Party identification in Ireland: an insecure anchor for a floating party system*

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The most widespread explanation of electoral stability involves the concept of party identification, or partisanship. This has its academic origins in the electoral research carried out by a team from the University of Michigan into US voting behaviour in the 1950s (Campbell et al. 1960; Miller and Shanks 1996 for a recent restatement.). Earlier studies had assumed that voters made up their mind afresh at each election on the basis of the campaign itself but discovered that most people seemed to make up their mind much earlier. Indeed, reported voting histories that were remarkably stable. If voters did decide afresh each time, they were clearly disposed in most cases to do what they did last time, and the time before. This 'predisposition' was described as party identification, a psychological attachment to a party which serves not only to define an individual's relationship to political society, but also provides an informational filter which helps the individual to deal with the constant stream of information about politics. Like other identities, party identification is something acquired quite early in life and, while it may not be set in stone, it would normally be expected to become more stable as the voter gets older. The roots of identity lie in the family and the network of social relations which define the young adult experience so we would expect to see identification being passed on from one generation to another, providing a stable anchor to electoral behaviour over a long period of time.

This theory has been the basis of intensive research in the US. (A recent set of review articles was published in *Political Behavior* 24 (2,3) 2002.) A major criticism has been that party identification may be not the 'unmoved mover' proposed by the Michigan School. Fiorina (1981) argued predispositions existed but consisted of a running tally of evaluations of parties built up over a long period. Hence predispositions derived from policy outcomes and governmental performance and could change even in adulthood. Even so, evaluations themselves are filtered via partisanship, a point argued consistently by Warren Miller (e.g. Miller 1976) and reaffirmed most recently by Bartels (2002).

Exported to Europe, this explanation of stability underwent some adaptation with more emphasis being placed on the way in which political divisions were underpinned by clear social structures, most often those of religion and class (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). In many cases political identities were inculcated and reinforced by a dense network of social relationships. Yet in many essentials, the explanation remained

unchanged (but see Richardson 1991). Voters had a stable predisposition to vote in a particular way. This predisposition was learned and, once acquired, served to reinforce itself by screening out information that might weaken it.

The predisposition of an identifier to vote for a particular party should manifest itself as a tendency, not a certainty. Under the circumstances of a particular election voters may vote for another party's candidate but the expectation would be that this is a temporary deviation and that at subsequent elections the voter's behaviour will, more often than not, be consistent with his or her identification. This separation of vote and identity allows for the short-term change and long-term stability typically seen in aggregate election results to have its roots at the level of the individual voter.

The idea that people have strong predispositions for vote for particular parties should not sound unfamiliar to most observers of Irish elections The view that the civil war provided as its legacy a set of strong party attachments on behalf of a large section of the population, attachments that were passed down through the generations, is commonplace. The question of whether someone 'is' Fianna Fail (FF) or Fine Gael (FG), or whether their family was FF or FG, makes sense in Ireland, although placing one's family might be easier than placing oneself nowadays as there is a perception that such attachments are less widespread today than they once were. The nature of such attachment has been little explored in academic analyses of Irish electoral behaviour, since before 2002 there was no proper election study. While there is a substantial literature on Irish electoral behaviour, this has depended for the most part on commercial opinion polls, and comparative surveys like *Eurobarometre* that have rarely coincided with actual elections.

Using data from the first Irish election study, this paper addresses what is a central question for analysis of the behaviour of the Irish electorate: what is the value of party identification theory in the Irish context.[1] This is not simply an important question for those interested in Ireland but has a wider relevance for students of electoral behaviour. The concept of party identification has perhaps a special value in the US as the social structural foundations of parties have generally been seen to be weak, and the multilevel character of the electoral decision, as well as the existence of primaries, provide a context in which party can provide a particularly useful cue for voters and

in which voter registration itself gives a formal basis for the concept of party identification. Irish party competition appears to lack the sort of ideological or sociological underlining typical of most other European countries (Whyte, 1974 is the classic; see also Marsh 1992 and most recently Garry et al 2003). When we add to this the use of a preferential vote electoral system that separates candidate from party, at least in the larger parties, it means that the Irish context resembles that in the US in some significant respects. If party identification proved to be a useful concept anywhere in Europe, Ireland would seem to be a prime candidate.

Carty (1983) argued that party identification was very strong in Ireland and that, in the absence of social structural underpinning for the parties and ideological differences between them, party identification provides the only plausible account of the stability of Irish party support. Carty was relying on data from the 1960s, and while the argument still holds true in principle today, it remains to be seen how strong the evidence is to support it now. Marsh, writing in the 1980s suggested there were strong grounds for thinking the electorate was becoming de-aligned (1985: especially 193-97) and there has been further evidence of such de-alignment as we will see below (Mair 1987; Schmitt and Holmberg1995; Sinnott 1999; Dalton 2000; Mair and Marsh, 2004). Hence while party identification may once have provided an anchor, that anchor may be much less secure today.

In this article we will examine how strong and widespread party identification in Ireland is today. We will then explore how identification relates to the vote: can it be separated from the vote empirically as well as conceptually? We then look at how exclusive are the terms in which identifiers see the party world: is it in black and white terms or are there shades of grey? Finally we will look at the roots of party attachment, and voting behaviour in the family to assess the degree to which partisanship can be said to be 'inherited'.

MEASURING PARTY IDENTIFICATION

Any measure of party identification should do several things. First, it should tap some kind of psychological attachment rather than behaviour. Second, it should not force, or allow, either almost all voters, or almost no voters to claim an identity. Thirdly, it

should provide some indication of how strong is each respondent's identification. And finally, the instrument should permit some comparison with the situation in other countries and at other times in Ireland if that is possible. The classic measure of party identification was a set of questions: "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as PARTY A, PARTY B or what? [If so] Would you call yourself a strong [supporter of PARTY], or not so strong?" [If not] Do you think of yourself as closer to the PARTYA or PARTY B?" This wording is not easily adapted to a multiparty system. Moreover, this wording has been criticised for leading respondents to provide an identity, and to provide only one identity. In theory at least, voters could have multiple identities (van der Eijk and Niemoller 1983). This wording has been used in Ireland but on only a few occasions, between 1976 and 1982 (Marsh 1985: p. 194). The measure employed here is more appropriate to Ireland, is also employed by the first two waves of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) project now in progress, and is comparable in many respects to the question asked by the Eurobarometer between 1978 and 1994.

Like the traditional question it has several parts:

- Do you think of yourself as close to any political party?
- [If so] Which one (s)?
- [If so] How close? Very close, somewhat close, not very close
- [If not] Do you think of yourself as closer to one party than the others?
- [If so] Which one?

This overcomes some of the criticisms of the classic wording and its variants although the removal of the 'generally speaking' preamble might be expected to lead to responses more closely linked to current vote. While use of the term 'close' has also been criticised for confusing identity with affect (Katz 1979) the time series already available for this question outweighs such considerations. The responses can be seen in Table 1. Attachment in Ireland is far from universal but over 50 per cent of the electorate have some degree of party attachment as measured in this way. When we look at the measure of the strength of this attachment it is evident that half of these are very weak, feeling only closer to their party than any other. Most of those who feel 'close' describe themselves as 'somewhat close'. Almost nobody who claims to be

‘close’ admits that they are ‘not very close’, perhaps unsurprisingly, as it might be considered something of a contradiction. In view of the small numbers reporting that they are ‘not very close’ to a party, in the analysis that follows these will be combined with the ‘leaners’, identified in the follow-up question as inclining to a party.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

A comparison can be made with other countries using the data gathered by the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems project (CSES). This is done in figure 1. For all countries we have combined those who say they are ‘close’ to a party with those who are ‘closer’ to one party than another. The range is considerable, and while attachment is perhaps surprisingly high in some countries such as Russia, considering how new and unstable are their party systems, the extreme position of Ireland – at the bottom of the party attachment league – is striking.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

On the basis of these figures party identification in Ireland can make a much weaker contribution to political stability now than it might elsewhere. Even if everyone with some degree of attachment voted in accordance with it, the other half of the electorate could still be responsible for huge changes was it so minded. These unattached votes may be, and probably often are, very stable in their behaviour but on this evidence we cannot ascribe that stability to anything like party identification.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The relative weakness of attachment in Ireland is almost certainly not of long standing. Table 2 shows the distribution of responses since 1978 to a Eurobarometer item that is essentially the first part of the question indicated above. As has been pointed out before (Sinnott 1995; Mair and Marsh 2004) attachment declined in the 1980s, particularly between 1981 and 1984, a period that saw three elections, and between 1990 and 1991. This decline is most marked in the categories reflecting weaker attachment, with 1999 and 2002 showing a very show drop in the weakest category.[2] The sample on which the figure for 1999 is based was both much smaller

and collected in a different way (a telephone poll), but the data from 2002 suggests that the further decline indicated by that figure has continued as almost three quarters of respondents now do not feel close to a party.

PARTY IDENTIFICATION AND THE VOTE

For those with some identification with a party, how does this differ from vote intention? One of the criticisms of the concept as applied in Europe has been that it differs insufficiently from the vote, and is little more than another measure of the same thing. This is part of a much more general criticism which sees measured identification as much less stable than its theoretical counterpart (Butler and Stokes, 1969; Thomassen 1976). We will return to this later but initially we will examine the relationship between identity and the vote. For a start, how consistently do respondents give a first preference vote to 'their' party? The answer is that most of those with a party attachment do vote for their party but that there is a distinction between vote and attachment. In fact only 67 per cent of those who declare a partisan attachment vote in accord with it: 80 per cent of those 'very close' 73 per cent of those 'somewhat close' and 59 per cent of the 'leaners' do so.[3] Those who do not follow their partisanship are divided between those who vote for someone else and those who don't vote at all, with both defection and abstention rising as the strength of attachment drops. This link between partisanship and the vote is comparable with that elsewhere, although in the US in particular the strong partisans, those 'very close', are more likely to report a consistent vote (see Blais et al 2001).

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Irish voters may indicate a preference for any number of the candidates standing in a constituency, and parties running several candidates will encourage supporters to give a high preference to all of them. When this is done it increases a party's chance of using all its support to wins seats; when it is not, the result may be suboptimal for the party. Are partisans of a party more likely to give all of their highest preferences to 'their' party's candidates? This is a concept of voting consistency not generally applicable as few countries give comparable power to their voters. However, in the US, where voters chose several levels of government simultaneously, and in mixed

member electoral systems like that of Germany there is the parallel of straight- and split ticket voting (e.g. Beck et al 1992; Gschwend et al 2003).[4] The incidence of straight ticket voting declines elsewhere with the strength of party attachment although characteristics of the candidates themselves and their campaigns are also important (Roscoe 2003). We would certainly expect partisans to favour all of their party's candidates over those of other parties. Table 4 shows that Irish voters are more likely to do this when their attachment is stronger, and least likely when they have no attachment at all.[5] While 74 percent of those with a strong attachment vote first for all candidates of their party, and 57 percent of those with a moderate attachment do so, this declines to 42 percent of 'leaners' and a mere 26 percent of other voters. [6] (In the case of non-partisans this involves voting a straight ticket for any party's candidates if that party fields more than one.) While there is little sign that the strength of partisanship makes much difference to defection rates, the weaker partisans are much less likely to show what Gallagher has called 'solidarity' (1986) by following a party line. 'Solidarity' as measured by transfer patterns has certainly declined over the last twenty years or so (see Gallagher 2003) and this trend ties in well to the decline in aggregate party attachment. Parties may well record as many first preference votes, but can no longer expect first preference voters to continue giving them second, third and fourth preferences. [7] The importance of partisanship for straight ticket voting can be emphasised by looking at the proportion of straight-ticket voters who are partisans. While partisans account for only 46 percent of the voters (as defined in table 4, but excluding those who do not vote), they account for 69 percent of all straight ticket voters.

INSERT TABLE 4

A final vote-attachment link can be observed in the reported vote shifts between 1997 and 2002. Does consistent voting across these two elections increase with the strength of partisanship? Table 5 provides the answer: it does. The big contrast here is between the leaners and the rest, with a majority of the former having switched parties or abstained in one of the two elections. There is no real difference between the behaviour of those who feel very close and those who feel only somewhat close: in each case about two-thirds of them were loyal to their party on both occasions.

INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

The key point that these several analyses reinforce is that the measure of party attachment behaves broadly as it should. It is close to the vote, but not identical, and the link with the vote, whether measured by first preferences, lower preferences or voting history, grows weaker as the strength of the attachment wanes. As with straight ticket voting, partisans account for most stable voters. Sixty-seven percent of all stable voters have a partisanship, compared with only 44 percent of those with an unstable voting record. Even so, this means that over a third (38 percent) of all voters who did not see themselves as having any form of partisan attachment nevertheless showed a stable voting pattern. If we look only at those who voted in 2002, it is still the case that one-third of those who voted just as they did in 1997 reported no attachment. This sort of recall data is prone to exaggerate stability but there seems to be no good reason why it should do so more for partisans than non-partisans – especially as partisanship was measured after items about voting in 1997 and 2002 in the questionnaire.

This analysis in tables 3, 4 and 5 indicates three things. First, that partisanship and vote are not synonymous. Second that, as would be expected, partisans have a more party-centred pattern of vote choice and partisans show more stability over time than non-partisans. Third, that while partisanship can thus be seen as contributing to party voting and stability, it is neither a sufficient condition for it, nor a necessary one. Partisanship contributes to stability, but stability appears to exist to some degree in its absence. The record of the government rather than any standing predisposition could of course explain the implications drawn from the stability of voting over time in table 5 but it may also be the case that some predispositions are not picked up by our attachment measure. We will return to this point in a later section.

INSERT TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

We now turn from examining the link between attachment and vote to exploring the extent of attachment to different parties. Which parties are best served by partisans? There are two points here: what is the party preference of partisans, and how strong is this partisanship. Table 6 shows the distribution across the parties by strength of

partisanship. A majority are FF, with FG also having a reasonable share, although underrepresented amongst leaners. This might be expected to provide the major party with a head start in any election, once it can mobilise that core support. The larger parties also have an advantage in having a higher proportion of partisans who are stronger in their attachment than the smaller parties, although Sinn Féin (SF) outdoes both of them in this respect. Labour, the Greens and, in particular, the Progressive Democrats (PDs) are well behind. The strength of attachment to SF by that party's partisans is remarkable. Like the PDs and the Greens it has been contesting elections only over the last two decades, but its profile in Northern Ireland and historical roots in the Republic give it a status that is certainly not that of most new parties.

We have already seen that partisans tend to vote with their parties. Table 7 shows the detailed voting preferences of partisans of each party. There is not much to choose between FF, FG, Labour and SF partisans in their tendency to vote for their parties, but Greens and PDs are much more likely to defect. Of course these two parties, and particularly the PDs, ran candidates in fewer constituencies than the other parties but if we confine the analysis of the smaller parties to those constituencies where each ran at least one candidate, then we see that the tendency of partisans of Greens and PDs to vote for their party rises only a little, to 55 per cent in the case of the Greens, to 52 per cent in the case of the PDs and to 70 per cent in the case of SF. The weaker levels of consistency that is shown by partisans of the PDs and Greens is largely due to the weaker partisanship in those parties.

INSERT TABLE 7 ABOUT HERE

Partisans and other parties

In a critique that questioned the capacity of party identification to offer us much of a guide to the future, Crewe pointed out that the concept might conflate some very different types of partisans (Crewe, 1976). The classic partisan would have a very black and white view of the political world in which their own party was good and the others were bad. Weaker partisans would like their own party a little less, and the other party a little more. This pattern would be mirrored in the views of partisans of

the other party. Crewe, however, suggested some might be partisan because they felt strongly about the alternative and not because they liked their own party very much. He suggested the term 'negative partisans' for those who followed this pattern, and advanced several variations on the same theme. The significance of this is that, particularly in a multiparty system, changes in partisanship could easily come about because a third party also offered a home for those people. The key point is whether partisanship indicates loyalty or convenience. If the former, it should be more durable. Of course in a multiparty system, the black and white model also seems more problematic. Are *all* other parties viewed in equally unfavourable terms? Van der Eijk and Niemoller (1983), writing about the Netherlands, suggested the answer to this was no, a conclusion also advanced about the US by Weisberg (1980). Weisberg also pointed out that the degree of warmth between some parties undermined the notion of identification because many voters have warm feelings about more than one.

We found very few Irish voters feel close to more than one party. While 25 per cent of respondents provided the name of a party to which they felt close, only 2 per cent felt close to more than one, and only 0.2 per cent close to more than two. However, this is not to say that partisanship is black and white in all cases. It is still worth examining the views of partisans about the other parties. Do they have black and white views? Are there significant numbers who are *against* one party rather than *for* another? The argument has certainly been made that FG has gathered significant support because it is *not* FF. Members of the FG party themselves report a strong motive for joining the party was a desire to fight FF (Gallagher and Marsh 2003) and if that is true of members so also it may be true of mere partisans. If such partisanship is widespread it implies the potential exists for even greater instability in future as change can come about from a much wider variety of sources, not simply because of what one party does but because of what any of the parties might do. It is also important to know how close partisans (and voters) of each party are to one another. Even if they like only one party and dislike all the others the degree to which they like and dislike may vary, and this may make people more or less likely to change parties in response to short-term influences.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

We will start by examining the party system as if it comprised just FF and FG. (Indeed, in partisan terms these two parties still attract the support of three out of every four partisans.) In figure 2 voters are separated according to their degree of attachment to FG or FF, if any. This gives us 9 groups, ranging from strong FG attachment, through moderate FG attachment, weak attachment, no attachment but voted FG, and so on up to strong FF attachment. The middle point comprises those with no attachment towards either party who also did not vote for either party. For each group four values are displayed: the evaluation of FG, the evaluation of FF, the evaluation of the next best party and the average evaluation of all other parties excluding FF and FG. Evaluations were made using a thermometer scale where 50 is the neutral point, above that is increasingly warm and below that increasingly cold. The figure shows that FF and FG partisans each like their own party and do not like the other. This is particularly true of FF partisans, even FF voters, who almost uniformly have a poor view of FG.[8] In general the typical evaluation of other parties follows the same pattern. Thus, FF supporters see FG as a typical 'other' party, and FG supporters have the same view of FF. However, in the case of both sets of supporters there is a range of views about other parties and each set does see at least one other party in at least lukewarm terms. All this goes to suggest that, at least as far as FF and FG supporters are concerned, support is not quite black and white. In general supporters, and partisan supporters in particular, like their own party and do not like the main alternative but each group does seem to hold at least one other party in some regard. This is generally no more true of those who simply vote FF or FG than those who claim a stronger attachment.

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

A more general evaluation of their own and each of the other parties by those with an attachment to each party is shown in figure 3. This simply gives the average thermometer rating for each party for those attached to FF, PDs, FG and so on. This confirms for a wider set of parties the more detailed pattern we described above: partisans like their own party and tend to dislike most, and in some cases all, other parties. We also see that not all other parties are disliked. SF partisans have some warmth for FF, and PD partisans also like FF, their coalition partners; Greens and Labour also have some mutual regard but FF and FG display no warmth towards any

party even if FF partisans are pretty neutral about the PDs. Surprisingly, perhaps, in view of their tradition of alliance, FG and Labour do not show the same degree of mutual warmth but this could be a function of the absence of any alliance in the 2002 campaign. This aggregate picture does not summarise perfectly the individual level details as the average partisan has warm feelings (i.e. a score above 50) towards 2.4 parties and for the average partisan outside FF and FG the average is 2.6 parties. The fact that different people within the same party like a different group of parties makes the aggregate pattern more black and white than is true of most individuals. While the overall structure might not be very well defined it is evident that partisans do not see the party system in black and white terms. There are several shades of grey with respect to other parties but they do tend to have very warm feelings towards their own party. Overall, partisanship seems to be positive rather than negative.

PARTISANSHIP AND THE FAMILY

Party identification theory identifies the intergenerational transmission of partisanship as key to the stability of party systems. This may be supplemented, or even replaced, by strong social networks. The absence of strong links between social institutions and political parties in Ireland, in contrast to much of Europe, suggests that the family has a significant a role in socialisation and anecdotal evidence, as well as scattered survey evidence, would certainly support an argument that the family has been a strong influence (Carty1983, Chapter 4; Sinnott 1995: 148-9; Gallagher and Marsh 2002: Chapter 4) Respondents were asked about the voting behaviour of their parents when the respondent was growing up. While about a third did not know,[9] or reported that their parents did not vote, a majority indicated their parents usually voted for FF or FG with small numbers mentioning other parties, some of them long extinct. Remarkably few opted for the 'different parties' option (see Table 8).

Knowledge of parental voting habits is not a requirement for the transmission of predispositions to support a party. Cues given by parents may be more subtle and absorbed almost unconsciously in some cases but it would be surprising if transmission was widespread in the absence of any recall. The evidence here indicates that there is a firm basis for transmission in the fact that the majority can recall parental vote. Even amongst our youngest respondents, those born after 1981,

64% can report parental habits of voting. This is comparable to the 76% of secondary school students who knew parental habits in the early 1970s: (see Carty 1983: 81, n47).

INSERT TABLE 8 ABOUT HERE

If recall of parental voting habits is the first step towards transmission of partisanship we still need to see how far partisanship then follows any parental lead. When we compare parental voting habits with each respondent's partisanship we see clear evidence of transmission. While there are many respondents with no attachment, the strength and direction of attachment tends to follow parental voting. Table 9 shows the respondent's partisanship by the typical vote of the mother and father. Fifty two per cent of those with a FF mother and father have a FF partisanship, a figure that falls to 36 per cent if a mother is not FF, 30 per cent if a father is not FF and only 16 per cent if neither parent is FF. A uniformly FF family is thus more than three times as likely as a non-FF family to produce a FF partisan. This ratio is even greater for Labour and even more so for FG where a uniformly FG family is nine times as likely as a non-FG family to produce a FG partisan. Overall, 71 per cent of FF partisans report at least one parent with a FF voting habit. The pattern is broadly similar for FG, where 68 percent of all partisans can point to a parent who voted FG. For Labour, partisanship is much more common where <u>either</u> parent typically voted Labour but only 27 percent of Labour partisans appear to come from a Labour voting family. The roots of their partisanship would appear to lie elsewhere.

INSERT TABLES 9 AND 10 ABOUT HERE

Not surprisingly, family loyalties are also evident in the respondent's voting behaviour (see table 10). The patterns here are similar to those for partisanship in some respects. People are much more likely to vote for a particular party if both parents did so and, to a lesser degree, if even one parent did so, either mother or father. To facilitate comparison with table 9 we have included all respondents. It is evident that transmission rates in most groups are similar for partisanship and for vote but the incidence of voting for FF amongst respondents from non-FF families is much higher than the incidence of partisanship. Hence the ratio of FF voters from uniformly

FF families to the incidence of FF voters from non-FF families is only about two to one; and the corresponding ratio is only about four to one amongst those from FG and Labour families. Parental tradition thus has a weaker impact on vote choice than it does on partisanship. Only sixty three percent of FF voters could recall a FF parent, only 48 percent of FG voters recalled a FG parent and only 18 percent of Labour voters could recall a Labour voting parent. Thus while parental loyalties translate quite well into the voting patterns of offspring, it is only a bare majority of the voters for one of these three well-established parties who may have 'inherited' their party, and, bearing in mind that only three-quarters of all voters supported one of the three, this means a minority of voters overall vote as their parents did.

The figures in table 10 can be contrasted with the results of a 1969 study reported by Carty (1983) which found 78 per cent of those whose father (the only parent for which data was available) was FF voting for FF, and correspondingly 65 per cent voting FG and 53 per cent Labour.[10] These are much higher than the 2002 figures that are 61 per cent, 48 per cent and 25 per cent. Sinnott, using the 1990 European Values Survey, reported figures of 68 per cent, 53 per cent and 30 per cent respectively for FF, FG and Labour transmission, somewhat closer to 2002 rates (1995: 149). Just as identification has declined, so has intergenerational transmission of the vote although there has been little decline over the past decade.

This evidence on the political affiliations of the family is consistent with the view that partisanship is generally rooted in childhood socialisation and therefore both separate from, and antecedent to, current vote. The argument that parents inculcate in their children a predisposition to vote for a particular party is certainly consistent with this evidence, even if it is clear that this does not seem to be the case for a significant number of voters. It makes sense to see this effect as one that engenders partisanship in the child, but also may create a predisposition that does not show up in our partisanship questions. It is the case, for instance, that children of a FF father tend to vote FF even where they are not partisans, and the same is true of children of FG parents. It could be that this is simply due to a shared outlook and set of interests by parents and children; it could be that a family tradition of support for a party is not tapped by the partisanship question used here.

We have explored the relative impact of family voting and partisanship on the vote in table 11. This makes use of a stacked data set, with a row for each party for each respondent, containing three additional variables: whether the respondent voted for the party or another one, whether the respondent had a parent who voted typically for that party or not, and whether the respondent has a partisan attachment to that party or not. This allows for multiple party attachments. We can use this to explore the separate impact on the vote of these two simple variables. In contrast to tables 9 and 10 this analysis excludes non-voters and those whose vote choice is unknown. Cell entries show the percentage of cases in each cell where the respondent voted for that party as opposed to voting for a different one. (Note that the Ns here are seven times as large as the number of respondents, as we have stacked the data matrix by seven parties, including independents/others.) It can be seen that where attachment and family traditions are in accord on the main diagonal of the table, 81 percent vote for the party when they are positive and only 6 percent when they are negative: i.e. neither attachment nor family tradition. When only one positive factor is present the influence of attachment on vote is much stronger than family tradition: 73 percent as against 28 percent. What this means is that both tradition and partisanship exercise separate influences. Partisanship seems the stronger direct influence but, as we have already seen, tradition may be seen in large part to account for partisanship, at least in the largest parties.

These figures are not unvarying across parties, a feature we have already seen in previous tables. For FF, when parental traditions and partisanship coincide positively, 82 percent vote FF as opposed to only 22 percent when both are negative. Corresponding figures for FG and Labour are 79 percent and 10 percent, and 70 percent and 6 percent. (The numbers are too small to permit separate analyses of the other parties.) While each party had much the same success in 2002 in translating favourable predispositions into votes, FF – the clear winner in the election –clearly did much better at translating non-favourable predispositions into votes than the other two parties were able to do.

It remains to be seen how far such patterns persist across elections but generally these results are consistent with the argument that family voting tradition and partisanship are linked – most plausibly, the former gives rise to the latter – but also that vote

tradition has a significant impact even when not channelled through partisanship. In other words, voting – and stable voting – may come not simply from partisanship as measured by our party attachment questions, but also via a family tradition of support for a party that is not picked up by those questions. It seems unlikely that this is simply a problem with the question although evidence suggests that in the US more respond to the classic party identification measure than to this one (Blais et al 2001). It may also be due to the changing political climate in Ireland as party competition has intensified and politicians have been subject to much more intense public scrutiny that in the past. These days, perhaps, some voters do not admit to feeling close to a party, even if they always tend to vote for it.

CONCLUSION

In many respects the concept of party identification makes sense in the Irish context. We see most identifiers belonging to the long established parties, particularly FF, the most stable of them, and identification appears to be separate from the vote. Partisans are more likely to vote in a particular way, but are not certain to do so; and voting with the identified party declines with the strength of partisanship. Straight ticket voting and consistent voting 1997-2002 also declines with the strength of partisanship. We also see the roots of partisanship in the family, as we would expect. Most partisans have at least one parent who usually supported their party. It is hard to disentangle the separate impact of familial support and current partisanship on the vote although each has a sizeable effect taken alone, as we have seen. Yet, just as a large proportion of voters report no partisanship, so also does a sizeable proportion report not knowing whether parents usually supported a particular party. While family socialisation obviously plays a significant part in current partisanship and voting habits, there are many voters whose political preferences cannot be accounted for in this way.

Moving beyond partisanship as party attachment to look at how voters view the different parties indicates that partisans in general have a positive basis for their attachment. They like their own party a lot and do not like other parties, or certainly like them a lot less than they do their own. There is little evidence of attachment being negative, stemming from a dislike of alternatives rather than the attraction of a

particular party and this suggests partisanship is more likely to provide a stable support base for those parties who have many partisans. However, partisans are not exclusive in their affections and attachment is quite consistent with warm feelings towards more than one party. This may reflect some ideological affinity (SF and FF, and Labour and Greens perhaps) as well as current alliances (PDs and FFs).

On the evidence of the party attachment question the Irish electorate is now significantly de-aligned. A majority of voters appear to be open to persuasion according to the balance of short-term forces. If these were to be neutral, FF would win most elections since that party has a disproportionately large share of partisans, and we would see few independents elected to the Dáil. Beyond that, nothing much would change. In fact, FF did very well amongst partisans and non-partisans in 2002. Although in relative terms short-term influences seemed to favour Independents and work against FF, in absolute terms FF won a large plurality of the vote amongst both groups but since we have no point of comparison it is not possible to say that FF, or any other party, did 'well' or 'poorly' this time amongst the non partisans. What we would have expected is that FF, as the party winning the election, and growing its vote over 1997 and 1992, did better amongst its own partisans than did FG, but as we have seen the differences here are relatively small.

While the concept of attachment is therefore helpful in examining voting patterns, this exploration of party identification in Ireland cannot provide a baseline against which we can judge the 2002 election. By examining partisanship we might hope to provide an indication of what an election would look like if all the short-term factors were to be neutral in their effects – providing what Stokes called a 'normal' election (Stokes, 1966). This is not really possible. This is firstly because it appears that a substantial portion of the electorate do not have a standing decision to vote for any particular party, and secondly, because we have insufficient information about what 'normally' happens in Irish elections. At least half of the electorate does have a bias towards one party but only one out of every two electors have anything more than a slight inclination towards that party. If we are looking for stronger predispositions we are talking about only a quarter of electors. It is apparent that this situation was different in the past. Even 25 years ago we might have seen the great majority of voters with a bias, and half with a strong bias, but no longer. The anchor is now loose. Short-term

factors thus have an increasing opportunity to make a big impact on Irish elections.

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Table 1 Party att achment in Ireland in 2002

	%
Close	26.1
Very close	8.4
Somewhat close	13.9
Not very close	2.0
DK	1.8
Closer to one party than the others	25.5
Not close at all	48.4
Total	100
N	2663

Source: Irish Election Study 2002.

Table 2 The decline of party attachment in Ireland since 1978

	Degree of party attachment					
	Very close	Fairly close	Merely a sympathiser	None	Total	N
	%	%	%	%	%	
Year						
1978	13.7	28.7	22.1	35.5	100	876
1979	9.6	26.3	26.6	37.5	100	1761
1980	9.0	26.4	25.9	38.6	100	885
1981	8.7	23.4	28.3	39.7	100	1640
1982	8.0	21.4	24.2	46.4	100	1886
1983	7.5	22.3	23.8	46.4	100	1818
1984	5.7	19.5	22.3	52.6	100	1832
1985	7.8	18.9	21.0	52.3	100	1795
1986	4.8	17.6	20.4	57.2	100	1791
1987	7.7	19.1	17.9	55.3	100	1757
1988	6.1	19.0	20.1	54.7	100	1792
1989	6.0	16.4	18.8	58.8	100	3480
1990	8.0	19.3	13.1	59.6	100	1815
1991	8.0	15.3	11.9	64.8	100	1800
1992	7.2	17.1	12.0	63.7	100	1814
1993	6.3	14.6	15.5	63.6	100	1803
1994	5.7	18.2	15.5	60.7	100	2774
1999	10.7	13.2	5.2	70.8	100	503
2002	8.6	14.2	2.0	75.2	100	2612

Sources: Eurobarometers 1978-94; European Election Study 1999; and Irish Election Study 2002. One 1978 and one 1981 Eurobarometer excluded due to very different question wording.
Note: 2002 response categories are ‘Very close’, ‘Somewhat close’ and ‘Not very close’. Those not knowing how close they are have been are excluded.

Table 3 Consistency of vote and party attachment by strength of attachment

	Close	Somewhat close	Leaners	All attached
	%	%	%	%
Voted in accordance with party attachment	80	73	59	67
Voted against party attachment	11	13	23	17
Did not vote	8	11	16	13
DK	1	3	3	3
Total	100	100	100	100
N	224	371	728	1374

Source: Irish election study 2002. All attached includes those who did not say how close they were: see table 1.

Table 4 Pattern of voting by strength of party identification.

	Very close	Somewhat close	Leaners	None
	%	%	%	%
Straight ticket	74	57	42	34
Split ticket	18	32	42	66
Defection	9	11	16	na
Total	100	100	100	100
N	155	242	389	546

Source: Irish election study 2002.
Notes: Cases where partisans had only one candidate of their party to vote for are excluded as are those cases where a simulated ballot was not filled in. Amongst those with some attachment, all straight and split ticket voters voted first for 'their' party. Since the concept of 'defection' is inappropriate for those with no party attachment that cell is empty.

Table 5 Voting record 1997-2002 by strength of attachment.

	Very Close	Somewhat close	Leaners
	%	%	%
Loyal to party attachment both times	68	65	45
Against 2002 party attachment at least once	15	21	32
Abstained at least once	17	14	23
Total	100	100	100
N	211	340	588

Source: Irish election study 2002. Note: those ineligible to vote in 1997 are excluded.

Table 6 Party of those with a party attachment, by strength of attachment

	Very Close	Somewhat close	Leaners	Total
	%	%	%	%
FF	55.7	55.3	57.4	56.5
FG	21.0	21.5	16.9	18.9
Greens	4.0	3.6	6.9	5.5
Labour	6.9	7.5	9.5	8.5
PDs	0.7	3.0	3.9	3.1
SF	11.8	8.1	3.5	6.2
Independent/ Others	0	1.2	2.0	1.5
Total	100	100	100	100
N	217	368	725	1310

Source: Irish election study 2002.

Table 7 First preference vote by party attachment

Vote	FF	FG	Greens	Labour	PD	SF	Other	None
FF	72.5	2.6	2.7	3.9	14,3	4.2	11.8	30.0
FG	4.5	69.3	7.3	4.8	13.0	3.3	5.9	15.1
Greens	1.0	0.8	52.1	0	4.7	0	0	2.9
Labour	1.4	5.6	4.3	70.1	4.4	1.4	0	8.7
PDs	1.5	2.5	0	0	32.5	0	0	2.6
SF	1.5	0.3	5.3	0.7	4.1	68.3	0	4.0
Independent/ Other	4.4	5.2	11.3	8.2	8.9	5.1	75.0	10.6
Did not vote	13.1	13.4	17.7	11.7	18.3	17.8	11.0	26.1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	748	251	71	110	40	79	19	1,212

Source: Irish election study 2002.

Table 8 Father's and mother's vote when respondent was growing up

	Father %	Mother %
FF	38.4	38.3
FG	16.1	16.8
Labour	6.0	4.4
PDs	0.2	0.1
SF	1.5	0.7
Others	1.3	1.3
Voted for different parties	2.6	3.1
Don't Know / no response	31.9	33.1
Did not vote	2.1	2.2
Total	100	100
N	2663	2663

Source: Irish election study 2002.

Table 9 Family transmission of partisanship

Party attachment	Mother and father voted for party	Father only voted for party	Mother only voted for party	Neither parent voted for party
% FF partisans	52 (N=820)	36 (N=201)	30 (N=201)	15 (N=1440)
% FG partisans	38 (N=323)	22 (N=105)	24 (N=134)	4 (N=2010)
% Labour partisans	18 (N=84)	15 (N=72)	23 (N=32)	4 (N=2,475)

Source; Irish election study 2002.
Note: Entries indicate percentage of cell respondents are FF, FG or Labour partisans. Cell totals in brackets.

Table 10 Family transmission of vote choice

Vote	Mother and father voted for party	Father only voted for party	Mother only voted for party	Neither parent voted for party
% FF voters	54 (N=820)	37 (N=201)	32 (N=201)	24 (N=1440)
% FG voters	42 (N=323)	29 (N=105)	25 (N=134)	10 (N=2010)
% Labour voters	26 (N=84)	14 (N=72)	18 (N=32)	7 (N=2,475)

Source: Irish election study 2002.
Note: Entries indicate percentage of those in each cell who are FF, FG or Labour voters. Cell totals in brackets.

Table 11 Family vote tradition, party attachment and vote choice

		Party attachment		
		Attached to party	Not attached to party	All
Parental traditions	Parent voted for party	81% (N=659)	28% (N=1,054)	49% (N=1,713)
	Party did not vote for party	73% (N=473)	6% (N=12,919)	9% (N=13,392)
	All	77% (N=1,132)	8% (N=13,973)	14% (N=15,105)

Source: Irish election study 2002.
Note: The data had been stacked for this analysis according to the seven vote options in table 6 and so the N is seven times as large as the number of respondents. Non-voters and those not reporting vote are excluded.

Figure 2 Views on parties by party attachment: FG to FF only

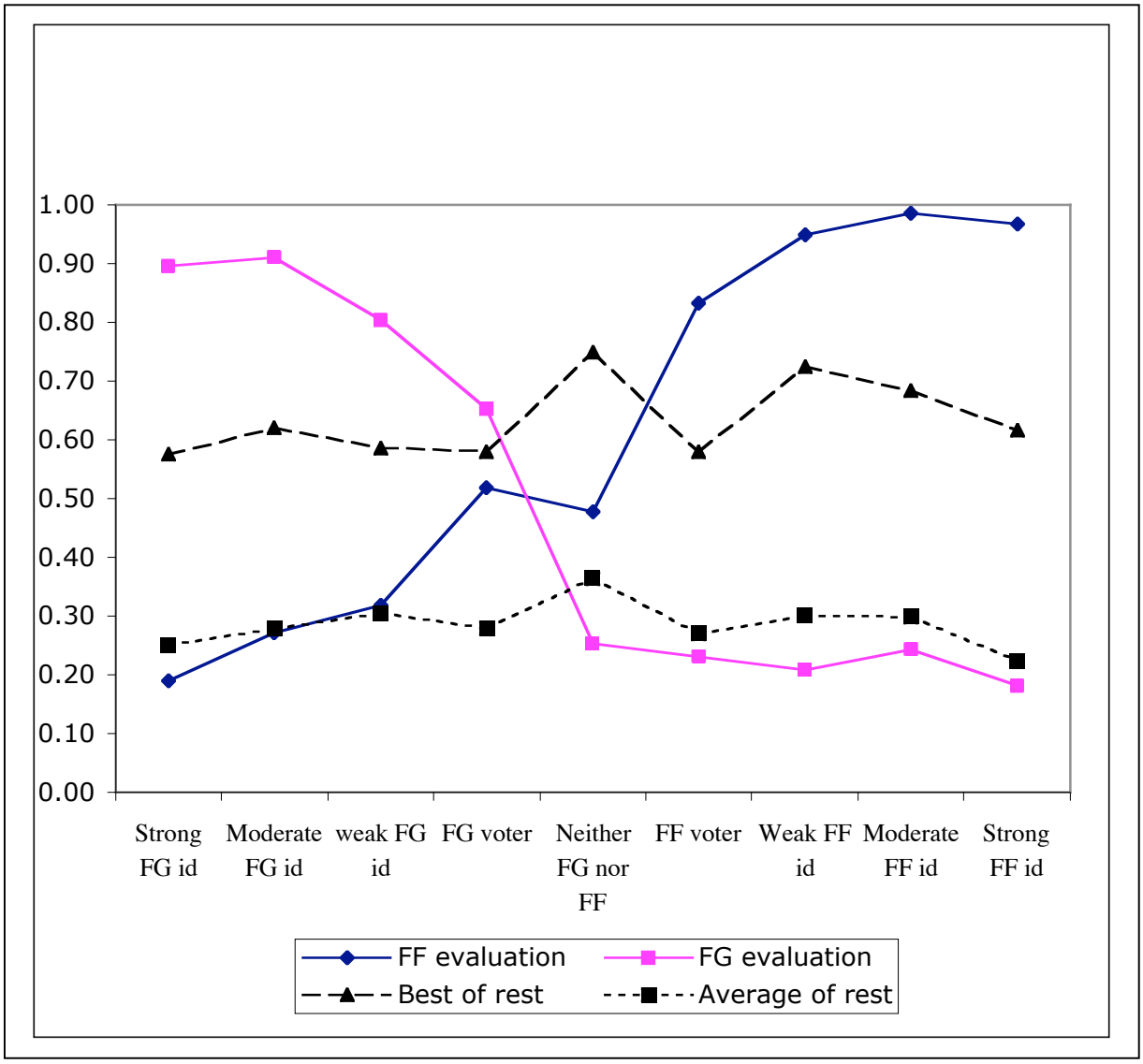
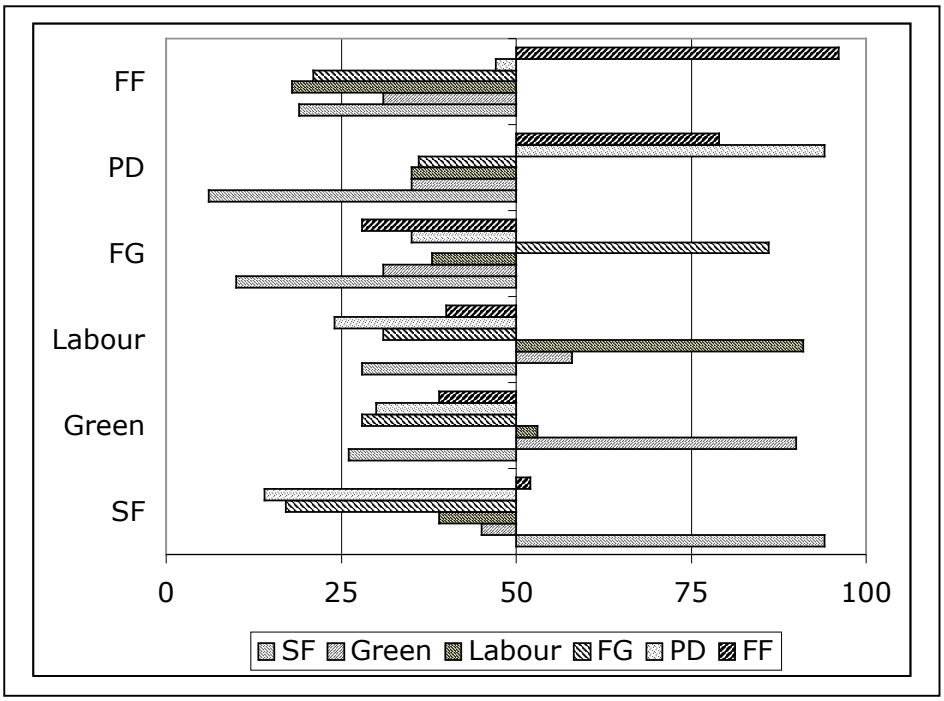


Figure 3: Partisans views of other parties



References

1. The 2002 Election Study was funded under the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions under the National Development Plan and co-directed by Michael Marsh and Richard Sinnott. It comprises a multistage random sample of 2663 members of the electorate, interviewed after the 2002 election. All tables here are weighted to correct for social biases. The data are available from the Irish Social Science Data Archive based at University College Dublin.

2. The use of 'not very close' as a response category rather than 'merely a sympathiser' may have pushed a few more into the 'somewhat close' category, since the decline is most marked there.

3. In the case of the small number of respondents said they were close to more than one party we have taken the first mentioned party as 'their' party. In table 11, below, we include all mentions.

4. This has been explored using aggregate analysis in Irish elections and referred to as 'solidarity': Gallagher 1978; see also Gallagher 1988, 1990, 1993, 1999, 2003.

5. Analysis here is restricted to those giving their first preference to a candidate with at least one running mate.

6 About half of the split ticket voters do, however, vote at some point for all 'their' party's candidates even if not in sequence. In all, 82 percent of those 'close' vote for all candidates, 75 percent of those who are 'somewhat close' and 64 percent of leaners while 33 percent of those with no affiliation do so.

7. Actually there are relatively few instances where a party fielded four candidates and fewer instances even of three. Only FF provides enough instances of 2, 3 and 4 candidates to allow comparisons. It appears that a majority of strong identifiers are likely to show solidarity however many candidates are standing. There is some decline in the solidarity of moderate identifiers and leaners as the number of candidates increases to 4, but the number of cases here is too small to show significant differences.

8. There is a striking contrast here between FG and FF voters as FG voters do not have any particular distaste for FF. How far this is typical, and how far due to the particularly dismal performance of FG in the 2002 campaign and election is not known at this time.

9. This was the first option on the showcard, an ordering that should minimise the chance that respondents would invent a memory. The 30 percent who don't know is much the same as that found by Larsen in 1969: see Carty 1983: p. 82.

10. It is not clear whether the question asked was about father's typical vote or something stronger although the Ns suggest the former.