

Taking the credit and avoiding the blame: parties and voting behaviour in Ireland 2002

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The roots of stability in Irish party preferences lie more in general attachments to parties, for the most part transmitted down through the family, than through enduring patterns of social cleavage or through sets of values, or ideologies. Long-term stability then seems to be more about the past than the future and more about loyalties than about making deliberate choices based on issues. Irish party politics were founded on issue cleavages, divisions over what should be done, but we find little evidence that such concerns are vital mechanisms in maintaining that party system. The sort of mechanisms that can account for short-term change are not policy disagreements but rather on more general evaluations of the relative competence of parties and their leaders to govern effectively. This paper examines the first of these.

P.J.Mara, FF Director of Elections in 2002 and a significant figure within FF circles for over 20 years claimed that, contrary to the notions of many journalists, election in Ireland were not really about issues at all. Unencumbered as he was by any knowledge of what academics had been writing about elections for much longer than 20 years it was a good point, if hardly original. Donald Stokes, co-author of foundational studies of voting behaviour in the USA and Britain, observed many years ago that important issues in elections were typically concerned goals on which the vast majority agreed. The dispute was largely about which party or leader could best achieve them. At much the same time another American political scientist, V. O. Key, responding to suggestions that voters knew too little about politics to make coherent decisions about who should govern them, argued that voters knew quite enough to judge whether things they cared about were getting better or getting worse. Elections let voters play the 'rational god of vengeance and reward': bad governments were rejected, and not so bad ones allowed another term in office. Irish voters between 1969 and 2002 seemed to have played the role of a very vengeful god indeed since all governments had received a thumbs down from the electorate, even if Fianna Fail still succeeded in staying in office after the 1989 and 1992 general elections with a *deus ex machina* in the form first of the PDs and latterly of Labour. In this chapter we will look at the issues that dominated the 2002 election, and at voters judgements on the performance of the outgoing government. We shall see that while the record of the outgoing government was a mixed one it was in credit on the big issues having delivered lower unemployment and lower taxes and this outweighed the less successfully managed problems such as the declining health service, the rising cost of living, difficulties with housing and housing and the perceptions of rising crime.

Election concerns and the 2002 election

The main theme of the election campaign, both the short one in April and May and the much longer one dating back a couple of years, was the imbalance between the objective success of the economy, and expectations about the appropriate level of public services and infrastructure. The economy had delivered unprecedented rates of growth and record low levels of unemployment but the infrastructure of public services in many areas could be seen to have declined in quality, or at least not kept pace with the demands made consequent of the years of growth. At the end of 2000 Fine Gael launched its 'Celtic Snail' campaign, featuring posters of the eponymous creature intended to highlight the slow movement in areas such as transport, education and health. It was not a hit with the media or with many members of the party who thought it ill-judged and it proved the catalyst in the move to topple FG's leader John Bruton and replace him with Michael Noonan. However, all parties had to face the fact that this imbalance would be the battleground for the election. For the government parties the strategy was to highlight their effectiveness in providing economic growth and ask the electorate to let them finish the job. The FF slogan 'A lot done – more to do' exemplified this approach. The major opposition parties generally argued that not enough had been done and that the government had mismanaged the wealth created by the economy. Those on the left, notably SF, argued that the benefits of wealth had simply gone to the rich, and they could support their case with evidence of growing wealth inequalities. Labour and FG made the same point but their main thrust was a criticism of the government for failing to deliver better services on health, crime and education.

There is obviously some objective reality behind these widespread perceptions of imbalance. The performance of the economy of the previous five years had reached levels never experienced before in the history of the state. Over the second half of the 1990s the Irish economy grew very quickly. The CSO reports year-on-year increases in GDP of about 10 per cent and increases in GNP of about 9 per cent over the five years in which the Fianna Fail – Progressive Democrat coalition was in power. However, in the year before the election evidence of a slow down in the economy began to emerge. In 2001 growth in GDP fell to 5.7 per cent and in GNP to 4.6 per cent. Despite the slow down the strong growth in the economy had a positive impact on unemployment, a problem that had plagued Irish governments from the late 1970s. It fell from 10 per cent in 1997 to just 4 per cent in 2002. On the other hand, as a consequence of both internal pressures deriving from strong economic growth as well as other external factors such as high oil prices and low interest rates, the annual percentage change in the consumer price index increased from 1.5 per cent 1996/7 to 4.6 per cent in 2001/02 (having peaked at 5.6 per cent in 1999/00). Both of these were influenced by the reforms

the government introduced to the tax system. By cutting the rates of tax and widening the tax-bands they hoped to make employment a more attractive option for those who were on lower wages as well as stimulating demand in the economy. This increased demand also helped to drive inflation up. When the government first took office the standard rate of tax was at 26 per cent and the higher rate was at 48 per cent. Over their period in office these had been reduced to 20 per cent and 42 per cent. Perhaps more importantly the tax bands had also been widened. As mentioned interest rates over the five years fell to very low levels. At the end of May 1997 the one-month inter-bank interest rate stood at 6.2 per cent. By the end of April the EURIBOR one-month inter-bank rate was 3.3 per cent. (Department of Finance monthly reports <http://www.finance.gov.ie/publications/>) Falling interest rates means that those who have mortgages and loans have more money in their pockets than they had when interest rates were slightly higher. Also as interest rates fall the cost of money becomes less expensive and encourages investment in industry, which stimulates further economic growth. Finally, low interest rates had some impact on house prices. The average price of both new and second hand houses in Ireland more or less doubled over the five-year period, with increases in house prices even greater in the Dublin area. (Dept of Finance) The improved performance was a double edged sword in that it brought with it not only increased expectations but also increased demands not only on public services but on roads and rail.

The state of the health service obviously concerned many voters, far more so than in 1997 when less than 20 percent saw it at critical. The government only managed to publish its strategy on reforming the health service a few months prior to leaving office. In the governments defence it could be argued that health spending as a proportion of GNP increased from 5.96 per cent to 7.41 per cent. However, the latter figure is still less than the 1983 figure when health expenditure accounted for 7.52 per cent of GNP. (Source: Dept Health and Children) Given the public spending cutbacks of the late 1980s it might be suggested that there is substantial lost ground that needs to be made up before people will feel that they have a health service adequate to dealing with their needs. Increased demand on the transport infrastructure was also evident with overcrowding on trains and traffic jams on motorways and in the centres of large towns and cities. Iarnrod Eireann embarked on a process of upgrading the rail network, while LUAS eventually began construction of a light-rail system for Dublin and spending on roads was increasing but for some people all this was taking a very long time. Concerns with crime are becoming a feature of many election campaigns and this one was no exception. FF had promised a 'zero-tolerance' law and order policy at the 1997 election of the last election and this was a hostage to fortune as crime showed no sign of declining, and even if it had, enough high-profile cases can still give the public an impression that nobody is safe

in their homes or on the streets. Right at the start of the campaign the issue of crime was to the forefront of people's minds, as two gardai were killed by so-called joy-riders. Relying on the statistics produced by An Garda Síochána it would appear that crime has fallen slightly. Unfortunately, the detection rate also slipped from 43 per cent in 1997 to 41 per cent in 2001. (Source: Garda Reports). FF promised a lot more gardai if elected, a recognition that not enough was currently being done.

This promise, like many others, depended on the future of the economy. All of the main parties sought to convince the electorate that they had the best plans for providing major investment in health, education and infrastructure while at the same time maintaining the low-tax regime and keeping the public finances stable. Using their own research that suggested that although voters were concerned about spending on health and infrastructure, they were more concerned that the next government should not be reckless with the government finances and as a result damage future economic prospects, Fianna Fáil sought to portray itself as the party of fiscal responsibility. There were different plans for how the various promises parties were making could be paid for with Fianna Fáil suggesting a National Development Finance Agency to raise money for capital spending and FG relying on well-managed growth. What was generally missing was any clear recognition by the parties that the economy was far less strong than was being suggested. There were plenty of financial journalists and economists who were of the same view, and in fact the press gave quite a lot of attention to this topic but the parties resisted any temptation to make much of it. The government parties hardly wanted to damage their own credibility as economic managers, while the main opposition parties did not want to undermine their promises to pay for much better services.

Given the record of the government the election agenda in 2002 had something of an unfamiliar look. Voters told exit pollsters that the important influences on their vote in 2002 were, in order, health, crime, economic management, honesty, the cost of living, housing and a myriad of local issues. Taxation and unemployment, the staples of elections over the last 25 years, had dropped well down the list as direct taxes had been cut and unemployment had fallen to around 4 percent. We have seen that while voters have different views on the balance that ought to be struck between taxation and public services the party system as a whole provides no clear outlet for those views, nor for the differences on abortion which is an old fashioned issue on which people can have entirely different interpretations of what should be achieved. However, neither this issue, nor the issue of NI, on which the parties hardly disagree in emphasis, featured significantly in the campaign and no polls indicated that many thought they should. ¹

Punishment and reward

There is now an extensive body of academic research into the link between government performance, particularly in economic affairs, and voting behaviour. Initial findings stressed the link between economic indicators and the vote and sought to demonstrate that the electorate operated a system of reward and punishment in which governments presiding over good times were returned and those who did not were ejected. (Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000) Variations on the model were also explored. One interesting one in the context of the 2002 election was that of asymmetry in the relationship that might lead the electorate to boot out failing government but be less quick in rewarding good ones (Bloom and Price 1975) although findings on this, particularly from data on individuals, are mixed (Stevenson p.46). While there is undoubtedly a general link between elections results and economics, the strength and nature of this relationship seems to vary. Electors respond to different economic indicators at different times – unemployment at one time for instance and inflation at another – and the link was apparently stronger in some countries than others. One reason for this lies in the differences between political systems that make it easier in some to identify responsibility and thus apportion blame. In a very influential piece of research Powell and Whitten (1993; see also Palmer and Whitten 2000) demonstrated that elections in countries where responsibility is most easily focussed on a single party will be more likely to follow the reward-punishment model. Where responsibility is divided, because of minority government, strong parliamentary committees or a decentralised federal structure it is harder for voters to identify who is to blame. Coalition governments mean the voters must decide whether responsibility should be distributed equally. The length of time a government has been in office is another factor. Other research has explored other institutional differences, such as how open an economy is to outside influence but the key point here is that a reward-punishment model requires voters not simply to evaluate the performance of the economy but also to apportion credit and blame as appropriate.

One further element may also be important and that that voters may need an alternative (eg Sanders and Carey 2002; Anderson 2000, Nadeau et al 2002). In the classic two-party system this is easy. Discontented voters can support the opposition. But in a multiparty system things are less clear cut and a vote against the government may not in effect do much to replace it if there is no kind of alternative government in waiting. To the extent that the opposition itself is more fragmented, the reward-punishment model may not apply.

V.O.Key argued that the reward-punishment model was an easy one for voters to use when deciding their vote as they required little special information to know when times were good and when they were bad.

Even so, it raises the question of how they know. Two general sources of information are the media and their own experiences and those of people they talk to. There is no reason to confine information to that on the economy. The health service has been a major item in the media for a long time, both in terms of policy debate – which many voters may not wish to follow – and stories of waiting lists, two-tier services and closing hospitals. Most people, if they have had no need of the service themselves, will have family members or friends with more direct experience so it is easy to see how a voter with little interest in politics can come to an evaluation of the state of the health services. The same is true of housing, transport and many other issues where voters can easily form an evaluation about how well things are working. This is not to say that all such evaluation is necessarily ‘objective’. Certainly not all share the same viewpoint as we will see. But it is reasonable to suggest that if we ask voters to tell whether things have been getting better or worse in relation to housing or transport they will have some basis to make an evaluation. Research has suggested, for instance, that perception of economic performance are influenced by information levels, group interests, partisanship and personal economic circumstances in ways which vary over time and so aggregated perceptions are not unbiased measures (Duch, Palmer and Anderson 2000). The partisanship element is serious because the story that people vote against the government because they see the government as doing badly but is less convincing if it turns out that this perception stems directly from life-long commitment to an opposition party. We will keep this in mind and return to it.

There are echoes of the debates over economic voting in Irish election campaigns and in commentaries on them. In the 1997 election both the Rainbow coalition and the alternative FF-PD alliance could claim credit for economic growth with equal justification since both had been in government since the previous election. In 2002 the opposition could argue that the economic boom was not of the government’s making but due to a combination of favourable circumstances in the world economy while the government could also point to the slowing of the world economy as a reason why growth would be much slower in 2002 than in earlier years. Responsibility within the government was an issue with the small PD party seeking to highlight their contribution on issues where performance may generally be seen to be good – economic growth, cutting taxes and increasing employment for instance and disassociating themselves from less popular proposals like that to build a new national stadium. The importance of an alternative government also exercised the main opposition parties with FG seeking an alliance with Labour and the Greens and those parties preferring to keep their options open. With the polls then overstating the FF vote and understating the opposition voters might well have perceived that there was no alternative. However, neither FG nor Labour had made much impact on public

opinion in the run-up to the election and as it is arguable that this was due to high levels of satisfaction with the government it would be circular to see their weakness as a cause of government strength.

Perceptions of performance

The general perception of the government was a good one. The regular series of poll question tapping the public satisfaction with the performance of the government recorded satisfaction levels of higher than 50 percent through most of its five years in office and throughout the last eighteen months. Our own question, asking *in general* how good or bad a job do you think [the government] has done over the last five years showed a similar pattern: 13 percent said it had done a very good job, 68 percent a good job, 12 percent a bad job and 4 percent a very bad job with further 2 percent undecided. These evaluations are associated with party choice (table 1). Those with 'good' evaluations look much like a random cross section of our sample whereas those more enthusiastic leaned very heavily towards FF and those who were critical leaned heavily away. Since almost two thirds fall in to the 'good' category this in itself means that the assessment of the record does not tell us so much as it might about the vote. Two thirds of all voters thought the government had done a 'good' job but only half of them voted for government parties. It is significant that so many people saw the performance as good but then voted for the opposition. Given the record itself and the substance of the campaign, it is important to know how the perceptions of the economy, the health services and so on, feed into this overall assessment and whether any of these were decisive. Even so, the fact over 81 percent could say the government had been a good one would lead any observer to expect that the government would have been returned.

INSERT TABLE1 HERE

This question, or at least one very much like it, has been a staple of opinion polls since the 1970s but we have very little idea of what makes people more or less satisfied with the performance of the government. We set out to explore the importance of perceptions of the government's record in more detail and to get some idea of how voters balanced the good and possibly bad parts of the record, and to examine assessments of the credibility of alternative governments. Hence we asked our respondents four things. First, in any given area, had things got better or worse over the last five years (the lifetime of the FF-Progressive Democrat government). We asked this question for a number of issues: those that pre-election polls had indicated were salient to voters as well as those which had been salient in the past: the economy in general, the health services, housing, transport, crime and the cost of living as well as unemployment and the levels of taxation. We then asked people whether they thought the

improvement/decline was due mainly to the policies of the government. The point here was to find out about the attribution of responsibility for success or failure. The next question asked people to say which of the two parties in government, if any, took the major responsibility: was it both parties equally, mainly FF or mainly the PDs. Finally, we asked whether any other party (and if so which one(s)) would do a better job.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

In general what we see here (table 2) is that the evaluations on economic issues are on balance positive – the cost of living is a major exception – and those on other areas either negative, or only marginally positive (housing). On the assumption that the government should gain from the good things and lose from the poor ones this is a mixed record and one which gave rise to the sort of campaign we saw in 2002 which revolved around the acceptance of the economic record and the competence of parties to solve the problems generated by the demands of a growing economy as well as those of public services in general. How well the government and opposition should depend on the attribution of blame and the credibility of alternatives as well as the importance placed on each of them. As we have seen, health and crime were major issues; transport and the cost of living were not. It is perhaps inevitable that the issues that the public sees as salient are those where performance has been below par, since otherwise the opposition and media will have less to say on the matter. It was the improvements in unemployment and change in rates of direct taxation that accounts for the fact that each of these issues was less prominent in the 2002 election than previously.

The demographic correlates of these assessments vary by issue area. The economic assessments tend to be least rosy amongst the rural, the working class, least educated, younger, female voters; but those least critical on health and housing are also rural, with men most unhappy on health and older, less educated voters most happy on housing. To some degree those groups happiest about the economy are least happy about health and housing. Older, better-educated voters are also more unhappy with transport but the record on crime is seen least positively by the older, the less educated and by female voters. On the whole the picture is one of different groups unhappy about different problems, not of the same people unhappy about everything.

In fact, if we simply summarise the evaluations by adding them up, the only correlate of overall discontent is gender, with men on average being happier and women less happy with the record.

When we compare these evaluations to the overall evaluation we showed in table 1 it appears that the three most important elements in the evaluation are health, the economy and housing. Simple

correlations, summarising the relationship between each of them and the summary evaluation are .31, .21 and .24 respectively with only two others, unemployment (closely linked to the economy) and transport significantly over zero. Allowing for the possible interrelationships between these several issues leaves the substantive picture much the same. ² It should be said that these evaluations do not in any sense explain voters summary evaluation but they at least all contribute significantly to it whereas other issues, like crime, taxation and cost of living do not, and transport and unemployment do so barely if at all.

One reason why the association between issue evaluations and assessment of the government might be low is perhaps that voters do not hold the government to be responsible for some matters, as we have said. Table 3 shows the degree to which voters attribute credit/blame to the government, and also shows how that varies in some cases according to the evaluation.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

There is considerable disparity here. A minority hold government responsible for crime and transport. At the other extreme almost all voters hold the government responsible for tax, not unfairly. Two-thirds give the government credit/blame on the economy but, and this was potentially damaging for the government, 80 percent see health as a government problem. These attributions are in many cases very similar to those of British voters in 1997 (Health et al, Table 3.11). Tax is directly a government decision (allowing for some EU constraints) but crime is not and other things are somewhat amenable to government decisions but not entirely so. Judgements vary somewhat according to evaluations. In general, this pattern is one that works in the government's favour, with higher proportions of voters giving credit on the government's 'good' issues than allocated blame on the 'bad' ones. Only on the cost of living is there more blame than credit, but then almost nobody thought the cost of living was falling anyway. Voters leaning towards the government appear to give it the benefit of the doubt where it has not delivered. This may reflect a reservoir of good will but it is worth emphasising that the tendency is not a very strong one. Housing is an interesting case because evaluations are most evenly balanced. Those with positive evaluations are 11 percentage points more likely to attribute responsibility to the government than are those with negative evaluations. There are a few very big differences, notably on crime and transport, but in each of these there are very few cases in the 'better' category (see earlier table). However, the suspicion must be that for some voters partisanship has some influence on whether they point the finger of blame at the government or wave their arms in applause.

What is interesting is that partisanship does not seem to influence evaluations in the same way. We examined the relationship between evaluations of the economy, health and housing and in no case was partisanship as measured in an earlier chapter associated with how voters saw the last five years. Partisanship is associated with attribution, particularly where the distribution of evaluations is uneven – such as on the economy. It is linked more weakly to voters' evaluations of housing and health. More generally, however, it is partisanship in conjunction with evaluation that is most strongly associated with whether a voter blames or credits the government, or gives credit or blame elsewhere. Take the case of health, on which views were divided as to evaluation and 20 percent saw as unrelated to government policies. Table 4 shows the percentages of voters attributing credit/ blame to the government according to a combination of partisanship and evaluation and according just to evaluation. While the combination of evaluation and FF partisanship is associated with very big differences in attributing responsibility to government, running from 63 percent to 100 percent, evaluation alone is associated with only a range of only 80 percent blame to 97 percent credit. Interestingly, it is FF partisans rather than those of opposition parties who appear most likely to award credit and avoid blame. The evidence of a partisan/evaluation link for non-government partisans is quite weak with no strong linear trend.

INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

When we examine the third part of our set of credit and blame questions we see neither nor FF and the PDs emerge as having the lion's share of responsibility. Most see both government parties as sharing the credit or blame as appropriate. Those who do distinguish one from the other tend to emphasise the role of FF but in the case of tax is striking that the PDs are seen as more important (table 5). This is an interesting result given the size of the PDs relative to FF. The PDs campaign sought to highlight their contribution to the government ["Look what we could do with 4, think what we could do with 8"] and these results indicate they had some success in doing so and that, in the case of tax, they have developed a particularly high profile. Significantly, it is only amongst those who see tax as declining that their profile is highest with 16 percent of those thinking tax was falling crediting the PDs and only 11 percent crediting FF.

INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

Finally, can anyone else do better? Most voters think not. Despite the fact that the opposition parties won 52 percent of the vote in our sample, only a minority think some other party could perform better.³ Table 6 shows the percentages. Analysis is limited here to those who attributed responsibility to government policies. We have also shown separate sets of percentages according to whether people's evaluations

were positive or negative in that issue area. The weak position of the opposition is apparent in the percentages in column 1 since on no issue do less than 62 percent think someone else would be better. The government looks best on economic matters but even on transport it looks as good as, if not better than, the alternatives. This is, as we might expect, even more apparent when we look at those who think things have improved although there are those who would still put more faith in an alternative. Where evaluation is negative there is perhaps more opportunity for opposition parties to convince and indeed there are quite sizable proportions here favouring the opposition but significantly, even when people are dissatisfied, in no instance do the opposition parties command a majority who see any party as a credible alternative. On housing and health near majorities favour the opposition and in both instances there are many who view the government's record negatively. But on crime, the cost of living and transport the government has a large lead.

We did ask people which party, if any, would do better. In general the distribution of responses reflected each party's overall popularity but there are some interesting deviations. Labour leads FG marginally on housing and health, the Greens are the most popular alternative on transport (16 percent of respondents with negative evaluations and who attribute responsibility to the government think the Greens would do better) and FG's lead is clearest on the economy and crime (which is also SF's best issue).

INSERT TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

Note that the differences between columns 2 and 3 are generally sharper than they were in table 3: evaluation is much more closely linked to the attractiveness of alternatives than is attribution. On health and housing, where opinion is reasonably well divided in terms of evaluation, the difference between the two columns is over 30 percent, compared with differences on attribution of only about 10 percent.

The aggregate picture

Putting all this together and extrapolating backwards to the election it is apparent that the government was in good shape. It was in credit in several areas, particularly the economic ones, and was given the credit for policies in those fields so could expect to gain an electoral reward. Where evaluations were more negative, there was more uncertainty about responsibility; furthermore, few thought anyone else would do better. Hence while there were areas in which the opposition parties might have hoped voters would take it out on the government for poor a performance, their own lack of credibility would have inhibited many voters from doing so.

As we suggested above, these sorts of issues are most likely to damage the government if evaluations are negative, the government is given the blame and the opposition is seen as better. With less than all voters falling into each category we can see that the expected negative impact on the government is generally small. For instance, health was the issue on which 50 percent of evaluations were negative and of those voters seeing a decline, 78 percent blame the government, but of those 78 percent only 47 percent see the opposition as a better alternative. So on a crude calculation health could cost the government the support of $.50 \times .78 \times .47$ percent of voters: 18 percent. However, 27 percent thought things had got better, and 90 percent of those credited the government with 87 percent of the latter thinking nobody would do better: in all $.27 \times .90 \times .87$: 21 percent. On this crude calculation the health issue, which most evaluated negatively, still gave the government a net 3 percent! Table 7 shows these calculations for each issue area. The economy, unemployment, tax and even housing are obvious net vote winners according to this set of expectations and crime, transport and the cost of living net losers but the gains outweigh the losses. The average net gain to the government across these eight issues is +8.

INSERT TABLE 7 ABOUT HERE

This represents the expected gains and losses according to the simple reward and punishment model outlined earlier and taking all reports of evaluations, attributions and credible alternatives at face value. The average figure of +8 indicates only that, across the issue areas defined and explored here, the government came out a little better than the opposition. It is worth reviewing table 2 showing evaluations. Across the eight areas the average evaluation is -19. The government deficit thus has become a surplus once we factor in blame/credit and some assessment of alternatives.

The position of the government is even better if we examine each voter's views across the range of issues. We score 1 for each set of considerations that should help the government, -1 for a negative set and 0 for the remainder. Most voters have a positive score. That is, there are more issues that they evaluate positively, credit to government policy and see no party as likely to improve on, than issues they view negatively, blame the government and see an alternative party as potentially better. 59 percent score positively and only 24 percent negatively, while 17 percent score 0, giving no advantage to either party.

Vote choice and performance assessments

The key point is of course how these calculations actually do relate to vote choice. Net evaluations do associate strongly with vote choice. However, the government required more than a positive score to get a vote – otherwise it would have won a landslide. As we saw in table 1, people who evaluated performance as ‘good’ were not particularly likely to vote for the government parties. Is it just evaluations that matter, or does attribution and opposition assessment come into play? We also assume here when averaging that all issues are equal, but some are almost certainly more salient than others. Certainly health, crime and housing, for instance, we much more likely to be issues mentioned by voters as important than transport, tax or cost of living.

INSERT TABLE 8 ABOUT HERE

However we start by looking at the net weight of assessments and its impact on the vote in table 8. We have grouped the scores since otherwise there would be too few cases in many columns. As we would expect, FF support is strongly related to the summary issue scores, the party winning almost no votes from those scoring negatively, and many votes from those scoring positively. This is not so true of the PDs, as there is little difference in PD support between those with a moderately negative score and those with a strongly positive score. Labour and FG are to a largely degree the mirror image of FF, gaining support as assessment grows more negative. SF supporters are particularly numerous in the most discontented column. The independent vote is also interesting. We might expect it to peak at zero as independents were not presented as an alternative party but they are significantly underrepresented in the most discontented column.

A problem with this analysis is that one of the factors used to explain the result is problematic. This is the credibility of an alternative. The perception that another party would do better is strongly associated with voting against the government. We would expect that this would be so particularly when evaluations point to an anti government vote but this is not the case, at least not as strongly as we would like. Those with negative assessments on health, and who blame the government and see another party as better are unlikely to vote for the government: only 13 percent do so. [n=346]. But only 19 percent of those seeing another party as better vote for the government in any case regardless of evaluation and attribution. The problem with the ‘alternative party’ part of the question is that it is much too closely linked to vote.⁴ To get a more realistic idea of the impact of the different issues on vote we will thus look at evaluation and attribution alone.

We can explore this by examining the relationship between evaluation and vote for those who think government policies played a major part in determining the outcomes that were seen as positive or negative.⁵ Table 9 shows the relationship between evaluation and vote among voters who attribute responsibility for each issue to government policies. The main point is that there is a clear relationship between evaluation and the FF vote on all dimensions although this varies in strength. On the economy the difference between the tendency of positive and negative evaluators to vote FF is 39 percentage points, on tax it is only 11. Health and housing provide the other two strong associations. Earlier we saw that these were the three issues most strongly correlated to general evaluations of the government record. Where numbers are very unevenly distributed between positive and negative evaluations it is instructive to compare the most numerous category with the sample distribution for a party. On the economy, FF's 62 percent is well above the sample 45; but on crime and transport the figure in the negative column is not far below 45. The biggest surprise here is perhaps crime, an issue with a high public salience that attracted considerable media attention and a lot of coverage during the campaign is related weakly to the vote. As numbers are small it is harder to see any similar impact of evaluations on the PD vote, although unemployment evaluations do differentiate PD voters from non-PD voters quite clearly. If we look only at constituencies where the PDs ran candidates the picture is much the same with no evidence that favourable economic or tax evaluations helped the party though some signs of benefits from falling unemployment.⁶

INSERT TABLE 9 ABOUT HERE

The opposition does not benefit evenly from non-positive evaluations. Most notably voting FG is related to evaluations of the general economy and of unemployment but related to evaluations on tax, health, housing and crime only weakly if at all. Labour and Independent voting seems to be most strongly linked to health; independents also to the economy in general and Labour to housing. Green support is very clearly linked to negative evaluations on health and housing, with those blaming the government for poor performance seven times as likely to vote Green as those who credit the government for a good one. So this suggests that health and housing might have moved votes between FF and Labour, Greens and independents, and the economic evaluations decided voters between FF and FG/independents. Other issue evaluations, given the weaker associations, did not appear to have much impact on the result.⁷

It would be wrong to see these assessments as entirely independent of one another. There is a tendency for people with negative assessments in one area to have negative assessments in other areas and vice

versa.⁸ In part this may be due underlying differences in partisanship but it may also be due to different personal experiences. Untangling this would be outside the scope of this chapter although we will try to do so in the concluding section of this book. Even so, it is evident that there are considerable differences across areas. The most important ones as regards the vote seem to be health, housing and the economy, with the latter summarising some of the other economic perceptions.

Whose economy matters?

In order to explore the nature of economic perceptions in a little more details we included a number of questions designed to tap several different dimensions of importance, all of which have been the subject of extensive research in other countries. A first dimension is a social-personal one. What is most important to voters – the wellbeing of their household or of the national economy? Most previous research has somewhat surprisingly come down in favour of the latter (Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000) This result is usually explained by evidence that many people do not attribute credit or blame to the government for many changes in their circumstances, which may be better explained by them as the result of personal effort, misfortune or changing life patterns such as retirement, children leaving home. These can lead to people being better off or worse off but are hardly attributable to government policy (Feldman 1982). The second dimension is the local-national one which is particularly interesting in the Irish context: do people reward a government for doing well on the national economy, or on their local economy, if they distinguish between the two at all (on the US see Niemi et al 1995). The last is time: are voters looking forwards or backwards: are their evaluations *retrospective* or *prospective*? The reward-punishment model assumes people are looking backwards but some argue this makes little sense except as a guide to the future. And what really matters is the future. The rational voter should worry about the next year, not the previous one.

We asked questions on the national economy past and future, the household economy past and future and on local-national differences and the results are displayed in Table 10. 67 percent voters thought things had been improving over the last 12 months although this is 15 percent fewer than thought things had improved over the last five years. Growth was slowing. The outlook for the future was much less promising with only 20 percent thinking the economy would improve over the next 12 months and 46 percent saying it would get worse. Most interviews took place in June and July as the government started to rein in public expenditure and the later the interview, the less optimistic the respondent. The outlook prior to the election was equally subdued, if significantly less fearful about the future.⁹ Given this change between pre- and post-election assessments, which are almost certainly due to the fact that the government introduced cutbacks that were not signalled in advance of the election, we should

be cautious in using this data as a guide to what respondents would have said before the election.

Household economic evaluations are much less enthusiastic about the past, but also less pessimistic about the future with more people expecting life to go on in the same way. Finally, most see their area as following national trends with almost equal numbers admitting things were better or claiming things were worse. While this sort of balance might be expected on statistical grounds, assuming local economic variations are even distributed around a national trend, it is more surprising that there are not more feeling disadvantaged and fewer feeling advantaged!

INSERT TABLE 10 ABOUT HERE

Table 11 examines the link between these perceptions and voting behaviour. The first comparison to make is between retrospective perceptions of the national economy and the household economy. Perceptions of the national economy are more closely linked to vote. For FF there is a 25 percent difference in support between national perceptions that are worse and better and for FG a 9 percent difference. The corresponding differences at household level are 7 percent and 3 percent. The Irish data are thus in accord with most other research on this topic (Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000). Broadly speaking, the relationships on national perceptions over the last year parallel those covering the previous 5 years showing a clear benefit to FF at the expense of all opposition parties and a marginal benefit for the PDs.¹⁰

INSERT TABLE 11 ABOUT HERE

With respect to the time dimension it appears that voters are influenced as much by the future than the past. For FF there is a 24 percent difference in support between prospective national perceptions that are Worse and Better and for FG a 12 percent difference. These are very similar to the results on the retrospective evaluations. The prospective view on the household economy is more strongly related to vote with FF +20 and FG -9, as against +7 and -3 on the retrospective household measure. The joint influence of retrospective and prospective evaluations of the national economy in combination are quite powerful, as we see in table 6.13. The table shows the percentage of voters who support the government parties according to their perceptions of the previous year and their predictions about next year's economic performance. We should examine the main diagonal of the table to see the combined effect of the two things. Only 28 percent of those who think things are bad and getting worse support the government, as opposed to 68 percent of those who think things are good and getting better, a difference of 40 percent. We then should look down each column or across each row

to see how one factor might be more important than the other. Is there more increase across the rows (prospective) or down the columns (retrospective). Small numbers in two of the cells make this less than straightforward but roughly speaking the impact of each looks about the same. The increase down the middle column is about the same as that across the middle row, and comparing increases from Same to Better in each direction also suggests the two have similar effects. However, the two evaluations are linked, and while the association between them is far from perfect, as we see from looking at the large number of cases off the main diagonal, the connection is quite strong. The typical voter thinks things were good, but will get worse. 43 percent of these voted for the government, just below the 48 percent across the sample. However, given the opinion poll evidence which suggested that few thought the economy would get worse before the election, it seems likely that we would not have found so many government supporters in this cell had the study been done in May.

INSERT TABLE 12 AND 13 ABOUT HERE

When it comes to the national-local perspective (table 13) there is surprisingly little association with voting behaviour. Looking across the rows from Worse to Better we see the FF vote go up +7 and FG down -9 but it is the worse/not worse distinction that is important for FF and the better/non better that is important for FG. FF did badly amongst voters who thought their areas had done badly; but did not do particularly well amongst voters who thought their area had flourished disproportionately; FG did worse amongst voters who thought their area had done well and did not pick up support amongst voters who thought their area was relatively deprived. The Labour vote is steady across all three categories, and the Greens did better in areas seen as well off relative to the rest. Independents did much better in 'deprived areas', picking up votes, perhaps with SF, that the established parties could not win. There may be some spurious effects here with parties like the Greens and PDs with a predominantly middle class vote doing better in well-off areas. This does not account for the strength of independents in 'deprived' areas, nor the sharp difference between FF and FG.

These national-local comparisons may depend on national perceptions as well as local ones. Those who think the national economy has been getting worse are more likely to see their area as worse than the nation as a whole but the difference is quite small with 31 percent of them thinking their area is deprived relative to the rest compared to 21 percent of those who think the economy is improving. When we compare the impact of national and (relative) local considerations it is the national ones that predominate and differences according to relative local perceptions are generally small once we allow for national conditions. This is shown in table 14. This analyses the degree of government support by national and national-local

perceptions. The key point is that each column tends to show increasing government support of 10-20 percent while each row shows a smaller increase of 10 percent or less, typically between Worse and the rest. ¹¹

INSERT TABLE 14 ABOUT HERE

Discussion and conclusions

The 2002 election was fought on rough terrain for the opposition parties given the unprecedented performance of the economy over the previous 5 years as unemployment fell to a previously undreamed of low rate, direct taxes were cut and inflation, though rising, still left a real increase in most people's pockets. If we accept that elections will follow broadly a pattern whereby government will suffer in bad times but flourish in good ones, the outlook for the outgoing government was good. However, even in good times, there is a tendency for government to have to pay for the 'cost of ruling' in Nannestad and Paldam's phrase (2002). The opposition could seek to exploit various downsides to the record and there was always the hope that the electorate would ignore the good things and concentrate on the bad ones. Certainly it is true that pre-election polls highlighted things like housing and the health service as election issues, not high rates of growth and low rates of unemployment. We outlined here a simple model under which voters would punish the government if they evaluated a state of affairs poorly, blamed government policies for the decline and thought someone else would do better and would reward a government where a situation had improved as a result of government policy and thought no other party could have done better. On this reckoning the government was in pretty good shape as even though many evaluations were negative, these were mitigated by the fact that blame was often not laid at the government's door and that the opposition parties did not constitute a preferable alternative. Far fewer voters considered the opposition would do better than actually voted for opposition parties. For most voters there were more positives than negatives and while all those with a positive assessment did not necessarily go on to vote for the government it is easy on this evidence to understand why the government did so well.

For a more detailed analysis of the importance of different issues we discounted the last part of our model – a preferable alternative – judging that it was too closely bound up with intended vote and concentrated on the evaluations of those who attributed responsibility for an area to government policies. Of course it is clear that the attribution of blame is also bound up with a tendency to vote for a government or opposition party for other reasons but we argued that this was a necessary part of how credit is taken and blame avoided in the political process. In particular, voters gave the government the benefit of the doubt in some areas. Whether that is because many FF

voters are strongly partisan, or whether it stems from factors specific to the 2002 election we do not know. What is clear is that on most issues evaluations are linked to vote but on some of the issues where the government might have been damaged severely by a strong link, the association was a weak one. This is so in relation to the cost of living, transport and particularly crime. Voters may well have cared about crime and certainly most perceived the struggle against rising crime as unsuccessful, but, even where they blamed the government, voters did not flock to the opposition as an alternative. The biggest effects, judged one by one, were on the economy, health and housing. These three remain as significantly affecting vote choice when we take into account the degree to which all these assessments are interrelated, although the effect of assessments of unemployment are almost certainly obscured by the impact of the economy as a whole. The improved state of the economy undoubtedly helped the government – although the positive effects for the PDs are not clear – and rising level of concerns about health and housing seems to have benefited the opposition significantly, though not, it appears, FG. FG support is linked particularly strongly to perceptions of the economy. We might surmise that consequently the general health of the economy (as perceived then) hurt FG most, particularly as that party was relatively unsuccessful and picking up support on the other salient issues.

We also examined some different types of economic evaluations, in an attempt to see whether Irish voters are, like most others, apparently motivated more than national than personal economic assessments and whether, in the words of McKuen et al, (1992) they behave more like bankers (using prospective evaluations) or peasants (using retrospective ones) although the difficulties in using the post election evaluations of economic prospects as proxy for pre-election ones makes this later question particularly hard to answer. Our best assessment must be that national evaluations are certainly more closely linked to the vote than household ones and that retrospective and prospective evaluations are each linked clearly to vote choice: Irish voters show signs of being peasants as well as bankers. Given the importance of local candidates and local orientations that emerged in an earlier chapter we would have expected to find that the relative performance of the local economy was a strong influence on the vote but that did not turn out to be the case. National perceptions were much more powerful, although there are indications that perceptions of purely local economies do matter. We saw here again some evidence of FG weakness in its failure to capitalise where the local economy was seen to be underperforming, and it seems possible that the high levels of Green support where the economy was doing well were at FGs expense. Independents did best where the local area was missing out, again perhaps taking votes that FG would have hoped to win.

The central conclusion that must follow from this analysis is that Irish voters are apparently moved by issues of competence if not by issues of position. While the party system does not lend itself to articulating major policy debates because the major parties lack strong ideological or even social identities, but its adversarial nature does allow and encourage voters to play the significant role of assessing governments on performance and the evidence here suggests that while the government parties were not seen as successful in all they did they nevertheless got the nod to continue for another few years. ‘A lot done – more to do’ in fact.

NOTES

¹ Much the same list emerged from an ICM poll for the *Sunday World* and an IMS poll for the *Sunday Independent*

² This was done using ologit regression. The pattern is also the same if controls for party ID and parental voting traditions are included.

³ We asked whether anyone else could do better. It could be that many think others could do as well and, if so, we are underestimating confidence in opposition parties.

⁴ A logistic regression of government vote on health evaluation, attribution and this question both separately and in combination demonstrated that the credible alternative was by far the most significant item.

⁵ A set of regressions including evaluation and attribution shows that in all cases the relationship between vote and evaluation is stronger when government policy is according credit/blame than when it is not, and in almost all cases there is no significant association within the latter group. Ideally we would tap attribution in a more indirect way, separating it more from evaluations to reduce any contamination from partisanship. As an alternative indicator of governmental responsibility we used a separate question, asking people whether who is in power makes much difference. This produces comparable, if less clear-cut results when combined with evaluations but this question is quite firmly associated with vote. FF voters tend to think it does matter and FG voters tend strongly to think it does not, perhaps rationalising FG’s failure to win office at an election since 1982. Moreover it is not strongly associated with attribution. The correlation between economic attribution and this question is only 0.11. Hence we preferred to stick with the attribution question.

⁶

	Economy		Health		Housing		Crime		Unemplo yment		Tax		Transport	
	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+
PDs	2	6	6	9	6	6	4	11	4	9	9	8	7	13
N	80	389	334	180	224	307	276	36	80	389	219	350	331	28

⁷ Of course any assessment of how much difference any issue could have made is a product not simply of the strength of the relationships we see in this table – the differences in percentages across pairs of evaluations, but also of the distribution of cases across each set of evaluations and the counterfactual we consider in assessing impact. So if we say: how would the outcome have been different if everyone had evaluated the economy positively, we can calculate the increase in, for instance, the FF vote that would come from reallocating all those cases where evaluation was not positive. How much this increases the notional FF vote is a function of how many extra cases this involves and how big the difference is between those who see the economy positively and those view it negatively. The difference is quite large. However since almost 4/5 voters see things positively already assuming that all do so cannot make that much difference. If the counterfactual is that everyone is not positive there would a much larger movement in the other direction. Using non-positive evaluations as the counterfactual suggests the big effects in 2002 came from the economy, with health and housing next. Unemployment and tax were also important but the rest were not important at all.

⁸ The alpha index is .56; using a PC factor analysis there is one factor with an eigen value just above 1.

⁹ A pre election poll suggested 24 percent thought things would get better, 12 percent get worse and 64 percent stay the same.

¹⁰ Note these figures cannot be compared directly with those in table 6.x because the latter are calculated only for the 66 percent who attribute responsibility to government policies.

¹¹ A logit regression puts the effect of national conditions at +16 from lowest to highest, and local-national relativities at +9 other things being equal. Both are significant at .05.

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Table 1 Record of the government

	Very good	Good	Bad/very bad	All
FF	81.6	46.8	12.2	45.4
FG	6.4	19.8	33.7	20.5
Green	1.0	4.0	8.6	4.3
Lab	3.9	8.9	18.3	9.9
PD	3.4	3.7	2.4	3.3
SF	0.9	5.6	11.0	5.9
Ind	2.8	11.3	13.9	10.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	241	1225	118	1797

Voters only

Table 2 Policy evaluations

	Worse	Same	Better	Better-worse
Economy	10	8	82	+72
Unemployment	21	10	68	+48
Tax	36	12	51	+15
Housing	41	12	47	+6
Health	50	23	27	-23
Crime	85	10	5	-80
Transport	93	4	3	-90
Cost of living	97	2	1	-96

Voters only

Table 3: Attribution of responsibility to government policies

	Attribute responsibility to government policies	Attribute responsibility to government policies Record Good	Attribute responsibility to government policies Record Bad
Tax	90	96	86
Health	80	90	78
Housing	73	81	70
Economy	66	66	70
Unemployment	66	70	62
Cost of living	65	43	65
Transport	49	92	48
Crime	46	81	44

Voters only

Table 4 Attribution, evaluation and partisanship

	Percentage attributing performance to govt policy FF partisan	Percentage attributing performance to govt policy Non govt partisan	Percentage attributing performance to govt policy All
Health much worse	63	89	80
Health worse	69	86	76
Health same	73	79	74
Health better	95	82	88
Health much better	100	*	97

Note: * Only 9 cases. Minimum elsewhere is 42. Voters only.

Table 5. Attribution of responsibility within government

	Attribute responsibility to both parties equally	Attribute particular responsibility to FF	Attribute particular responsibility to PDs
Tax	81	8	10
Health	83	14	3
Economy	83	14	3
Unemployment	88	8	4
Housing	90	8	2
Crime	91	7	2
Cost of living	93	6	1
Transport	93	6	1

Note: voters only.

Table 6. Perceptions that another party would do better

	No other party could handle issue better All	No other party could handle issue better Positive evaluations	No other party could handle issue better Negative evaluations
Economy	83	87	56
Tax	80	85	70
Unemployment	79	84	66
Housing	71	87	51
Health	67	87	53
Crime	67	81	63
Cost of living	67	*	68
Transport	62	83	61

Note: includes only those blaming government policies. * too few cases - minimum elsewhere is 54. Voters only.

Table 7. Assumed positive and negative effects on the government vote

	Positive Effects	Negative Effects	Net Effects
Economy	-3	47	+44
Unemployment	-4	40	+36
Tax	-9	42	+32
Housing	-14	33	+19
Health	-18	21	+3
Crime	-14	3	-11
Transport	-17	2	-15
Cost of living	-20	0	-20

Note: effects calculated by multiplying proportions evaluating negatively/positively, blaming/crediting the government and seeing/not seeing an alternative.

Table 8 Net issues assessment scores and the vote

Vote	-8/-4	-3/-1	0	+1/+3	+4/+8	Total
FF	4	14	36	55	73	46
FG	40	34	21	16	10	20
Green	9	7	6	3	1	4
Lab	24	19	12	8	3	11
PD	1	3	4	3	4	3
SF	11	7	5	6	4	6
Ind	1	16	17	9	6	11
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	237	240	366	603	541	1988

Note: Zero category also includes missing data cases. Scores calculated from combinations of evaluation, attribution and preferable alternatives with pro-government scoring 1, anti government scoring -1 and the rest zero.

Table 9. Issue evaluations and the vote amongst those who attribute responsibility to the government

	Economy		Health		Housing		Crime		Unemployment		Cost of living		Tax		Transport	
	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+	-	+
FF	20	59	29	63	30	59	39	52	39	56	41	55	39	50	39	55
FG	30	15	24	17	22	19	25	21	31	15	22	0	25	18	24	15
Green	2	2	7	1	7	1	4	2	1	3	5	0	4	5	5	7
Lab	20	8	17	5	17	6	13	6	7	8	11	30	9	10	13	2
PD	0	3	3	3	3	3	2	5	1	4	2	0	4	3	3	7
SF	7	5	7	4	9	4	6	6	7	5	7	0	8	4	6	3
Ind	21	9	14	6	13	8	11	6	14	8	11	15	11	9	11	11
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	130	1067	736	479	525	721	721	74	233	847	1119	7	514	840	776	50

Note: Voters only

Table 10 Economic perceptions in 2002

	Better	Same	Worse	Better minus worse
National economy- last 12 months	67	23	10	+57
National economy- next 12 months	20	34	46	-26
Household economy- last 12 months	31	44	24	+7
Household economy- next 12 months	17	55	27	-10
Local economy: last five years	22	59	19	+3

Weighted: voters only

Table 11 Dimensions of economic evaluations and the vote

	National economy- Previous 12 months		National economy- Next 12 months		Household economy- Previous 12 months		Household economy- Next 12 months	
	Worse	Better	Worse	Better	Worse	Better	Worse	Better
FF	24	49	36	60	43	50	36	56
FG	28	19	24	12	20	17	23	12
Green	7	4	5	2	4	4	2	5
Lab	14	9	12	7	12	9	15	8
PD	3	4	4	1	3	3	3	3
SF	11	5	7	7	8	5	9	7
Ind	13	10	12	10	11	11	12	9
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	170	1185	779	329	435	552	444	285

Note: those saying things have or will stay the same are excluded. Voters only

Table 12. Vote by retrospective and prospective perceptions: cell entries are % government vote and cell numbers

Last 12 months	Next 12 months		
	Worse	Same	Better
Worse	28 (115)	46 (28)	22 (18)
Same	38 (220)	51 (136)	50 (56)
Better	43 (508)	56 (397)	68 (281)

Voters only

Table 13. Vote by perceptions local-national relativities

	Local economy relative to national economy		
	Worse	Same	Better
FF	39	47	46
FG	23	22	14
Green	2	3	9
Lab	10	11	10
PD	2	3	6
SF	7	5	5
Ind	16	9	10
Total	100	100	100
N	431	1164	379

Voters only

Table 14. Government support by perceptions of national conditions and local-national relativities: cell entries are % government vote and cell numbers

National Economy	Local economy in comparison to the national		
	Worse	Same	Better
Worse	26 (62)	40 (93)	29 (24)
Same	48 (29)	39 (106)	50 (16)
Better	45 (409)	52 (965)	53 (336)

Voters only