

## **The ideological space in Irish politics: comparing voters and parties**

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### **Abstract**

Drawing on an original survey of voters and parties, this article examines the policy space in Irish politics in the context of the 2016 general election. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses show that four broad ideological dimensions structure voters' policy views across a range of salient issues. These are an economic dimension, a cultural dimension, a religious dimension, and an austerity dimension. Comparing the location of voters and parties on these dimensions, gaps in the policy space are identified where voters are not represented by any party. Most noticeably, a significant segment of the electorate is found to have left-wing views on economic issues but conservative/authoritarian views on the cultural dimension, and this combination is currently not offered by any of the existing political parties. The article also highlights areas where political parties are out of step with the views of their own voters.

**Keywords:** policy dimensions, voting advice applications, issue congruence, representation

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## Introduction

Politics in Ireland was once seen as essentially non-ideological, with the established parties competing more on the basis of competence and personnel than policy (Carty 1981; McGraw 2008). However, the Irish party system has become increasingly fragmented and polarized in recent years, and policy competition has come to play a more important role in elections. The centrist ‘catch-all’ parties of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have lost ground to more ideologically distinct parties such as Sinn Féin, and a number of new parties on opposing sides of the ideological spectrum have emerged. The percentage of voters who say that policy considerations have been the most important factor influencing their vote in general elections rose sharply in the wake of the economic crisis that engulfed the country in 2008<sup>1</sup>.

This paper sets out to map this policy space: that is, to identify the ideological dimensions that structure voters’ policy views, and to locate voters and parties on these dimensions. Such an ideological map can shed new light on the nature of electoral politics and political representation. In particular, comparing the ideological locations of voters and parties allows us to assess how well voters are represented by existing political parties, and to identify gaps in the policy space that future political entrepreneurs may seek to exploit.

Mapping the policy space is challenging, as it requires reliable data on the preferences of voters and parties across the spectrum of salient policy issues. Traditional election studies can be used to study the policy preferences of voters but not parties, and they can suffer from the inclusion of a relatively narrow set of policy issues. In recent years, a new approach to data gathering based around online Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) has emerged, which can potentially address these problems. VAAs are particularly suited to the study of the policy

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<sup>1</sup> In exit polls at the 2007, 2011 and 2016 elections, the percentage of respondents who said that policy was the most important factor influencing their decision was, respectively: 25%, 41% and 33%.

space and to comparisons of the locations of parties and voters because they typically include a large set of policy questions, put to both voters and parties. Data from VAAs have been used to study the political space in a several contexts to date (Gemenis 2013; Germann et al. 2015; Wheatley 2015; Wheatley et al. 2014).

This paper employs data from a VAA from the 2016 Irish general election to explore the Irish policy space. Two questions in particular are addressed: what ideological dimensions structure voters' policy preferences; and how do the positions of parties compare with the positions of voters on these dimensions? While each of these questions has been the subject of past studies, here both questions are examined together, using comparable data on voters and parties. Furthermore, a fresh look at these questions is warranted because the issue space in Ireland appears to have evolved considerably in recent years. For instance, the economic crisis gave rise to a significant new policy conflict over what has become known as 'austerity politics'. This conflict centred primarily on a number of new taxes and charges that were introduced after the EU/IMF intervention in 2010, including a new property tax and domestic water charges. A number of social issues have also (re)emerged during this period. The constitutional ban on abortion became a salient issue in the 2016 election campaign, and many young voters were mobilised and politicised on social issues during the 2015 Marriage Equality referendum. The emergence of these issues may have increased the complexity of the ideological space in Irish politics, as it is not obvious that they map easily onto an overarching left-right dimension.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section discusses existing evidence regarding the dominant dimensions of political conflict both in Ireland and in other European countries and the main tensions between voters and parties on these dimensions. The data is then introduced, including an explanation of the weighting procedure used to address the issue of

sample bias. The dimensionality of the Irish political space is then examined using a combination of exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. The positions of voters and parties on these dimensions are examined, and the policy positions of parties are compared with the preferences of their supporters. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of the findings for democratic representation and party competition in contemporary Irish politics.

### **Policy positions of voters and parties in comparative context**

Political actors (including voters and parties) take positions on a wide range of specific issues, but typically these positions can be usefully summarised with reference to a small number of underlying dimensions. At the extreme, the political space is frequently reduced to left and right, although a large body of research suggests that this is an over-simplification that neglects important differences among political actors (Kriesi et al. 2006; Thomassen 2012). Particularly when it comes to voters (and arguably also for parties), at least two dimensions are usually required to adequately summarise the main policy differences in contemporary Western European democracies.

The first, and traditionally the most important, is an economic left-right dimension. This summarises positions on a range of issues related to the redistribution of wealth (such as taxation, public spending, and welfare), along with issues concerning the role of the state in the management of the economy (such as privatisation versus state ownership, and market regulation). The second is a cultural dimension, which according to Kitschelt concerns 'preferences over the governance structures of social life' (Kitschelt 2004, p. 2). This dimension summarises attitudes on issues such as immigration and cultural diversity, law and order, and in some cases also environmental issues and issues of European integration (Kriesi et al. 2006; Van der Brug and Van Spanje 2009). The two poles of this cultural dimension are often labelled 'libertarian' and 'authoritarian', although others have suggested alternative

labels such as such as GAL-TAN (green/alternative/libertarian – traditional/authoritarian/nationalist) or integration-demarcation (referring to a distinction between those who support the process of international integration and those who seek to strengthen national boundaries, independence and identity) (Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002; Kriesi et al. 2006). In this paper, the more common labels of ‘libertarian’ and ‘authoritarian’ are used, but with some reservations given that these labels do not fit equally well for all issues that are associated with this dimension.

A number of cross-national studies confirm the importance of these two dimensions in structuring European voters’ preferences on salient election issues (Costello, Thomassen, and Rosema 2012; Dalton 2015; Van der Brug and Van Spanje 2009). Yet not all issues will necessarily map neatly onto these two dimensions. For example, in a cross-national study Dalton (2015) finds that attitudes on issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and the role of women in the workplace form a separate dimension. Attitudes towards the so-called austerity policies that were the dominant response in the EU to the financial crisis may also form a separate dimension, as has been found in the Greek case (Karyotis, Rüdig, and Judge 2014, p. 451).

In the Irish case, using data from the 2002 Irish National Election Study, Marsh et al. (2008, p. 41) found that fully six dimensions were required to adequately capture the variation in voters’ issue preferences. The issues that constitute a single cultural dimension in some other contexts were found to form three separate dimensions in the Irish case: a secular-liberalism versus a religious-conservatism dimension; an environmental dimension; and a dimension related to European integration. Furthermore, they found that positions on economic issues were not constrained by a single left-right dimension, but rather formed two separate dimensions: one relating to the role of the state in the economy, and the other relating to

redistribution. The sixth dimension identified was a distinctly Irish one related to the question of Northern Ireland. Below, the dimensionality of voters' issue preferences is examined in the context of the 2016 general election.

Turning to the policy positions of political parties, most theoretical accounts assume that policy platforms are designed with a view to maximising vote share (Downs 1957). In the simplest scenario whereby voters' preferences are structured by a single left-right dimension, it is often argued that parties in a multi-party system will spread out across the policy space (Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005). This should then deliver a high degree of policy congruence between voters and parties, assuming that voters choose parties based on policy proximity. However, when voters' issue preferences are not constrained by a single ideological dimension, policy congruence between voters and parties may be lower and significant 'gaps' in representation may emerge. One reason for this is that established parties often seek to reduce policy space to a single dimension of competition (Van der Brug and Van Spanje 2009). If parties are organised around a single dimension (e.g. from left-libertarian to right-authoritarian), but voters' preferences differ along multiple dimensions (so, for example, we find voters that are left-libertarian, right-libertarian, left-authoritarian and right-authoritarian), then substantial segments of the electorate will be unable to find a party that they agree with across the spectrum of policy issues. Recent research has identified such representational gaps in several European countries, particularly among voters who are left-wing on the economic dimension and right-wing (or 'authoritarian') on the cultural dimension (Van der Brug and Van Spanje 2009). These gaps in representation create opportunities for new parties to exploit. The rise in many countries of new populist, anti-establishment parties, particularly those taking a conservative or authoritarian position on the cultural dimension, is evidence of this.

One factor which may mitigate the consequences of gaps in representation is that policy congruence between voters and parties tends to be highest on salient issues (Giger and Lefkofridi 2014). However, there are a number of reasons why this does not entirely address the problem. Issue salience can change, and indeed is subject to manipulation by political parties; so just because an issue is not a priority for voters today does not make it irrelevant for party competition. Furthermore, parties typically claim to have a mandate from their voters to pursue policies that are in their manifesto, regardless of the electoral salience of those issues. Such claims may be dubious if parties are out of step with their voters on certain issues (see Krosnick 1990).

Very few studies have used comparable data to compare the location of voters and parties in Ireland. Benoit and Laver (2005) examined the location of voters (based on the 2002 Irish National Election Study) and parties (based on an expert survey) on a number of pre-defined policy dimensions. They found that the highest concentration of voters was found at the centre of both the economic and social dimensions, which is where the two largest parties (Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael) were located. More recently, McElroy (2017) compared the self-placement of Irish voters and candidates on a number of pre-defined issue dimensions. For most parties, the distributions of voter and candidate positions on a 'taxes and spending' dimension were found to be broadly similar. More noticeable differences were observed in relation to issues such as European integration and immigration.

This paper departs from these previous studies in a number of respects. Rather than relying on pre-defined dimensions, an inductive approach is used to extract issue dimensions from a large set of policy questions, and then the location of voters and parties are compared on these dimensions. Both the dimensionality of the issue space and the location of political actors in the issue space are relevant for understanding political competition and representation,

and ideally both should be studied in tandem. The more complex the issue space (i.e. the more dimensions needed to summarise voters' policy views), the harder it is for parties to represent voters effectively (Thomassen 1994, p. 254). An inductive approach to mapping the policy space also makes it possible to assess whether or not the same policy dimensions structure public opinion in Ireland as have been found in other contexts, and whether or not the same patterns of voter-party congruence on these dimensions exist. The study also includes a broader range of policy issues than have previously been studied in the Irish context (including issues related to austerity politics), and includes a range of new and established political parties as well as Independent candidates.

It should be stressed that this paper does not seek to explain variation in voter-party congruence. The goals are entirely descriptive: to map the policy space for voters and parties, and to identify areas of the policy space where there are significant numbers of voters that are not well represented by the existing parties. Identifying such gaps is important irrespective of why they exist. They are the potential 'sleeping giants' of political representation (to use the phrase originally applied by van der Eijk and Franklin (2004) to the issue of European integration); sources of strain that may be exploited in the future by political parties seeking to win new voters.

## **Data**

This paper employs original data on the policy preferences of voters and parties in the 2016 Irish general election generated from an online Voting Advice Application (VAA) called Which Candidate ([www.whichcandidate.ie](http://www.whichcandidate.ie)). There are a number of advantages in using VAAs to study the policy space in a given country. These surveys can achieve a high response rate from parties and/or candidates, because if they do not participate they forsake the opportunity to attract voters through the VAA. Another advantage is that the answers supplied by parties



or candidates to the policy questions can be considered to be their public position on those issues. This is in contrast to most candidate surveys, where answers are anonymous and election candidates may give personal opinions on issues rather than positions they are willing to endorse publically. This is an advantage when mapping the policy space, as the most relevant comparison to make is between the preferences of the electorate and the public positions of the parties and candidates. Another distinct advantage is that VAAs ask the same sets of questions of both parties/candidates and voters, making their answers directly comparable.

The Which Candidate survey was administered to both political parties and election candidates in January 2016, before being opened up to the public. The core element of the survey, administered to all three types of respondents (parties, candidates and voters), was a set of 22 policy questions. The questions were selected by a team of five academics specialising in Irish politics and were designed to cover the spectrum of salient issues in contemporary Irish politics. Each question relates to a specific policy issue, and the answer categories refer to specific policy alternatives<sup>2</sup>. Each question had three ordered answer categories plus a ‘none of the above’ option<sup>3</sup>. The answer categories were designed to capture the main alternatives being proposed by parties or being publically discussed at the time of the election. For example, a question on the highly salient issue of water charges was phrased as follows (the full set of questions is given in the appendix):

How should water be funded?

- Households that use more water (above a set allowance) should pay more

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<sup>2</sup> This question format departs from the more usual Likert format, where respondents are asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with a statement. The Likert format was used in trials of the Which Candidate survey, but it proved to be unsuitable when it came to eliciting public responses from political parties and candidates. There was a strong tendency for candidates to agree with statements that might sound appealing to certain sections of the electorate, even when this implied contradicting a previous answer.

<sup>3</sup> There are two exceptions to this. An item on abortion had four answer categories, but for the purpose of the analysis in this paper these categories are collapsed into three. In addition, an item on budget priorities had three unordered categories; for the purpose of this paper this is recoded into a dichotomous measure (see Appendix).

- The current policy (with fixed charges per household) should be maintained
- Water should be free at the point of use and funded through general taxation
- (None of the above)

The survey was first administered to the policy director for each of the main political parties (Fine Gael (FG), Fianna Fáil (FF), Sinn Féin (SF), Labour (Lab), the Anti-Austerity Alliance/People Before Profit (AAA/PBP), the Social Democrats (SD), Renua Ireland (RI) and the Green Party (GP)). All parties responded to the survey; these responses are considered to be the official party positions in the subsequent analysis. Next, the survey was administered to all candidates running in the election. In the present study, the focus is on party positions rather than intra-party competition, so the official party positions rather than the candidate positions are used (except when considering Independent candidates). It is worth noting that in all cases where a party provided an official position, it was identical to the median position of candidates from the party who provided a response<sup>4</sup>.

Finally, the survey was opened to the public for the duration of the election campaign (February 5<sup>th</sup>-February 26<sup>th</sup>). Voters were invited to answer the 22 policy questions, and on the basis of their answers they were provided with detailed information on their match to the candidates in their constituency<sup>5</sup>. Before being presented with the information on their ‘match’ with candidates, respondents were invited to complete an optional supplementary questionnaire containing questions on age, gender, area, political interest, party attachment, vote intention and left-right self-placement. To ensure only valid responses are included from

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<sup>4</sup> As discussed below, in some instances (20 out of a total of 136 cases) parties did not provide an official response to a particular question, and the party position is instead coded based on the written explanation provided by the party. These coded positions do not always match the position of the median candidate from the party (there are five cases where a difference is found). However, the written explanation of the party position is a more reliable indicator of the party position than the median candidate position due to the low number of candidate responses on some of these questions.

<sup>5</sup> Voters were free to go back and change their answers to the policy questions; however, only their initial answers are recorded in the dataset examined here.

the voter survey, the data was extensively ‘cleaned’, as described in the Appendix. The cleaned dataset includes a total of 23,451 respondents.

There is of course a significant potential for sample bias in any opt-in online survey. Previous research demonstrates that younger and better-educated respondents are usually overrepresented in VAA surveys (Wall et al. 2009). To address this issue, a sample matching procedure known as ‘coarsened exact matching’ is used (Blackwell et al. 2009). This involves comparing respondents in the online survey to respondents in a representative ‘benchmark’ survey, and weighting the online survey accordingly. A similar technique is used by online polling companies such as YouGov and academic election studies such as the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (Twyman 2008; Vavreck and Rivers 2008). For this approach to succeed, the online sample must be sufficiently large and diverse, so that matching respondents can be found for all (or nearly all) of the respondents in the benchmark survey (Rivers and Bailey 2009).

As the target population for the present study is the electorate at the time of the 2016 election, a recall survey conducted by the polling company Red C, carried out as part of the Irish National Election Study (INES), is used as the benchmark survey. The survey was conducted by telephone with a representative sample of 1,000 voters the week after the election. This is a high-quality survey, where the reported first-preferences votes of respondents closely matched the actual election result (see Appendix). Six questions common to both surveys were used to match respondents across the two surveys, namely: age; education; gender; left-right self-placement; party identification; and urban/rural location. For example, if a particular respondent in the INES survey is a left-wing female in her 30s from a rural location, with no party attachment and a university degree, the matching procedure identifies all respondents in the Which Candidate survey who share all of these traits. Which Candidate

respondents who do not have an equivalent in the benchmark survey are dropped. In addition, weights are computed to address the fact that some types of respondent are over or underrepresented in the Which Candidate sample compared to the benchmark sample.

Of the 947 respondents in the INES survey who gave answers to the six items used for matching, 892 (94%) were successfully matched with 20,184 respondents from the Which Candidate survey. The success of the matching procedure can be attributed to the fact that the Which Candidate survey was promoted through both social media and a range of traditional media partners, including a quality national broadsheet (The Irish Times) and several local and regional media outlets around the country, and therefore attracted a very diverse range of respondents. The quality of the matched Which Candidate voter sample can be tested by looking at the distribution of voting intentions among respondents, both before and after the matching procedure. As reported in the Appendix, the distribution of vote intentions in the weighted Which Candidate sample is very close to that found in the INES sample. Further tests for bias in the weighted sample were also carried out by comparing the distribution of responses on policy questions with comparable data from contemporaneous surveys conducted using traditional sampling methods. These tests, which are reported in the Appendix, find that the distribution of responses to policy questions in the weighted Which Candidate survey closely mirrors that found in other surveys.

### **The dimensionality of the policy space**

Turning to the analysis, the goal of this section is to examine the dimensionality of the policy space among the Irish electorate using responses to the policy questions in the Which Candidate survey. Following the approach recommended by Gerbing and Anderson (1988), this is done using a combination of exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. As a first

step, exploratory factor analysis is conducted using 21 policy items<sup>6</sup>. As the items are measured on ordinal rather than interval scales, a polychoric correlation matrix is used (Drasgow 1988). When calculating the correlation matrix, missing data is dealt with by pairwise deletion. The purpose of the exploratory factor analysis is to get a preliminary sense of the latent dimensions in the data, and to identify items that do not load cleanly on any of these dimensions. The results<sup>7</sup> suggest that four factors should be retained. These correspond to an economic dimension, containing items related to taxation, public services and market regulation; a cultural dimension, consisting of items related to the environment, refugees, European integration and law and order; a religious dimension, including items on abortion and the role of religion in schools; and an austerity dimension including items on water charges and property tax. This analysis also indicates which items load on multiple dimensions, or do not load clearly on any specific dimension: namely, an item on Traveller accommodation, an item on healthcare, and two items on political reform.

While the exploratory factor analysis suggests a structure, it does not provide a way to assess how well this structure fits the data, which is particularly important given that the ultimate goal is to construct scales based on these dimensions. As Gerbing and Anderson (1988) point out, it only makes sense to consider creating a scale or a composite score from a set of items when we are confident that it is in fact unidimensional, meaning that a single construct underlies the various indicators. Confirmatory factor analysis is the generally accepted approach to testing unidimensionality. The researcher specifies a measurement

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<sup>6</sup> There were 22 items in total in the survey. One item, on the referendum on the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution, is excluded because it is logically related to another item on abortion (if someone favours liberalising abortion, this implies they also favour repealing the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment). Some other items are also closely related to one another, but are logically and conceptually distinct. There is a danger when using items in factor analysis that are very highly correlated with one another that a factor will emerge simply because of the similarity of these items. For this reason, the exploratory factor analysis was repeated while excluding such items, but this did not affect the results.

<sup>7</sup> Not reported; available from the author on request.

model, whereby particular sets of items are assumed to tap particular latent dimensions, and the fit of this model is assessed.

In this case, the model illustrated as a path diagram in Figure 1 is tested. The items that were found to load on multiple dimensions in the exploratory factor analysis are excluded, so a total of 17 items remain. The four latent dimensions are shown on the left in Figure 1, and the 17 measured survey items that load on these dimensions are shown on the right. Standardized factor loadings, which have a possible range of -1 to +1, are shown on the paths between the latent factors and the policy items. The curved paths between the latent factors are the inter-factor correlations.

<FIGURE 1>

The factor loadings are all reasonably strong and (given the ordering of the answer categories on each item) have the anticipated sign. Model fit is assessed by three measures: the Comparative Fit Index (CFI); the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA); and the Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). These scores, reported in Figure 1, all suggest an acceptable-to-good fitting model<sup>8</sup>. A number of alternative models were also tested, including a simpler two-dimensional model and a number of more complex models, but these proved to be a poor fit.

Of particular interest are the inter-factor correlations shown in Figure 1. Not surprisingly, there is a strong correlation between the economic and austerity dimensions and between the cultural and religious dimensions (the direction of these relationships are what we should expect given how these dimensions are orientated<sup>9</sup>). There is hardly any correlation between

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<sup>8</sup> According to Brown , a model should have a CFI value over .90 (acceptable fit) or .95 (good fit); RMSEA below .08 (acceptable fit) or .06 (good fit); and SRMR below .08.

<sup>9</sup> Given how the items are worded, the orientation of these dimensions are: right-left (economic dimension); authoritarian-libertarian (cultural dimension); secular-religious (religious dimension); and pro-/anti-austerity (austerity dimension).

the austerity dimension and the religious dimension. Most interesting is the negative, and moderately strong, correlation between the cultural dimension and the austerity dimension. This implies that respondents who are anti-austerity tend to be located towards the authoritarian pole of the cultural dimension. While this is not entirely unexpected, given the strong working-class basis of the anti-austerity movement (particularly evident in the Sinn Féin vote) and the longstanding tendency for working-class voters to hold relatively more authoritarian views on cultural issues (Lipset 1960), it does imply a certain tension between the voters and parties in the anti-austerity movement.

### **Mapping the policy space: voters and parties**

The previous section has identified a fairly complex policy space. Voters' attitudes on salient election issues are not constrained by an overarching left-right dimension. Rather, voters' positions on traditional economic issues tend to be relatively independent from their positions on so-called 'austerity' issues and from a range of non-economic issues such as environmental protection, law and order, refugees and abortion. This poses a challenge for political parties: while they attract voters who agree with their policies on certain issues, those voters may disagree with at least some of their positions on other issues. To investigate these potential representational strains, this section compares the positions of parties and voters on these four ideological dimensions. This involves both a global comparison of party and voter positions on these dimensions, and a comparison of party positions with the positions of their own voters on each dimension. The global comparison is used to identify segments of the electorate that are not well represented by any of the existing parties, while the party-level comparison identifies the policy dimensions where parties are out of step with their own supporters.

For each of the four ideological dimensions, a composite score is calculated for each voter and each party based on their answers to the relevant survey items. The composite scores are simply the weighted averages of the scores for the individual items that make up the dimension, where the weights are the factor loadings shown in Figure 1. Given that each item is measured on a scale from 1 to 3, the dimensional scores also range from 1 to 3. In computing these scores, the direction of the individual items are reversed where appropriate, so that a score of 1 always indicates a left-wing/libertarian/secular/anti-austerity position, while a score of 3 always indicates a right-wing/authoritarian/religious/pro-austerity position<sup>10</sup>. These scales were found to have an acceptable level of internal consistency, as measured by Cronbach's alpha<sup>11</sup>. The four scales are all positively correlated with voters' self-placement on the left-right scale ( $R=.40$  for the economic dimension;  $.31$  for the cultural dimension;  $.26$  for the religious dimension; and  $.23$  for the austerity dimension).

Before presenting the results, a note on missing data is in order. For the voter data, a respondent's score is calculated on a given dimension only if the respondent answered each of the items in the scale<sup>12</sup>. There are relatively few missing observations in the data on party positions. With 17 items and 8 parties, there are a total of 136 possible positions; of these, 20 positions are missing (where a party answered 'none of the above'). The highest number of missing observations occurs for the two new parties, Renua Ireland and the Social Democrats. However, in every instance where a party declined to select one of the available answers, the party provided a written explanation of its position. These written explanations are used to code

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<sup>10</sup> While the party positions were not included in the factor analysis, the positions of the parties on these four dimensions is calculated in the same way as the positions of the voters – i.e. taking the weighted average of the party's positions across the various items that make up the dimension in question.

<sup>11</sup> Cronbach's alpha measures reliability or internal consistency of a composite scale, and is a function of the number of items included in the scale and the correlations between them. The alpha scores for the four dimensions identified here range from 0.70 to 0.79. Given the relatively small number of items used for each dimension, these alpha scores do not imply that the scales should be rejected on reliability grounds.

<sup>12</sup> The analysis below was replicated with missing values imputed by multiple imputation; this did not change the substantive findings.



missing values. For example, on the issue of budget priorities, Fine Gael declined to indicate whether it prioritised tax cuts, spending increases or debt reduction. The party's written commentary makes clear that tax cuts were in fact the immediate priority, and it is coded accordingly:

“We don't believe tax cuts and spending on public services are mutually exclusive. Our Long-Term Economic Plan will create more jobs and make work pay by cutting income tax. The boost to the public finances from increasing numbers at work will allow us to fund improvements in key public services.”

The results of this mapping exercise are now presented. Figure 2 focuses on the economic and cultural dimensions. The first panel plots voter positions and party positions. Voter positions are summarised using bivariate kernel density estimation, with darker regions indicating a higher concentration of voters. It is worth emphasising that positions on these scales are determined by respondents' answers to the particular survey items that underpin them, rather than respondents' self-placement on abstract ideological dimensions. The majority of voters are located towards the left on the economic dimension (the median score for voters is 1.6 on a scale from 1 to 3). Being at the furthest left point on this scale means that the voter supports: prioritising public spending over tax cuts or debt reduction; higher taxes for high earners; increases in the minimum wage; rent control; greater security in work contracts; and more state support for childcare. Voters are reasonably well served by the alternatives presented by parties on the economic dimension. There is a cluster of parties at on the left; Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are more centrally located; and Renua is on the right.

<FIGURE 2>

Figure 2 also reveals some noticeable gaps in representation on the cultural dimension, as voters are quite evenly distributed (the median position is 1.8), but parties are all either on

the libertarian end of this scale or near the centre. (Recall that a position at the authoritarian extreme of this dimension indicates support for a reduction in the number of refugees; rolling back on European integration; harsher sentencing for criminals; and opposition to wind farms and measures to reduce emissions). The most obvious gap in the party system is found in the Left/Authoritarian section of Figure 2. Thirty-one percent of voters are located in this upper-left quadrant, although most of these voters are moderately rather than strongly authoritarian/conservative in their views. In sharp contrast, there are no parties located in this upper-left quadrant.

Similar patterns have been observed in other contexts. For instance, Van der Brug and Van Spanje (2009, p. 329) find that ‘in most West European countries there is a very large group of voters with left-wing positions on socio-economic policies and right-wing positions on the cultural dimension’, but that there are relatively few parties that support this combination of positions (see also Lefkofridi, Wagner, and Willmann 2014). Others have noted that radical right parties in some countries have begun to move into this space, putting forward a set of policies that are left-leaning on economic issues and authoritarian on cultural issues. De Lange describes this as a ‘new winning formula’ for radical right parties (De Lange 2007).

Digging into the data a bit more, it is clear that the characteristics of the voters found in the upper-left quadrant in Figure 2 are in some ways similar to the profile of voters for populist right wing parties in other countries (see Givens 2005). For instance, 55% of respondents who did not complete secondary school are located in this quadrant, compared to only 19% of respondents with a university degree. In terms of voting preference, the majority (57%) of Sinn Féin voters are located in this quadrant, along with almost half (47%) of Independent

voters<sup>13</sup>. The high proportion of Sinn Féin voters is consistent with previous research that shows that Sinn Féin support is correlated with anti-immigrant sentiment (O'Malley 2008).

An important characteristic of recent elections in Ireland has been the strong performance of non-party candidates. Existing research suggests that people vote for Independents primarily because they focus on local issues (Weeks 2016). However, given that almost half of the voters for Independent candidates can be categorised as left-authoritarian, it is worth investigating whether these candidates are filling a gap in the ideological landscape. A total of 78 out of 195 (40%) Independent and micro-party candidates responded to the Which Candidate survey. The location of 65 of these candidates on the economic and cultural dimensions is shown in the second panel in Figure 2 (the remainder could not be placed due to missing data)<sup>14</sup>. Unlike the political parties, the distribution of Independent candidates on the two dimensions is very similar to the distribution of voters. The majority of these candidates (60%) are located in the left-libertarian quadrant, while a substantial minority (34%) are found in the left-authoritarian quadrant. This suggests that Independent candidates may provide an outlet for voters whose views are not well represented by any of the main parties. A full investigation of the relationship between the policy preferences of Independent candidates and their voters is beyond the scope of this paper, but this is an important avenue for further research.

Figure 3 turns to the other dimensions previously identified. The first panel plots positions on the economic and religious dimensions, where again sharp differences are apparent in the distribution of voters and parties. The vast majority of voters (72%) are located on the secular/liberal side of the religious dimension, but several parties (including the two largest parties) are towards the religious/conservative end of the spectrum. This is in effect the reverse

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<sup>13</sup> The corresponding figures for the other parties are: AAA/PBP 40%; Fianna Fáil 36%; Fine Gael 32%; Renua 25%; Social Democrats 25%; Labour 17%; Greens 10%.

<sup>14</sup> As with the data on party positions, missing data was coded based on the written comments provided by the candidates. However, unlike the data on party positions, this was not possible to do in all cases.

of the situation shown in Figure 2, where parties were shown to be more liberal than many voters on the cultural dimension. The very different patterns in voter/party distributions on the religious dimension compared to the cultural dimension might seem surprising at first. However, it can probably be explained by the fact that the status quo in Ireland on issues that make up the secular-religious dimension is extremely conservative by international standards, while this is not the case for issues on the cultural dimension. Centrist, government-oriented parties such as Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael tend to be located close to the status quo on any given issue, but clearly most voters in Ireland support progressive change on issues such as abortion and the role of the church in education (this is also confirmed by opinion polls, as reported in the Appendix).

<FIGURE 3>

The second panel in Figure 3 shows the location of voters and parties on the economic and austerity dimensions. As previously noted, there is a moderately strong correlation in voters' positions across these two dimensions, with left-wing voters more likely to be anti-austerity. However, there are also voters who are left-wing on the general economic dimension who support the so-called austerity taxes. The most noticeable feature of this graph is the sharp polarisation on the austerity dimension. Voters are located at the two poles of this dimension, with roughly equal numbers on each side (the median is 2.1). Parties are equally polarized: on one side are the two government parties at the time of the 2016 election (Labour and Fine Gael) along with the Green Party and Renua; the remaining parties are located on the anti-austerity side of this dimension to varying degrees. The distribution of party positions therefore mirrors the distribution of voter preferences on this dimension to a large extent.

While these graphs show the overall distribution of voter and party positions on the various dimensions, they do not tell us how close parties are to the people who actually voted

for them. There are several approaches in the literature to measuring congruence between parties and their voters. Achen (1978) distinguishes between measures of proximity, centrism and responsiveness. The approach taken here is to plot the position of each party against the position of its median voter on each dimension, based on respondents' stated vote intentions. This provides an indication both of centrism (how close a party is to the centre of the distribution of its voters) and responsiveness (the strength of the relationship between the positions of parties and the positions of each party's voters - for example, the extent to which more conservative parties have more conservative voters and *vice versa*). Figure 4 presents the results for each of the four dimensions. When a party's position is identical to the position of its median voter, the party will be placed on the 45 degree reference line. When a party is more right wing/conservative/pro-austerity than its median voter, it will appear above the reference line (and *vice versa*). For the economic dimension, most parties are close to the reference line, indicating that parties are relatively close to their median voters. There is a tendency, however, for parties to be slightly more extreme than their voters on this dimension: in other words, parties on the right are slightly to the right of their voters, while parties on the left are slightly to the left of their voters. This is a pattern that has also been observed in other contexts (e.g. Adams and Merrill 1999, p. 765).

<FIGURE 4>

For the cultural dimension, a different pattern emerges. While there is a strong relationship between the ordering of the parties and the ordering of voters (indicating a degree of responsiveness), the parties are all more liberal than their voters to varying degrees. This is particularly evident in the case of Sinn Féin: the party is located towards the libertarian end of the scale, but its median voter is slightly towards the conservative/authoritarian end. McElroy (2017) found a similar pattern for Sinn Féin on the issue of immigration. The third panel in Figure 4 relates to the religious dimension. Here, parties are generally closer to the

religious/conservative end of the spectrum than their own voters, with the exception of AAA/PBP and Sinn Féin. Fine Gael is a particular outlier: its median voter is squarely on the secular/liberal end of the spectrum, while the party is on the religious/conservative side.

The final panel in Figure 4 concerns the austerity dimension. The two government parties and the AAA/PBP are perfectly in line with their median voters on this dimension. Given that these issues were very salient in the 2016 election campaign, and given the clear position taken by these parties, this is perhaps not surprising (it can be assumed that most voters who previously supported Fine Gael or Labour, but opposed these ‘austerity’ taxes, deserted these parties in 2016). Large differences exist for some other parties, however. The median Green Party voter was considerably more anti-austerity than the party; while the median Social Democrat voter and, significantly (given the emphasis that the party put on the issue of water charges during the subsequent negotiations to form a government) the median Fianna Fáil voter were noticeably more supportive of these taxes than their respective parties.

## **Conclusion**

The ideological space in Irish politics is complex, but not unstructured. Four separate dimensions can adequately account for voters’ opinions on a diverse range of policy issues that were salient in the 2016 general election. These are the economic, cultural, religious, and austerity dimensions. The first three of these ideological dimensions relate to more or less perennial issues and are likely to have continued relevance in Irish politics in the years to come. The long-term importance of the austerity dimension is less certain. On one hand, the issues that map on to this dimension are quite specific to the post-financial crisis period in Irish politics. On the other hand, a significant segment of the population was mobilized by parties such as AAA/PBP and Sinn Féin (along with a number of other non-party organisations)

explicitly on these issues, and the success of the anti-water charge protests may lead to similar movements in the future.

The party system reflects the range of views in the electorate on the economic and the austerity dimensions relatively well. However, the more complex the issue space, the more challenging it becomes for parties to represent the views of citizens. Voters may find that the party closest to their views on the economic dimension does not share their position on non-economic issues. The analysis presented in this paper confirms this. A significant proportion of the electorate holds a set of policy views that are not supported by any party.

Most strikingly, the findings here suggest that almost one-third of the electorate can be described as left-leaning economically but conservative/authoritarian on the cultural dimension. Currently none of the main political parties in Ireland fit this description, although the evidence presented here suggests that Independents may go some way towards filling the gap. The differences between voters and parties on the cultural dimension are quite systematic: in nearly all cases, the majority of a party's voters are more conservative/authoritarian than the party in question. Representational gaps are also present on the religious-secular dimension, although in this case the patterns are reversed: in most cases, parties are more conservative than their own voters on this dimension.

Of course, not all issues are equally important to voters. It may be the case that Irish voters are well represented on the issues that matter most to them. While issue salience is not examined in this paper, evidence from the 2016 RTE exit poll suggests that the issues related to the cultural and religious dimensions, where the biggest representational gaps are observed here, were not a priority for many voters. The relationship between issue salience and voter-party congruence in the Irish case is an important avenue for further research. However, issue salience among voters can be manipulated by political parties (Budge and Farlie 1983).

Identifying gaps in policy representation is important regardless of how salient those policy issues are, because these issues could in the future be politicised by a political party seeking to win new voters. This has happened in a number of other countries, where previously low-salience issues such as immigration and European integration were politicised by new populist parties.

Indeed, the surge in support for populist right-wing parties across Europe in recent years was fuelled in large part by working class voters with precisely the combination of attitudes identified above as constituting the largest representational gap in Irish politics (Oesch 2008). As O'Malley (2008) has argued, Ireland meets many of the conditions usually assumed to give rise to successful right-wing populism, but has remained immune to this so far. The party that is arguably best positioned to exploit this gap in the electoral market is Sinn Féin, but to date the party has defied the 'populist' label that its critics often apply to it by continuing to support a markedly more liberal and inclusive set of policies than those favoured by many of its voters. However, if issues such as immigration and the future of the EU continue to become more important across Europe, this is likely to also feature more prominently in political discourse in Ireland. If and when these issues become politicised, parties such as Sinn Féin are likely to come under increasing pressure to re-orient their positions towards that of their supporters on the cultural dimension, particularly if a new party emerges that attempts to win support from this segment of the electorate.

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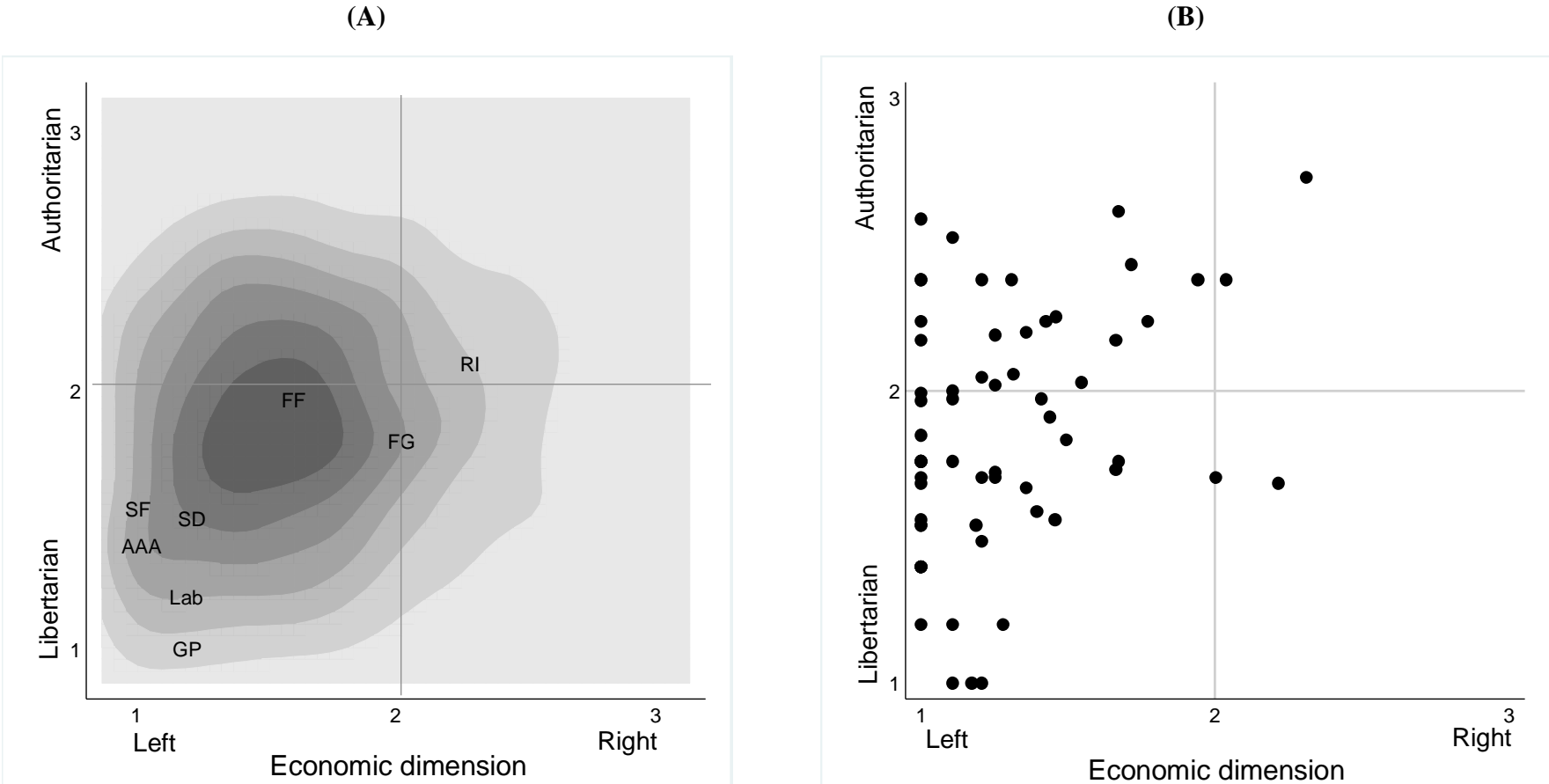
## Figures

**Figure 1: Path diagram and loadings for Confirmatory Factor Analysis**

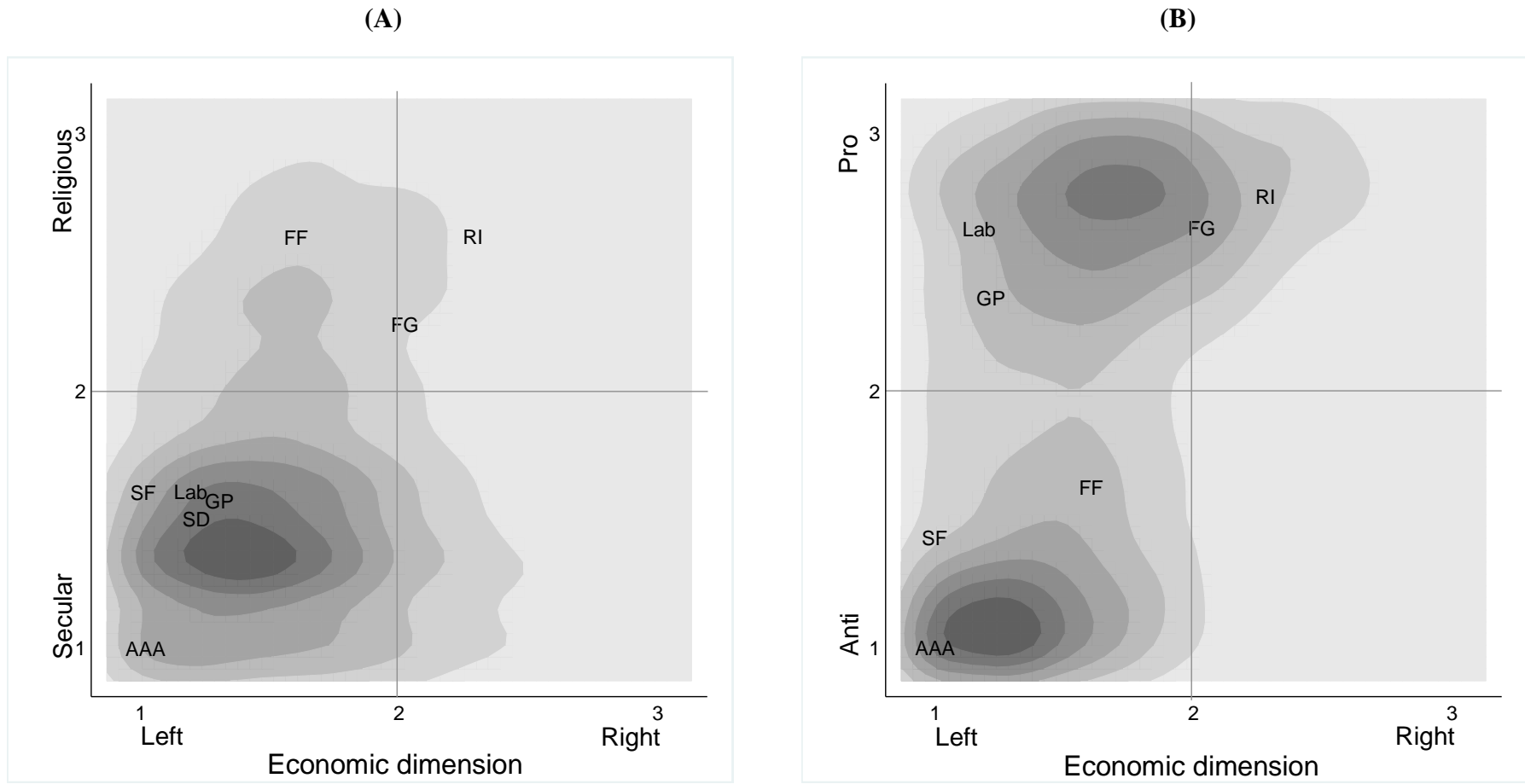


Note: Figures are standardized factor loadings and inter-factor correlations. Error paths not shown. Model fit: CFI=.914; RMSEA=.065; SRMR=.058

**Figure 2:** Location of (a) voters and parties and (b) Independent candidates on the Economic and Cultural dimensions



**Figure 3:** Location of voters and parties on (a) Economic and Religious dimensions and (b) Economic and Austerity dimensions



**Figure 4:** Comparison of party positions with median positions of their own voters on each dimension

