant empirical result has been attained.

perfectly, without any violations. If, on the other hand, a proposed scale yields as many violations with empirical observations as would occur in the case of statistical independence of the stimuli,  $H$  is 0. As a rule of thumb  $H$  should be at least .30 if we are to treat a scale as meaningful, and above .50 if we are to see it as strong (Oppenhuis, 1995).

Table 8.6 shows the results obtained with unfolding analysis using the sets of party scores already discussed. It shows the results for different sets of stimuli and in each case displays an ordering. (There is no significance to the area of space between each stimulus – party or independent group). We began by trying to find a scale on which all parties could be placed. The  $H$  coefficient for this full analysis (Table 8.6a) is .40. That is above the minimal level of .30 but well below the typical level for other European party systems of around .50. The three parties on the left of the scale – Sinn Fein, Green and Labour – fit better into this structure than do the three on the right hand side and the independents fit worst of all. However, no alternative scale, such as is obtained by reversing Greens and Labour, gives quite such a good fit and many obvious options, such as placing the Progressive Democrats to the right of Fianna Fáil, resulted in a much worse fit.

Arguably, independents are an inappropriate group for inclusion in this exercise since they are so disparate. Any particular independent might fit quite well but a group which included Tony Gregory, Jackie-Healy Rae and Thomas Gildea may not have fitted easily into any framework. It could be that the attempt to treat this group as a single stimulus is the reason why the overall fit is not better. We tested this by running the analysis again but this time without the independent stimulus, using only the set of six *party* stimuli. The ordering is the same but the fit is improved, rising to .43 (see Figure 8.6b). The structure

**owes much to the fact that Sinn Fein, Greens and Labour are placed on one side and Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats on the other but all parties fit satisfactorily into this pattern and moving any party worsens the overall fit.**

Figure 8.6: Unfolded scale orderings from potential electorates with goodness-of-fit coefficients for each party, 2002

*(a) Including all parties and independents*

←	→					
SF	Green	Labour	Indep.	FG	PD	FF
.43	.43	.43	.34	.37	.40	.38

Overall goodness of fit:  $H=.40$

*(b) Including parties only*

←	→				
SF	Green	Labour	FG	PD	FF
.43	.46	.48	.41	.43	.40

Overall goodness of fit:  $H=.43$

Note: Data consists of the probability to vote questions from ISPAS. Analysis is done using MUDFOLD. Respondents rating all parties '1' are excluded.

**How does this pattern compare with that for 1989? Is it stronger, or weaker, and has the ordering of the parties changed over these 12 years? In 1989 respondents were asked about the Worker's Party (WP) rather than about independents. We first examined the fit that could be obtained by putting the WP – a self-proclaimed left-wing party – between the Greens and Sinn Fein. As Table 8.7a shows, this gives a scale with a satisfactory H coefficient (.51) but it is evident that the Green Party fits less easily into this model than does any other party. In addition, we are not comparing like with like as we would expect the**

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**WP to have provided a much more cohesive stimulus than independents. We therefore examined the structure without the WP. This is Table 8.7b. Here the fact that the Greens are a relatively poor fit is even more obvious. If we leave out the Greens (in Table 8.7c), the**

Figure 8.7: Unfolded scale orderings from potential electorates with goodness-of-fit coefficients for each party, 1989

*(a) All parties*

←						→
SF	WP	Green	Labour	FG	PD	FF
.71	.61	.38	.53	.52	.51	.45

Overall goodness of fit: H=.51

*(b) All parties except WP*

←						→
SF	Green	Labour	FG	PD	FF	
.66	.34	.44	.47	.47	.42	

Overall goodness of fit: H=.45

*(c) All parties except WP and Greens*

←					→
SF	Labour	FG	PD	FF	
.61	.48	.52	.53	.47	

Overall goodness of fit: H=.51

res ..... of .51, is clearer. On this basis we might say that a change between

198 (b) All parties except WP and Greens: FG, PD reversed seen by the electorate as close to Labour whereas before the elector-

←						→
SF	Labour	PD	FG	FF		
.61	.48	.52	.53	.47		

Overall goodness of fit: H=.51

alt ..... in equally

si Note: Data consists of the probability to vote questions from ISPAS. gnifi-

c; Analysis is done using MUDFOLD. Respondents rating all parties '1' are Pro- excluded. still

g .51, again much better than anything achievable in 2002.

**This suggests that parties did move somewhat with respect to one another in the public mind between 1989 and 2002. In 1989, the Green Party's appeal was more amorphous; as a new party it perhaps appealed to different people in quite different ways, or it could be that many voters were hard pressed to know where it stood at all. By 2002 its appeal was, if not very well defined, at least better defined. Green issues had become better absorbed into the mainstream of party politics. The Progressive Democrats have followed a slightly different path. In 1989 the party was closer to Fine Gael than to Fianna Fáil, despite sharing government with the latter in what Fianna Fáil's Brian Cowen described to the party faithful as a "temporary little arrangement". After two spells in office with Fianna Fáil the party seems closer to Fianna Fáil than it once was; at least in 2002 it appears to occupy a space that stretches into that between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. At the same time Sinn Fein has become less well defined. Still on the "left", it fits less well there than it did 13 years earlier. It appears that the nature of party competition is less well defined in 2002 than it was at the end of the 1980s.**

**This raises the question, of course, about the substantive meaning (if there is one) of that space. We have already used the terms left and right in a merely spatial sense but these terms may also apply when used in a political sense. In both 2002 and 1989 voters, were willing to locate themselves on a left-right scale when asked to do so. If we judge parties by their supporters we would put Sinn Fein on the left, followed by the Greens, Labour, Progressive Democrats, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil.<sup>7</sup> This ordering equals the best scale in 1989 and was almost as good as the best in 2002 so we may with some**

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<sup>7</sup> Respondents were also asked to locate the parties in 2002. The ordering given by the mean position of each party is the same as that given by using the self-placement of each party's supporters.

justification talk of the space as a left-right one. What that means in terms of issues is another matter altogether, but the results of some previous analysis suggests that concepts of left and right in Ireland do not have firm connections to contemporary political issues (Garry and Marsh, 2001; also Knutsen, 1995a, 1995b) and, to the extent that they do, issues of morality, such as abortion, are as significant a part of what left and right mean as are economic issues concerning the distribution of wealth and control of resources. The parties themselves may stimulate people's self-placements more than political issues. In other words, voters may see themselves as left because they support Labour rather than support Labour because they see themselves as left wing and identify Labour as a party for left-wing people. Certainly Irish electoral competition has rarely served to emphasise issues in terms of left and right. However, this is a topic requiring further analysis, linking the positions of individual voters in the party space we have described with that of the voters in a space more clearly defined by issues.

#### **CONCLUSION**

We began by asking to what extent the Irish electorate is now open to electoral competition and, if it is open, how far that competition takes a structured form. We also asked whether there had been change in this respect in recent years. Using a set of questions that measure party utilities by asking people about their likelihood of voting for various parties we have been able to show that a substantial part of the electorate is very much open to competition and that only a minority of voters seem to be "out of competition". A comparison of survey data from 2002 with similar survey data from 1989 provides little evidence of significant change in this respect. There are similar percentages of voters in 2002 and 1989 that rate more than

one party as being the one for which they are most likely to vote. However, there does seem to be evidence of an increase in the percentage of voters who can think of no party they are likely to vote for, a change which parallels the decline in turnout over the period. This decline in the average level of support for any party means that in one sense there are fewer voters who might be said to be "in competition" or floating between parties. If competition is not increasing between the parties it does seem to be increasing between the ballot box and the armchair and this certainly gives each party an opportunity to tap into a potential vote that no other party appears to be able to attract. We also looked for changes in the structure of competition. We found clear signs of a structure in 2002 into which all parties, if not independents, could be fitted satisfactorily. This ran from Sinn Fein through Greens, Labour, Progressive Democrats and Fine Gael to Fianna Fáil. When we compared this to the structure in 1989 it became evident that there have been changes in the perception of parties. Sinn Fein seem less clearly identified as being on the extreme left, and the Progressive Democrats are placed marginally closer to Fianna Fáil than they were, while the Greens, previously a marginal fit in any scale, now fit satisfactorily between Sinn Fein and Labour. Certainly we cannot say there is now a stronger one-dimensional structure. If anything there does seem to be more structure in 1989. Although there is evidence that the public perceives parties as arranged in a left-right ordering that resembles their own left-right self-placement, this structure is not pronounced. Ireland's electoral competition in 1989 was already relatively unstructured in these terms by comparison with other EU countries. In 2002 it seems even more unstructured. Despite the growth of small parties with apparently distinct social and ideological appeals, electoral politics in 2002 looks like a war of all against all.

A caveat should be entered here. The 1989 survey was carried out in the wake of both a general and European Parliament election whereas the 2002 survey was conducted a few months before the general election of 2002. It has been shown that election campaigns can increase support for all parties, and that campaigns can serve to sharpen electoral appeals (van der Brug et al., 2000). The 2002 election may well have done that and post-2002 data may show more structure and a larger electorate "in competition".

There are obvious avenues for further research. One is to compare the 1989 survey with a post-2002 election survey, which is now available. A second is to explore the link between competition and turnout, and find out whether those who rate no party highly are the very people who are most likely to stay at home on polling day, effectively narrowing the field available for competition between the parties. A third is to explore the substantive meaning (if there is one) of the underlying structures we have described, and a fourth is to examine the social location and issue concerns of the "floating voters".

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