Many commentators have sounded the death knell for party identification. For example, Dalton claims that we are witnessing a general process of partisan dealignment and that this trend ‘reflects long-term and enduring characteristics of advanced industrial societies’ (Dalton 2002, p. 29). Like many other countries, Ireland experienced a sustained period of political dealignment, beginning in the 1970s (or earlier) and continuing right through to the new millennium. In Eurobarometer polls taken in the late 1970s, approximately two thirds of Irish respondents described themselves as being close to a political party; this had declined to 40 per cent by the mid-1990s (Mair and Marsh 2004, 242). As reported below, just over one quarter of respondents admitted to feeling close to a party in Irish National Election Study (INES) surveys conducted in 2002 and 2007, and this fell even further in 2011.

This is an important and, for many observers, worrying development. Partisanship is associated with political engagement, and is also seen by some as providing the stability necessary for a functioning representative democracy. As Rosenblum argues, ‘partisans are carriers of a more extended story about the party than may be told by the candidates of the moment’. Their long-term focus and attention to their party, even outside election years, acts as a ‘check on short-term, arrant, political considerations’ by their party, as well as providing support and sustenance to the party following electoral defeat (Rosenblum 2010, p. 355). A dealigned electorate, by contrast, is usually associated with disengagement, the growth of anti-establishment populism, and above all political instability (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2004, p. 222; Mair 2013, p. 19).

Dealignment is one potential explanation for the high levels of volatility observed in 2011 and 2016 elections in Ireland, as argued by Marsh and McElroy (2016, p. 159). Not only were these the two most volatile elections in the history of the state, they also rank among the ten most volatile elections
in post-war Western Europe (Farrell and Suiter 2016). Fianna Fáil, which had been the biggest party in every general election since 1927, lost over 70 per cent of its seats in 2011; Labour lost an even larger proportion of its seats in 2016. A number of new parties emerged during this period, and a record number of voters turned away from political parties altogether and voted instead for Independent candidates. If these are symptoms of a dealigned electorate, then electoral volatility is likely to be here to stay.

Yet at other times and in other contexts, long-term declines in party identification have been reversed following a ‘critical’ election which disrupts the old political order and subsequent ‘cementing’ elections in which new political alignments become embedded (Miller and Shanks 1996; Wattenberg 1996, p. 138). The 2011 and 2016 Irish general elections could conceivably fit this pattern. As described by Burnham (1970), critical elections ‘are closely associated with abnormal stress in the socioeconomic system (and) are marked by ideological polarizations and issue-distances between the major parties which are exceptionally large by normal standards’. The 2011 election in Ireland was preceded by an unprecedented level of economic stress leading to the ‘bailout’ by the EU and IMF; and the economic consensus that had dominated party politics during the 2000s gave way to greater political polarization.

It is clear that the elections of 2011 and 2016 dramatically changed the Irish party system. The question that this chapter seeks to answer is whether the electoral turbulence was a simply a symptom of a fundamentally dealigned electorate, or whether we are witnessing a realignment in Irish politics. In other words, has the number of floating voters increased in the wake of the crisis, or have people begun to form new party attachments that are likely to shape elections in the future? To address this question, this chapter will examine both the level and direction of party attachment in Ireland between 2002 and 2016. The chapter is organised as follows. First, the debates about the concept of party identification are introduced, and the meaning and measurement of party identification in Ireland is assessed using panel data from the Irish National Election Study (2002-2007). Next, arguments about partisan change (dealignment and realignment) are discussed, before presenting evidence on the evolution of partisanship in Ireland in the period 2002-2016, using the full set of INES studies. The chapter concludes by discussing what these findings imply for future elections in Ireland.
The meaning and measurement of party identification in Ireland

Despite its importance to generations of electoral researchers, party identification remains a highly contested concept. The traditional account, found in ‘The American Voter’, is that party identification is a lasting psychological attachment to a party or (according to a more recent restatement) a sense of belonging to a partisan group (Campbell et al. 1964, p. 67; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2004, p. 8; Miller and Shanks 1996, p. 120). These attachments form relatively early in life, due to a combination of family and peer group influences and the political environment during an individual’s first experiences of voting (Miller and Shanks 1996, p. 128-132). Once established, party attachments are expected to be highly stable, and become more ingrained over time. One of the main reasons for this stability, according to this view, is that partisanship is causally prior to and has a significant impact on many other political attitudes. In the words of Campbell et al. (1964, p. 76), ‘identification with a party raises a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favourable to his partisan orientation’. Partisanship is therefore seen as an exogenous factor exerting enormous influence on long-term electoral trends.

There are a number of important critiques of this argument. A revisionist view assigns much less significance to party identification as a driver of other political attitudes. For Fiorina (1981, p. 84), partisanship is nothing more than a ‘running tally’ of an individual’s evaluations of party performance. This account treats partisanship as a rational assessment rather than as a psychological attachment. As such, it is much more susceptible to change in response to short-term political events, and not the important explanatory variable that the authors of ‘The American Voter’ assumed. Thomson (2017) provides evidence in support of this revisionist view of partisanship in the Irish case.

A second line of criticism is that party identification has little meaning outside the US. The usefulness of party identification as a concept is tied up with its stability: individuals may change their vote in response to short-term factors, but partisanship is far stickier, and hence a better predictor of future behaviour. However, in some European contexts, party identification was found to covary strongly with the vote (LeDuc 1981; Thomassen 1976). If party identification is synonymous with the vote, it loses its usefulness as an independent variable to explain long-term electoral patterns. The lack of applicability of the concept to many European countries is generally believed to derive from the very importance of political parties in structuring choice. Particularly in list-based electoral systems, where voters are essentially choosing between parties rather than candidates, voters are very unlikely to vote against their party identification. Furthermore, voters in many European countries have
traditionally held strong class and religious identities, and these have been dominant over party identities.

However, these arguments do not necessarily apply to the Irish case, which resembles the US in a number of ways that makes party identification a more useful concept than it is in many other European countries. Voting in Ireland has traditionally not been driven by strong social group or class identities, so party identities could potentially fill this gap. The Irish electoral system is far more candidate-centred than most other European countries, so how you vote and which party you support are not necessarily the same things. As Marsh notes, ‘If party identification proved to be a useful concept anywhere in Europe, Ireland would seem to be a prime candidate’ (Marsh 2006, p. 491).

Yet there are significant measurement issues that arise when applying the concept of party identification outside the US, including in Ireland. The original formulation, still used in American National Election Studies, explicitly focuses on the respondent’s self-identity (‘Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent or what?’). This approach has not been widely exported, for a number of reasons. On a practical level, it is difficult to formulate the question in this way in a multi-party context, particularly when there are no widely used nouns to refer to different partisan groups (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2004, p. 169). It is also more likely that individuals will identify with more than one party in a context where several parties are spread out across the ideological spectrum.

It is more common in European surveys to measure party identification in terms of closeness to a party, and this is the approach used in the Irish National Election Study. The sequence of questions is as follows:

1. ‘Do you usually think of yourself as close to any political party?’
   - [If yes] ‘Which party is that?’
2. [If no] ‘Do you feel yourself a little closer to one of the political parties than the others?’
   - [If yes] ‘Which party is that’?

While this measure is arguably further removed from the concept of psychological attachment than the original formulation, it does focus the respondent’s attention on long-term attachment. Barnes et al. (1988) find that the two approaches produce scales that are highly correlated and similar in terms of reliability.
Most previous research has measured partisanship in terms of the first of these two questions, treating those who reported feeling ‘a little closer’ to one of the parties as non-partisans (Marsh and Tilley 2010; Thomson 2017). However, movement over time from having no party attachment to feeling a little closer to one party (or vice versa) may be an important indicator of realignment or dealignment. This chapter therefore distinguishes between three types of voters: ‘partisans’ (those answering in affirmative to question 1 above); ‘leaners’ (those answering yes to the second question above); and ‘non-partisans’ (those answering no to both questions).

Before proceeding to the main analysis in the next section, I first compare these three different categories of voters using the 2002-2007 INES panel data. The reason for this exercise is to determine whether ‘leaners’ are more like partisans or non-partisans in terms of their voting behaviour and attitudes. This is an important consideration when it comes to interpreting changing levels of partisanship in the aftermath of the financial crisis.

Partisan stability implies that party identifiers will be more stable in their vote over time compared to non-partisans. Table 5.1 compares the stability of voting preferences of our three categories of respondents in the period 2002 to 2007. Respondents are categorised according to whether they voted for the same party in 2002 and 2007 or changed their vote. The second column shows the percentage of respondents who voted for the same party in both elections. As expected, there are significant differences between those who identified with the party they voted for in 2002 and those who did not. For respondents who felt close to the party they voted for in 2002, 77 per cent went on to vote for the party again in 2007. For those categorised as ‘leaners’ in 2002, 64 per cent went on to vote for the party in 2007. In contrast, only 43 per cent of those who did not feel close to the party they voted for in 2002 went on to vote for the party again in 2007.

A similar picture emerges when we look at respondent’s assessments in 2007 of the probability (on a scale of 1-10) that they will ever vote for the party that they voted for in 2002. As reported in the right-hand column in table 5.1, the average probability score is 8.63 for partisans, 7.88 for ‘leaners’ and 6.94 for non-partisans. In both of these sets of analyses, the difference between non-partisans, ‘leaners’ and partisans are statistically significant. Both reported vote and probability to vote therefore tell the same story: partisans have more stable vote preferences over time than ‘leaners’, who in turn have more stable voting preferences than non-partisans.
According to the psychological account, party identification is stable in part because it shapes how people interpret new political information. As Zaller put it, ‘people tend to accept what is congenial to their partisan values and to reject what is not’ (1992, p. 242). For instance, partisans are expected to exhibit bias in how they perceive objective conditions (Bartels 2002). INES respondents in 2007 were asked whether they thought various aspects of the country (the economy, the housing situation, crime, and the health service) had improved or disimproved over the previous five years. Respondents who identified with the main government party (Fianna Fáil) should, according to the theory, be more likely than other respondents to say that things had improved. To ensure that the direction of causation is not the other way around (i.e. respondents develop an identification with Fianna Fáil because they believed that things had improved), respondents are categorised based on their partisanship in 2002.

Each of the four items (economy, housing, crime, health) is measured on a 5-point scale. Where appropriate the items are reversed so that in all cases lower scores indicate that a respondent believed things had improved, while high scores indicate that a respondent thought things had gotten worse. As table 5.2 shows, for all of these items except ‘crime’, respondents who identified with Fianna Fáil in 2002 were significantly more likely to believe that things had improved in 2007. There is no noticeable difference between partisans and ‘leaners’ in this regard. In contrast, those who voted for Fianna Fáil in 2002 but did not claim an attachment to the party were no different than other respondents in how they perceived these conditions.

The evidence presented in tables 1 and 2 shows that partisanship has a significant effect on both the behaviour and attitudes of Irish voters. Partisans are more likely to be stable in their vote choice from one election to the next; and they are more likely to perceive economic and social conditions in a positive light when their party is in office. What is more, these effects are found even among those classified here as ‘leaners’. This is in line with research in the US that finds that voters who describe themselves as ‘Independent’, but in a follow on question admit to feeling closer to one or other of the parties, actually behave very similarly to outright party identifiers (Keith et al. 1992). It is therefore important not to ignore ‘leaners’ when examining trends in party identification over time, which is the focus of the next section.
Changing patterns of party identification in Ireland

As mentioned in the introduction, it is often claimed that the level of mass partisanship is in decline in advanced industrial democracies (e.g. Dalton 2002; Mair 2013). One prominent explanation for this is that dealignment occurs as a result of ‘cognitive mobilisation’. Due to the complexity of politics, making an informed voting decision can be difficult. Rather than making up their minds afresh at each election, voters form long-term attachments to a party, and this serves as a short-cut to help them interpret political information. In this view, party attachments are formed by voters who lack the time and resources to make a fully informed decision. When voters become more politically sophisticated due to higher levels of education and greater access to information, they become less dependent on partisan cues (Dalton 2002, p. 29).

However, such broad-brush theories fail to account for the fact that the patterns of dealignment have not been uniform across countries. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that in some countries the level of partisanship has actually increased in recent years (Andeweg and Farrell, 2017). A more explicitly political explanation is needed to account for such country-specific patterns. One such argument is that the level of party identification is linked to the degree of party polarization in a country (Hetherington 2001; Lupu 2015; Schmitt and Holmberg 1995; Smidt 2015). Party attachments, in this account, are most likely to form during times when clear ideological and policy differences exist between parties. When parties converge, they arouse more muted emotional responses among voters, and voters who come of age at times of party convergence are less likely to form strong attachments. Growing dealignment is therefore a symptom of the narrowing of the policy space between mainstream parties. In contrast to cognitive mobilisation, however, political convergence is not all one-way-traffic. Party systems can undergo periods of polarization as well as convergence, and according to this view we should expect to see increases in party attachment among young voters at such times.

In support of this argument, Hetherington (2001) finds that a resurgence of mass partisanship in the United States has occurred as a result of growing polarization at the elite level. Smidt (2015) finds that independent voters in the US have begun to behave more like loyal party supporters as a consequence of party polarization. In a cross-national study, Lupu (2015) finds a strong correlation between the degree of party polarisation in a country and the level of mass partisanship.
This political explanation for patterns of partisanship fits neatly with the well-developed literature on realignments. There is convincing evidence from the US that periods of gradual dealignment have been reversed by ‘critical elections’ which have revitalised politics and led to an increase in party identification in subsequent years, often along different socio-demographic lines than before. As described by V.O. Key, these are elections ‘in which the depth and intensity of electoral involvement are high, in which more or less profound readjustments occur in the relations of power within the community, and in which new and durable electoral groupings are formed’ (1955, 4). Critical elections are often associated with an increase in party polarization, which is one of the reasons that they can reinvigorate partisanship (Burnham 1970).

As argued in the introduction to this chapter, the 2011 election in Ireland bears all the hallmarks of a critical election. As with other critical elections, it was associated with a noticeable increase in party polarization. This is clear from the INES surveys, where voters are asked where they think each party is located on a left-right scale. Party polarization can be measured using the method recommended by Dalton (2008), which takes account of both the policy positions of parties and their size. According to this measure, which has a theoretical range from zero (when all parties occupy the same position) to ten (when parties are equally divided at opposite ends of the left-right spectrum), party polarization in Ireland was 2.3 in 2002, 2.0 in 2007, 2.7 in 2011 and 3.0 in 2016. This is a very substantial increase in polarization, much higher than the vast majority of cases analyzed by Dalton, who compared changes in polarization across a wide range of established democracies (2008, p. 907).

To test the critical election argument, I examine the evolution of partisanship over the full period of the INES series (2002, 2007, 2011 and 2016), paying particular attention to generational differences. If realignment is taking place, we should observe an increase in the level of partisanship and changes in the direction of partisanship (i.e. which parties people feel close to) in the 2016 election compared to the pre-bailout elections (2002 and 2007), particularly among younger voters. In contrast, if dealignment is continuing, we will observe a pattern of decline in party identification over the period, particularly among younger cohorts.

Turning first to the extent and intensity of partisanship over time, figure 5.1 divides the electorate in each election year into the three categories introduced previously: partisans, ‘leaners’ and non-partisans. Figure 5.1 appears to provide some support for the realignment argument. In 2002 and 2007, almost half the electorate expressed no attachment to a party, while the other half were evenly split between partisans and ‘leaners’. In 2011, non-partisans made up almost two-thirds of the electorate; this was due to a decline in the proportion of partisans (from 27 per cent in 2007 to 21 per
cent) and a very sharp decline in the proportion of ‘leaners’ (from 26 per cent to 15 per cent). This trend was dramatically reversed in 2016. Here we find by far the lowest proportion of non-partisans in the series (at 34 per cent), while the proportion of partisans increased to 31 per cent and the proportion of ‘leaners’ increased to almost 36 per cent. Given that ‘leaners’ exhibit many of the traits of more committed partisans in terms of voting behaviour and attitudinal bias, the sharp increase in the number of ‘leaners’ in 2016 is a potentially important development.

Related to this, parties also evoked stronger feelings among voters in 2016 compared to previous years. Some researchers use the percentage of citizens with positive feelings toward one or more party and negative feelings towards one or more parties as an indicator of partisanship (e.g. Hetherington 2001). In all INES surveys, respondents were asked what they thought about each party in terms of a scale from 0 (strongly dislike) to 10 (strongly like). In 2002, 56% of respondents indicated that they liked one or more party (gave them a score of 7 or more) and also disliked at least one party (gave them a score of 3 or less). By 2016, this increased to 78%, by far the highest of any year in the series.

The realignment argument implies that increases in partisanship should be strongest among younger cohorts. This would be in stark contrast to previously observed patterns in Ireland. Mair and Marsh (2004) found decreasing levels of partisanship in Ireland both over time and across generations in the period 1978-1994: each generation exhibited lower levels of partisanship than its predecessor, and for each generation they observed a decline in party identification over time. This analysis is replicated in figure 5.2 using the INES data. Respondents are divided into three cohorts: those born prior to 1960; those born in the 1960s and 1970s, and those born after 1979. The panel on the left shows the percentage of respondents who are ‘close to’ or ‘a little bit closer to’ a party (i.e. partisans plus ‘leaners’), while the panel on the right excludes ‘leaners’.

The results using the more encompassing measure of partisanship (the left-hand panel) are quite different from those for the earlier period reported in Mair and Marsh (2004). First of all, as we have already seen, there is no consistent pattern over time in the level of partisanship: a decrease in the number of partisans across all generations in 2011 is followed by a sharp increase across all
generations in 2016. Secondly, the generational pattern also changes over time. While in the period 2002-2011, the youngest generation is the least aligned, the reverse is true in 2016. Remarkably, the percentage of aligned voters among the generation born after 1979 (often referred to as the ‘millennial’ generation) increases from 29 per cent in 2011 to 72 per cent in 2016. This is significantly higher than the figure of 61 per cent for the generation born in the 1960s and 1970s, and marginally above that of the oldest cohort (at 69 per cent aligned). This would appear to be a telling piece of evidence in support of the realignment thesis. However, if we exclude ‘leaners’ from our measure of partisanship (see the right-hand panel in figure 5.2), this dramatic change among the youngest cohort disappears. Rather, the youngest cohort remains the least-aligned of the generations using this narrower measure. This suggests that while many young voters acquired party attachments in the wake of the economic crisis, these attachments are rather weak. It remains to be seen whether or not these attachments become more deeply ingrained over time.

To further test the realignment argument, it is necessary to also examine the direction of partisanship. Figure 5.3 plots the proportion of the electorate indicating attachment to each of the main political parties. As before, the panel on the left shows the percentage of partisans including ‘leaners’, while the panel on the right excludes ‘leaners’. It is evident from both graphs that the decline in partisanship in 2011 is accounted for almost entirely by the collapse in the number of voters identifying with Fianna Fáil, from close to 30 per cent (including ‘leaners’) in 2002 and 2007 to 11 per cent in 2011. Fianna Fáil partisanship rebounded somewhat in 2016, but remained far below the pre-crisis level. In contrast, both Fine Gael and Sinn Féin experienced a steady increase in partisan supporters over the period, with Fine Gael marginally ahead of Fianna Fáil as the party with the highest number of partisan identifiers in 2016. Identification with the smaller parties (the category ‘others’ includes at various points the Greens, PDs, AAA-PBP, Social Democrats and Renua) is low for most of the period, but there is a sharp increase in 2016, particularly for the looser measure of partisanship shown in the left-hand panel. Overall, figure 5.3 shows that the patterns of identification in 2016 are much more fragmented than was the case prior to the economic crash.

<FIGURE 5.3>

The consistent rise in identification with Fine Gael is somewhat surprising, given that the party experienced a sharp decline in its vote share in 2016 compared to 2011. It may be that some people who voted for Fine Gael for the first time in 2011 had by 2016 developed an identification with the party, while others proved to be only one-time voters. This interpretation is borne out by the data. Looking at the 2011 INES, only 18 per cent of new Fine Gael voters (i.e. those who did not vote for the
party in 2007) identified with the party in any way. By 2016, a majority (58 per cent) of those who
switched to Fine Gael in 2011 and were now voting for the party for the second successive time
considered themselves to be close to/a little close to the party. So while Fine Gael’s vote share peaked
in 2011, the number of Fine Gael partisans grew considerably in 2016. In total, almost half (46 per
cent) of Fine Gael partisans and leaners in 2016 were relatively new converts to the party, not having
voted for them in 2007; this is far higher than the corresponding figure for Fianna Fáil (at 30 per cent).

As with the level of partisanship, the direction of partisanship can be broken down by generation.
According to the realignment hypothesis, we should expect to find that the changes in the direction
of partisanship illustrated in figure 5.3 are most noticeable amongst the youngest generation. Table
5.3 provides a breakdown of partisanship in 2016 for each of the three generations defined previously.
For completeness, smaller parties are now included separately rather than combining them. Each cell
in table 5.3 shows the percentage of respondents from a particular generation that felt some
identification with the party in question (i.e. partisans plus ‘leaners’; the corresponding figures when
‘leaners’ are excluded are shown in parentheses). Among the oldest generation, Fianna Fáil and Fine
Gael were still the two biggest partisan blocks in 2016 by a considerable margin. Just over half of
respondents from this generation identified with or leaned towards one of these two parties, while
relatively few identified with any other party. The level of identification with Fianna Fáil and Fine
Gael was somewhat lower among the middle generation, and this was not replaced with a noticeable
increase in identification with any other party. As expected it is among the youngest cohort that we
find the most striking patterns. Here, identification with Fine Gael was relatively high (20 per cent if
‘leaners’ are included), but identification with Fianna Fáil (12 per cent) was far lower than it was among
the older cohorts. A number of other parties have substantial numbers of partisans and ‘leaners’
among this cohort, including Sinn Féin (13 per cent), Social Democrats (8 per cent), and AAA-PBP (7
per cent). The increased fragmentation in party identification shown in figure 5.3 is therefore driven
primarily by patterns of identification among the youngest generation’.

<TABLE 5.3>

Conclusion

The literature on realignments distinguishes between critical elections, characterised by dramatic
political change, increased polarization and a rupture in the old patterns of party identification, and
‘cementing’ elections where new patterns become embedded for the next generation of voters
(Wattenberg 1996, p. 138). The findings presented here are not unequivocal, but they do provide
some evidence that elections of 2011 and 2016 should be seen in this light. If 2011 was the year where
old party attachments (at least as far as Fianna Fáil is concerned) were abandoned, by 2016 young
voters in particular had begun to form new political allegiances.

Two pieces of evidence support this conclusion. First, two thirds of respondents in the 2016 INES
survey expressed some level of attachment to a party, which was almost double the figure from the
previous election. The increase in partisanship in 2016 was most evident younger voters who came
of age during this turbulent period; remarkably, voters born after 1979 were more likely to admit to
some party attachment than any other cohort. This is highly unusual in comparison to previous
elections, when younger voters were the least aligned.

Second, the distribution of partisan attachments among parties was noticeably different in 2016
compared to the pre-crisis elections. For example, in 2002 and 2007, almost 30 per cent of the
electorate identified to some extent with Fianna Fáil and less than a quarter identified with another
party; whereas in 2016 only 19 per cent identified in any way with Fianna Fáil and almost half the
electorate identified with a different party. Again, these differences are particularly evident among
the younger generation. This suggests that the fragmentation of the party system that occurred in
2011 and 2016 is likely to persist. Assuming that party identifiers remain loyal to their party, the
extreme volatility of the 2011 and 2016 elections may have been a temporary phenomenon.

Yet while there is evidence of a nascent realignment among Irish voters, it is ultimately too soon after
the critical election of 2011 to say with confidence what the long-term implications will be. The
increase in party identification in 2016 was primarily of the weaker sort – i.e. voters who said they felt
only a little closer to one party than others. The analysis presented earlier in this chapter shows that
these weak partisans do exhibit many of the same behavioural and attitudinal traits associated with
more committed partisans. Nevertheless, it is quite possible that these weak attachments will not
survive into the future. This is particularly so given that some of the parties that voters (particularly
young voters) expressed an attachment to, such as the Social Democrats, were only a few months in
existence at the time of the 2016 election. We should be sceptical of the extent to which voters can
form lasting allegiances to parties in such a short space of time.

To conclude, the question of whether the turbulence of the 2011 and 2016 elections should be seen
as a symptom of dealignment or realignment can only be answered definitively in retrospect. All we
can say from this vantage point is that the evidence to date does not rule out the possibility that we
are in the midst of a realignment that will shape Irish elections over the longer term. Given that most
observers have expected that partisanship would continue its long-term decline in Ireland, even this tentative conclusion may come as something of a surprise.
References


### Tables and Figures

#### Table 5.1: Stability of vote preference by party attachment, 2002-2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Voted for same party in 2007 as 2002 (% respondents)</th>
<th>2007 probability to vote for party voted for in 2002 (mean score)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002 Partisans</td>
<td>77%**</td>
<td>8.63**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002 Leaners</td>
<td>64%**</td>
<td>7.88**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002 Non-partisans</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>6.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>7.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** **p<0.01. Significance calculated in comparison to non-partisans. Partisans/leaners are respondents who said they felt close to/a little closer to the party that they voted for in 2002; non-partisans are respondents who did not feel close to the party they voted for in 2002. Source: INES 2002, 2007.

#### Table 5.2. Perceived changes in conditions between 2002-2007 (respondents grouped according to 2002 partisanship)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Economy (n=1149)</th>
<th>Housing (n=982)</th>
<th>Crime (n=1141)</th>
<th>Health (n=1137)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fianna Fáil Partisans</td>
<td>1.87**</td>
<td>2.48**</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>3.06**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fianna Fáil Leaners</td>
<td>1.90**</td>
<td>2.48**</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>3.37**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fianna Fáil non-partisan voters</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>3.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other respondents</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** **p<0.01. Significance calculated in comparison to ‘Other’ respondents. Lower scores indicate a more positive view of how conditions have changed. Source: INES 2002, 2007.
### Table 5.3: Direction of partisanship 2016, by generation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-1960</th>
<th>1960-1979</th>
<th>1980-</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fianna Fáil</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(15)</td>
<td>(9)</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>(9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fine Gael</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(13)</td>
<td>(9)</td>
<td>(8)</td>
<td>(10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinn Féin</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AAA-PBP</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(0)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Democrats</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>66 (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(37)</td>
<td>(29)</td>
<td>(27)</td>
<td>(31)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** figures without parentheses include ‘leaners’; figures in parentheses exclude ‘leaners’.

Source: INES 2016. Data weighted for demographic factors and party vote shares.
Figure 5.1: Levels of partisanship (INES data), 2002-2016


Figure 5.2: Levels of partisanship 2002-2016, by generation

Including ‘leaners’

Excluding ‘leaners’

Figure 5.3: Direction of partisanship 2002-2016

Including ‘leaners’

Excluding ‘leaners’

Notes

1 Unlike the US, where voters habitually refer to themselves as a Democrat or Republic, nouns are not used to describe partisanship in Ireland (apart from in a derogatory sense, such as ‘Blueshirt’ (Fine Gael supporter) or ‘Shinner’ (Sinn Féin supporter)). One could speculate that the fact that nouns to describe Irish partisan groups are not in common usage is an indication that these groupings are not an important part of people’s identity. On the other hand, lacking a word to describe it does not necessarily imply that people do not consider themselves as part of a partisan grouping.

2 An additional question measuring the intensity of partisanship was also asked, but this chapter focuses on these two basic questions.

3 Respondents who did not vote in one or more of the elections are excluded.

4 This measure is based on the weighted average distance between each party and the policy centre on the left-right dimension (where the policy centre is simply the weighted average of party positions).

5 For 2016, the INES2 data is used.

6 There were some differences in the sampling procedures used for each wave of the INES, which might affect the results. To test this, a sample matching procedure was used (Blackwell et. al. 2009) to select a set of respondents from the 2002 and 2016 surveys that were similar in terms of age, education, political interest, turnout, and left-right self-placement. Using the matched samples, significant differences still remain in terms of the level of party identification. In the unmatched data reported in Figure 5.1 the level of partisanship (including ‘leaners’) is 14.8% higher in 2016 compared to 2002. Using the matched data, the corresponding figure is 12.3%. This suggests that the growth in party identification recorded in the 2016 INES2 survey is not primarily due to differences in the nature of the sample. It should be noted, however, that the level of partisanship found in the 2016 INES2 data is slightly higher than that found in the 2016 exit poll (INES1). Specifically, 27% of voters in the exit poll reported to be close to a party, compared to 32% of self-reported voters in the INES2 post-election survey. It is not possible to examine ‘leaners’ using the exit poll, as the relevant question was not asked.

7 As a robustness check, table 5.3 was replicated using data from the 2016 exit poll (INES1). The exit poll only asked whether or not a respondent felt close to a party; it did not ask the follow-up question that identified ‘leaners’ in the analyses in this chapter. Furthermore, the exit poll differs in that it does not include non-voters in the sample. Overall, the generational patterns in party identification in the exit poll are similar to those found in table 5.3. In particular, party identification among younger respondents in the exit poll is far more fragmented than among older generations. One noticeable difference, however, is that in contrast to the figures shown in table 5.3, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil attract roughly equal numbers of partisan supporters among the youngest generation in the exit poll.