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Are Irish voters moving to the left?

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ABSTRACT

The Irish party system has been an outlier in comparative politics. Ireland never had a left-right divide in parliament, and for decades, the dominant centrist political parties competed around a centre-right policy agenda. The absence of an explicit left-right divide in party competition suggested that Irish voters, on average, occupy centre-right policy preferences. Combining survey data since 1973 and all Irish election studies between 2002 and 2020, we show that the average Irish voter now leans to the centre-left. We also show that income has recently emerged as a predictor of left-right self-placement, and that left-right positions increasingly structure vote choice. These patterns hold when using policy preferences on taxes, spending, and government interventions to reduce inequality as alternative indicators. We outline potential explanations for this leftward shift, and conclude that these developments might be anchored in economic inequalities and the left populist strategies of Sinn Féin.

KEYWORDS Left-right politics; ideology; voter self-placement; political behaviour

Introduction

Since the great recession, brought about by the transatlantic financial crash in 2008, and followed by almost a decade of austerity, Irish politics has experienced significant social change. This is observable in both electoral politics, and within social movements across civil society. At the ballot box, the two dominant centrist and centre-right parties – Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael – have seen their vote share decline to less than 45 per cent. This downward trend had been in place since before 2008, but it was particularly striking in the 2020 election (Cunningham & Marsh, 2021; Little, 2021). Neither party won sufficient seats to form a government, and for the first time in history, they entered a grand coalition together.

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One issue that clearly shaped the 2020 election was unequal access to housing (Elkink & Farrell, 2020b). Sinn Féin won more votes among those voters who cited housing as the number one issue facing Ireland than Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil combined. Sinn Féin also won more votes among the under 35s than Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil combined (Figures A1–A3). Unequal access to housing has been found to increasingly influence electoral politics within advanced capitalist democracies (see Ansell, 2019; Chou & Dancygier, 2021). Urban cities with a concentration of high-growth multinationals tend to have rapidly growing house prices, high levels of market income inequalities, and very unequal access to housing wealth (Fuller, Johnston, & Regan, 2020; Iversen & Soskice, 2019; Piketty, 2018). These dynamics are directly observable in Ireland where Dublin house prices have increased by over 70 per cent since the financial crash, and in urban rental prices, which have increased by over 85 per cent.

Market income inequalities in Ireland – that is, inequalities before state taxes and transfers – are also one of the highest in Europe, and similar to levels observed in the UK and the USA (Collins & Regan, 2021). The bottom 50 per cent's share of gross market income in Ireland is less than 19 per cent. It is over 35 per cent for the top 10 per cent. But after the state taxes and transfers, disposable income inequalities decline to average European levels. This indicates a large low-wage sector, and a highly polarised labour market between lower and higher-earning households. It also suggests that there is a large cohort of voters across the low to lower-middle income distribution that do not *directly* benefit from the economic growth that is generated by Ireland's foreign direct investment (FDI) model.

We think these inequalities are manifesting themselves in voter preferences. Ireland's political economy has created a clear winner and loser dynamic, particularly between those who directly work in the higher-paid multinational sectors, and their associated business-finance services, and those who do not (Brazys & Regan, 2017; Regan & Brazys, 2018). We are interested in whether these changes in the political economy correlate with left-right identification and voting behaviour? Our core claim is simple and parsimonious: we posit that the dominant macro-trend is an increasing left/right polarisation in preferences and political behaviour. We test and analyse this argument more concretely through examining left-right voter placement over time using various data sources, including a harmonised dataset of Irish election surveys between 2002 and 2020, and cross-national surveys published since 1973, including over 150,000 responses of Irish voters' left-right self-placements.

Our results point to a clear and consistent trend: the average Irish voter increasingly self identifies on the centre-left. This is a big socio-structural change from the late 1980s, when Irish voters self-identified firmly on the right (Castles & Mair, 1984; Mair, 1986). In addition, in the 2020 election, we find that income – in contrast to previous elections – is an important predictor

for self-identifying on the left. Those who earn low to middle incomes are most likely to self-identify on the left and to favour economic redistribution. In terms of voting behaviour, in the 2020 election, lower earning voters were most likely to self-identify on the left, and had the highest probability to vote for Sinn Féin. Whether this is something that was unique to the 2020 election remains to be seen. But for now, it seems to us that we are potentially observing a clear left/right realignment of Irish politics.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, we engage the theoretical debate on the determinants of left-right placements. Second, we discuss our data and empirically analyse Irish voter left-right placements over time. Third, we analyse the individual-level determinants that predict left-right placements, and the party choice of these voters in elections between 2002 and 2020. The paper concludes with a theoretical discussion on what might explain these trends.

Explaining left/right preferences

The left-right scale is widely used and understood in comparative politics (Bauer, Barberá, Ackermann, & Venetz, 2017; Caughey, O'Grady, & Warshaw, 2019; De Vries, Hakhverdian, & Lancee, 2013; Jahn, 2011; Knutsen, 1995; Meyer & Wagner, 2020). Over 30 years ago, Peter Mair (1986, pp. 456–457) observed that 'the significance of the terms left and right is less clear in the Irish case, and […] a left-right dimension as such is less meaningful in Ireland than in most other West European countries.' Irish voters were considered to be issue-driven, rather than ideologically oriented (Carty, 1981). We argue that Ireland has now come full circle, and that a left-right ideological cleavage has clearly emerged amongst the electorate. Furthermore, it has become a powerful predictor of party choice.

Left-wing voters tend to favour more economic equality, more state intervention in the economy, higher tax and spend policies, and will typically hold socially liberal views on women's rights, LGBT issues, asylum seekers, and immigration. Right wing voters tend to favour less state intervention in the economy, lower tax and spend policies, market-based income distributions, and will typically hold conservative views on women's rights, LGBT issues, asylum seekers, and immigration. As numerous scholars have pointed out over the years, left-right preferences have proven remarkably consistent in predicting voting behaviour in advanced capitalist democracies. Although, as argued by Leeschaeve (2017), the left-right self-placement scale is typically a much better predictor for the policy positions of *parties* than it is for the policy preferences of voters.

In recent years, using a one-dimensional left-right economic scale to analyse and predict voting behaviour has fallen out of favour. This is mainly because non-economic issues have grown in salience. In Ireland,

given the historical significance of the nationalist cleavage, and the historical dominance of two conservative parties, it was never in favour. Most comparative political science now distinguishes between cultural and economic conflict, and analyses voting behaviour and electoral competition within a two-dimensional space (Beramendi, Häusermann, Kitschelt, & Kriesi, 2015; Caughey et al., 2019; Kitschelt, 1994; Kriesi et al., 2012). The reason for this is the emergence of more and better empirical data showing that many voters simultaneously hold right-wing economic views, and left-liberal cultural views. Equally, some voters have left-wing economic views, and conservative social views. In this two dimensional space, established political parties face conflicting ideological battles, and have to compete with new challenger parties that mobilise on cultural conflict (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020).

There are different political economy theories that seek to explain where economic and cultural preferences come from. But most of them pivot on the structural impact of globalisation (Ford & Jennings, 2020; Frieden, 2019; Langsæther & Stubager, 2019; O'Grady, 2019; Rodrik, 2018; Walter, 2010). The free movement of capital, people and goods has benefitted some voters more than others. In turn, this has reshaped occupational class structure and preference formation in new and interesting ways. What the research consistently shows is that, on average, higher educated voters tend to hold more socially liberal views than those without higher education (Amable & Darcillon, 2021; Beramendi et al., 2015; Piketty, 2020). This is particularly the case when it comes to attitudes toward immigration (Dancygier & Walter, 2015). The question as to *why* education has this effect may be related to economic security. Higher educated voters tend to have higher incomes, and experience higher levels of economic status. Immigration complements rather than challenges their wealth and social status in society (see Gidron & Hall, 2017, 2020).

However, higher educated voters are typically split on the question of economic redistribution. Higher educated voters with *higher incomes*, and who typically work in business-finance market services, tend to hold more right-leaning views on the economy, particularly taxation. Higher educated voters with low to *middle incomes* typically work in the public sector and civil society, and, on average, hold more left leaning views on the economy (Beramendi et al., 2015; Gingrich & Häusermann, 2015). Both sets of voters are socially and culturally liberal, and tend to have favourable attitudes toward open immigration policies. Liberal parties on the green, left and right increasingly compete for the votes of these centrist and professional salaried urban groups, with liberal centre-right parties claiming the lion's share of votes from higher earning voters (Oesch & Rennwald, 2018). This has led to a large research agenda on who is mobilising *lower earning* voters (Häusermann, 2020), and what this means for the future of social democratic parties (Benedetto, Hix, & Mastrorocco, 2020).

What we take from this comparative political economy literature is that education has become an increasingly important predictor for explaining socio-cultural preferences, but that income and wealth remains an important predictor for explaining socio-economic preferences. What dimension and issue becomes salient (for instance, immigration or housing) cannot be identified *a priori,* and depends on the country in question, and the extent to which different political parties mobilise and compete on different issues. In Ireland, for example, immigration has not yet become a politically salient issue in elections in the same way that it has across Western and Eastern/Central Europe. For example, in the 2020 Exit poll, less than 1 per cent of respondents stated that immigration was most important in deciding how to vote (Elkink & Farrell, 2020b). But for the purpose of this paper, and as evidenced by the study of seventeen countries by Amable and Darcillon (2021), we think income and earnings inequality remains an important predictor in shaping left/right economic preferences, and economic conflict more generally. This is what we focus on in the Irish case.

In Ireland, the case for using a two-dimensional space that cuts across economic and cultural conflict is more a case of old wine in new bottles (Marsh, Farrell, & McElroy, 2017). The economic left-right divide never entirely shaped party competition because cultural nationalism was always a dominant force in Irish politics (Hutter & Malet, 2019). But just because the left-right economic divide did not shape the supply-side of party competition, it does not mean it did not exist on the demand side among Irish voters. Fianna Fáil was traditionally anchored in the rural and urban working class, but it never articulated a Social Democratic ideology. Equally, while Fine Gael was typically anchored in the upper middle classes, it never really articulated a Christian Democratic ideology for society. Today, both parties cluster in the European liberal-centre, with Fianna Fail perhaps struggling the most in terms of party identity. Its traditional anchor in the urban and rural working class is now firmly occupied by Sinn Féin (Bauluz, Gethin, Martinez-Toledano, & Morgan, 2021; Costello, 2017; Cunningham & Elkink, 2018).

This paper does not attempt to explain the new supply-side dynamics of party competition in Ireland (see Keenan & McElroy, 2021; Little & Farrell, 2021). All we will note for the moment is that supply often creates its own demand. On the demand side, the left-right divide that we observe in the data may be structurally anchored in the political grievances that some voters have toward perceived economic inequalities. But it may also have taken the emergence of a challenger party with a left wing economic narrative for left voters to identify with and articulate their own interests. In this regard, the structural impact of globalisation on voting behaviour depends on *party strategy*. Supply and demand do not seamlessly connect in real life politics – they are mediated by political parties (Mudge, 2018). This seems to have crystallised in the 2020 election. Hutter and Malet (2019)

show that since the 2008 great financial crash, and the subsequent austerity years, *economic issues* have increasingly divided Irish political parties, and reshaped party competition. Even though Ireland did not experience the emergence of a new challenger party during the austerity years, Hutter and Malet (2019, p. 325) conclude that 'this small restructuration along economic lines looks like a substantial move away from the traditionally unstructured patterns.' We will now analyse whether this correlates with left-right identification and voting behaviour.

Data and methods

In this section, we (1) assess whether there is a consistent leftward trend in the Irish electorate over time, (2) test which factors help explain left-right self-placements, and (3) study whether left-right placement predicts vote choice. To answer these questions, we combine and harmonise various datasets.

First, we rely on a recently published cross-national dataset of voters' left-rights self-placements across developed democracies since the 1970s (Dassonneville, 2021). The dataset includes Eurobarometer surveys, Irish election studies, and waves 1–8 of the European Social Survey. We extend this dataset by adding the 21 Eurobarometer surveys published between 2017 and 2020. These data allow us to test whether Irish voters have changed their left-right positions, whether this shift is driven by certain generations, and whether the developments in Ireland diverge from other European countries.

Second, we combine and harmonise all Irish election studies between 2002 and 2020. Data from the elections in 2002, 2007, 2011, and 2016 come from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES, 2019a, 2019b). The 2002 and 2007 election studies are face-to-face interviews from a panel survey and were conducted in the weeks after the elections (Marsh & Sinnott, 2008; Marsh, Sinnott, Garry, & Kennedy, 2008). The election study in 2011 was conducted by the polling company Red C and consisted of face-to-face interviews. The survey started on 6 March, around two weeks after the general election, and ended on 10 April 2011 (Marsh et al., 2017). The 2016 election study used in this paper was conducted after the election by Red C again, but as a telephone survey, not face-to-face survey (Marsh et al., 2017). The 2020 election study relies on the *Ireland Thinks* online panel and is the only comprehensive survey conducted after the election (Elkink & Farrell, 2020a). We use the version published in November 2020, which contains the most appropriate survey weights (SI Section F). The weighted sample consists of 1,000 respondents. 85 per cent of these respondents completed the survey on election day or the day after the election. 99 per cent of the respondents in this weighted subset completed the survey in February 2020.

Third, we draw on new survey data from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). As noted by McElroy (2017), self-identifying on the left does not necessarily mean voters support left-wing economic policies in practice. The ESRI survey allows us to test for this possibility since their in-person survey explicitly explained the substantive meaning of left and right to respondents (see SI Section C and Timmons, Robertson, & Lunn, 2020).

We develop our empirical analysis using three methodological approaches. First, from a purely descriptive perspective, we compare left-right self-placements in publicly available surveys between 1973 and 2020. Second, we limit the focus on Irish election studies and run linear regression models with the left-right self-placement and attitudes towards taxation and spending as the dependent variables (see, e.g. Cunningham & Elkink, 2018; De Vries et al., 2013 for comparable methodological approaches). The selection of independent and control variables closely mirrors the choice in Cunningham and Elkink (2018). Third, using multinomial logistic regression models we test whether self-identification on the left, policy preferences on taxes and spending, and government interventions to reduce inequality predict vote choice in elections between 2002 and 2020.

Results

Left-right self-placements by Irish voters, 1973–2020

Do we observe a shift towards the centre-left in left-right self-placements? To test this, we first provide purely descriptive evidence of the average left-right positions by Irish voters. Our harmonised dataset covers 47 years of survey data and 152,344 responses of left-right self-placements by eligible Irish voters. To make these results comparable with the election studies, we harmonise the left-right positions to an 11-point scale ranging from 0 to 10.

Figure 1 shows the average left-right self-placements of Irish voters, along with 95 per cent bootstrapped confidence intervals and a smoothed line based on these averages. Roughly speaking, we observe three phases: from the early 1970s until the mid-1980s, the average left-right self-placement was quite constant and usually ranged between 5.5 and 6. Beginning in the late 1980s, however, we observe a first shift towards the left. This could be related to the austerity years and protests in the 1980s. The next change occurred after the global financial crisis. Comparing election surveys from 2007 and 2011, Bowler and Farrell (2017) observe a small shift to the right. We reproduce this analysis in Figure A8. While more voters placed themselves on the centre-right (values between 6 and 9), the proportion of voters who placed themselves on the extreme right (a value of 10) was higher in 2007. With values of 5.8 and 6, the *average* left-right self-placements in 2007 and 2011 are very similar. Our harmonised dataset suggests

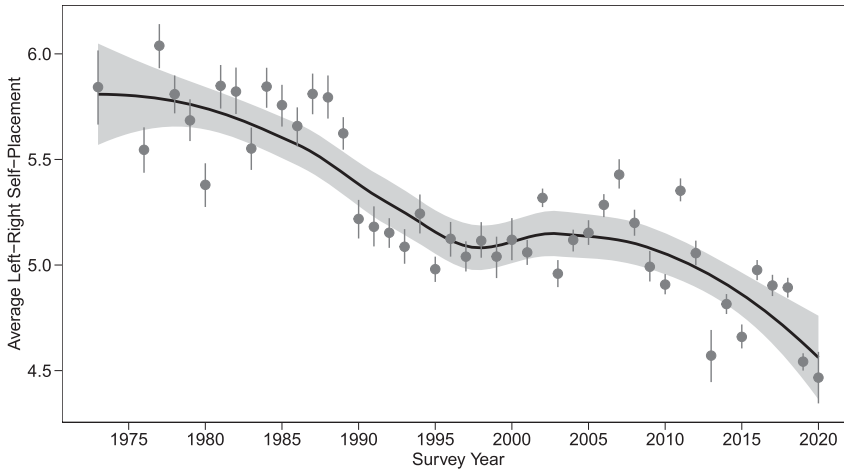

Figure 1. Average left-right self-placements of Irish voters, 1973–2020, based on various surveys.

that Irish voters moved to the left since 2012. In surveys conducted in 2019 and 2020, we observe a further shift to the left. What is more, these trends are observable in all age groups and generations born since 1945 (Figures A4–A5). Irish voters have also moved more to the left than voters in other established European democracies (Figure A6).

These aggregated trends hold when focusing on the results from the election studies since 2002. In 2002, 2007, and 2011 the average left-right placement ranged between 5.8 and 6, with a median of 5 (in 2002 and 2007) and 6 (in 2011). In 2016, the average left-right placement across all respondents moved slightly to the left (5.5), but the distribution of respondents still does not assume a clear trend to the left of the ideological spectrum. The distribution looks very different in 2020. The average and median self-placement amounts to 4.3, a stark divergence from previous elections (Figure A8). What is particularly worthy of note about the distribution in 2020 is the much larger proportion of respondents who placed themselves on a 0 on the 0–10 scale. Yet, even if we exclude all respondents who placed themselves on a 0 from the merged dataset, we still observe a shift to the left.[1]

Is this shift driven by supporters of specific parties? To test for this possibility, we divide up the sample by the expressed first-preference vote choice for each election and estimate the average left-right positions, along with 95 per cent confidence intervals, for voters of each party (Figure 2). The lowest average left-right values for voters from *all* parties occurred in 2020. Even respondents who voted for Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael in 2020, on average, express a slightly more left-leaning attitude. The difference is strongest for supporters of Labour, Sinn Féin, and the Social Democrats. These patterns

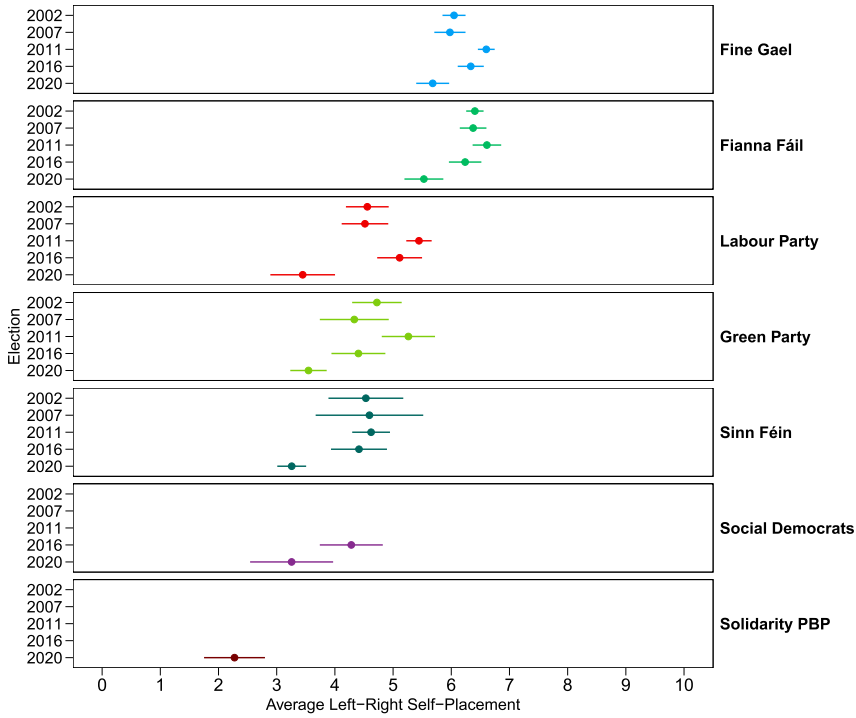

Figure 2. Average-left right self-placements by first-preference vote choice.

hold when excluding respondents who place themselves at 0 on a scale from 0 to 10 (Figure A9). This robustness test accounts for the possibility that some voters may position themselves on the very left to express disapproval with the government, which may not reflect their actual ideological position. To sum up, the descriptive evidence clearly highlights (1) a shift to the left, and that (2) this shift is not driven by respondents who place themselves on the very far left, and that (3) respondents across all parties place themselves more to the left in 2020 compared to respondents who supported the same party in previous elections.

We also investigate whether the results for 2020 might be driven by election-specific circumstances or the sample of respondents who answered the survey. In the Supporting Information, we reproduce the results with a survey conducted by ESRI. This survey includes 1,001 participants and was conducted prior to the launch of the general election campaign. 801 participants were recruited through an online panel between 21 and 25 October 2019. Importantly, the survey explained the substantive meaning of left and right ideology to the respondents (see Appendix for question wording). According to the Irish Polling Indicator (Louwerse, 2016; Louwerse & Müller, 2020) Sinn Féin polled at around 15 per cent at the time when the online survey was

conducted. Thus, this survey took place *before* the surge of Sinn Féin. 200 additional respondents were recruited for a lab experiment in Dublin between 3 and 19 December 2019. Figure A9 shows that respondents in these surveys match the left-right self-placements in the 2020 election survey (with average economic left-right self-placements of around 4), giving us confidence that the 2020 election survey is not a once-off.

In sum, the data collected for this analysis suggests that we observe a shift towards the left. In contrast to Cunningham and Marsh (2021, p. 239) who argue that these developments do not constitute 'huge shifts', we conclude that Irish voters have been consistently moving to the left for some time, and that this demand-side shift is likely to feed into party competition. This shift is much stronger than in other European countries, does not depend on a single survey in 2020, and – from our perspective – constitutes a substantial and meaningful change. We think it is a structural change that is likely to be anchored in the wider political economy of Ireland.

Explaining left-right self-placement in Ireland, 2002–2020

Next, we turn to individual-level predictors of left-right self-placements in Irish general elections. To recall, we expect that *income* has recently emerged as a predictor of left-right placement. Following Cunningham and Elkink (2018), we run linear regressions with the left-right self-placement as the dependent variable. We control for education (whether or not a respondent has a third-level degree), gender, whether a respondent lives in an urban constituency, and age. All of these variables are available in the election studies in 2002, 2007, 2011, 2016, and 2020. Respondents are separated into income quintiles in election studies between 2002 and 2016. In 2020, the question wording about income was slightly different as respondents were asked about their current gross *salary* (six categories). We mirror the variable coding from previous elections by separating respondents into five income categories which largely correspond to income quintiles.[2] Asking respondents about their salary better reflects the impact of market inequalities on left/right preferences, as it is specifically focused on wages earnings. In this regard, we think the 2020 survey is preferable.

Does income correlate with left-right self-placements? Figure 3 shows the expected values of left-right self-placement for the five income categories. Estimates are based on the regression models in Table 1.[3] The coefficients for income in elections between 2002 and 2016 are small and do not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. The expected values of left-right placements in Figure 3 are very similar across the income categories for the first four elections under investigation. In other words, income does not predict a voter's left-right self-placement in 2002, 2007, 2011, and

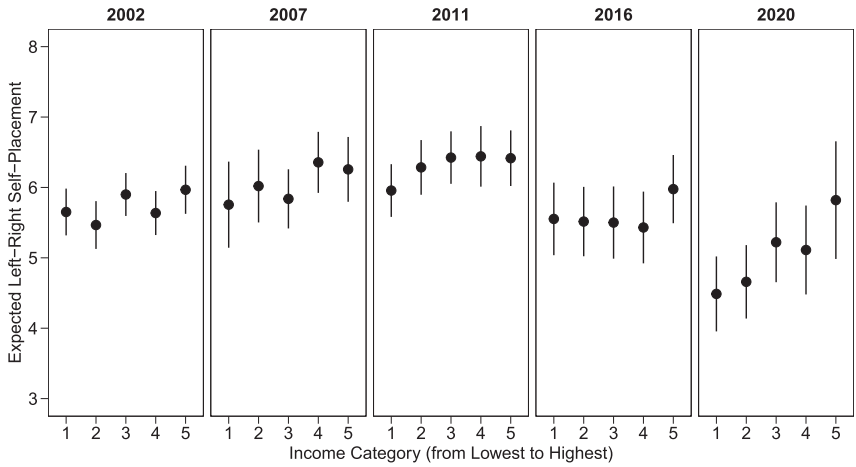

Figure 3. Predicting left-right self-placement conditional on income.

Table 1. Predicting left-right self-placement.

	2002	2007	2011	2016	2020
(Intercept)	4.91***	6.08***	5.82***	5.15***	4.30***
	(0.20)	(0.34)	(0.21)	(0.31)	(0.30)
Income category: 2 (ref.: 1)	−0.19	0.26	0.33	−0.04	0.17
	(0.17)	(0.31)	(0.17)	(0.23)	(0.20)
Income category: 3	0.25	0.08	0.47**	−0.05	0.73**
	(0.16)	(0.29)	(0.17)	(0.25)	(0.24)
Income category: 4	−0.01	0.60*	0.49*	−0.12	0.62*
	(0.16)	(0.30)	(0.21)	(0.24)	(0.29)
Income category: 5	0.32	0.50	0.46*	0.42	1.33***
	(0.18)	(0.31)	(0.19)	(0.23)	(0.38)
Age: 25–34 (ref.: 18–24)	0.69***	−0.75**	−0.26	0.21	0.02
	(0.19)	(0.27)	(0.21)	(0.30)	(0.35)
Age: 35–44	0.74***	−0.33	0.13	0.40	0.19
	(0.19)	(0.27)	(0.22)	(0.30)	(0.36)
Age: 45–54	0.88***	−0.05	0.11	0.60	0.10
	(0.19)	(0.29)	(0.22)	(0.31)	(0.34)
Age: 55–64	0.98***	−0.09	0.13	0.79*	0.81*
	(0.21)	(0.29)	(0.24)	(0.31)	(0.33)
Age: 65+	1.69***	0.79**	0.54*	1.36***	0.74*
	(0.21)	(0.30)	(0.23)	(0.31)	(0.33)
Female	0.07	−0.24	−0.22	−0.34*	−0.10
	(0.10)	(0.15)	(0.11)	(0.15)	(0.16)
Urban constituency	−0.34**	−0.87***	−0.32**	−0.20	−0.20
	(0.11)	(0.16)	(0.12)	(0.15)	(0.17)
University degree	−0.53***	−0.66**	−0.15	−0.13	−0.43*
	(0.16)	(0.20)	(0.14)	(0.16)	(0.17)
R^2	0.06	0.11	0.04	0.05	0.05
Adj. R^2	0.06	0.09	0.03	0.04	0.04
Num. obs.	1643	797	1095	816	921

Notes: 95 per cent confidence intervals in parentheses. All models include survey weights.

2016. However, in the 2020 election, income does predict left-right self-placement. Respondents in lower income categories tend to place themselves more to the left than high income earners. In other words, while high-income earners in 2020 have similar left-right self-placements than high-income earners in previous elections, it is low-to-middle earning voters that have moved to the left in 2020 (see also Figure A11). This might be because the 2020 data explicitly asks about *salaries*, which will exclude pensioners, and therefore better captures the left/right preferences of low wage earners in the labour market. But if pensioners are excluded from the classification of 'low income' in 2020, but not previous surveys, it may skew the findings, as older voters are more likely to identify on the right. We test for this by excluding pensioners from all election studies and rerunning our analysis. We still observe a shift to the left across lower- and middle-income earners in 2020 (Figure A12).

The control variables in Table 1 offer additional insights into ideological placements. Across all elections, age is an important predictor of left-right self-placement: older voters tend to place themselves more to the right than younger voters. Voters in urban constituencies tend to be slightly more on the left, but this difference is not statistically significant in 2016 and 2020. In line with evidence from other countries, respondents with a university degree tend to place themselves more to the left. In 2020, female respondents were not more likely to identify themselves on the left. In Table A1, we rerun the model for 2020 using different dependent variables: (1) attitudes towards reducing income and wealth, and (2) increasing taxes and public spending. As expected, voters with higher incomes tend to disagree with the statement that the government should act to reduce differences in income and wealth. Lower-income voters tend to agree more that the government should increase taxes a lot and spend much more on health and social services.

To test the robustness of these findings, we also run random forest models with left-right self-placement as the dependent variable (SI Section E). Random forest models allow us to assess the relative importance of independent variables. We report the mean decrease in accuracy for the set of variables we include in our regression models (for similar approaches see Bowler, McElroy, & Müller, 2021; Elkink & Farrell, 2021). In 2020, income is the most important predictor of left-right self-placement, followed by gender and age. In previous elections, and in line with the comparative political economy literature, education (2002), urban vs. rural respondents (2007), and age (2011, 2016) were the strongest predictors of left-right self-placements. It is important to recall though that the 2020 election survey explicitly asked about *salaries,* and may better capture the dynamics of *wage* inequalities.

Predicting vote choice in Irish elections, 2002–2020

The previous section underscores that various individual-level attributes predict self-right self-placement. But does left-right self-placement also shape vote choice? To answer this question, we run multinomial logistic regression models with the expressed first-preference vote choice as the dependent variable for each election.[4] Following previous studies, we treat first-preference vote choice as a sincere expression of party support (e.g. Benoit & Marsh, 2008; Müller & Kneafsey, 2021). We include the same control variables as in Table 1 and apply survey weights.

Figure 4 plots the predicted values for each election and party. Each facet plots the probability of voting for a party conditional on respondents' left-right self-placement. In all elections since 2002, left-right self-placement is

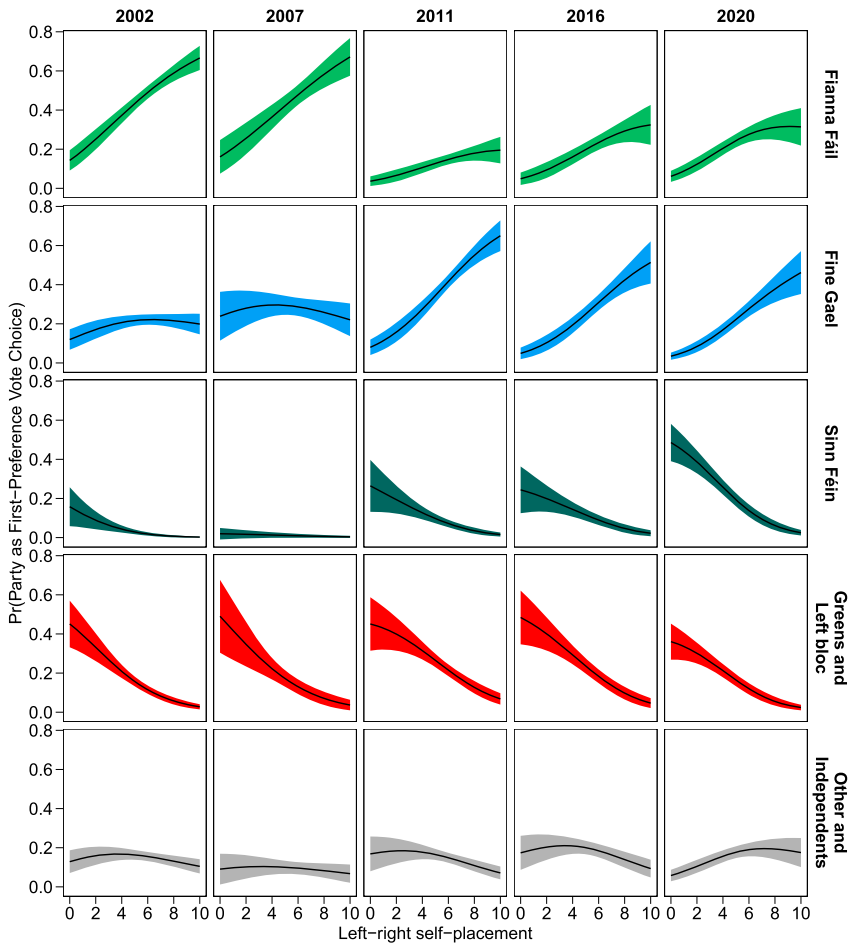

Figure 4. Predicting vote choice conditional on left-right self-placements.

a strong predictor of casting the first-preference vote for a Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael candidate. Full estimates are provided in Table A2. In 2002 and 2007, voters who placed themselves on the right were very likely to vote for Fianna Fail, with probabilities exceeding 0.6. In the same elections, this pattern was weaker for Fine Gael. Yet, since 2011 voters who place themselves on the centre-right or right are most likely to vote for Fine Gael. Voters who place themselves on the left or centre-left (values between 0 and 4) rarely vote Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

A different pattern emerges for Sinn Féin, the Greens, and parties from what we call the 'Left bloc' (Social Democrats, Labour, and People Before Profit). In 2020, respondents who placed themselves on the far-left were very likely to cast their first-preference vote for a Sinn Féin candidate. This trend is also evident in 2011 and 2016, even though the probabilities are lower given that Sinn Féin received – overall – less support than in 2020. In all elections since 2002, left-right self-placement is also a significant predictor of voting for the Greens, Labour, the Social Democrats, and Solidarity–People Before Profit. In sum, Figure 4 indicates that left-right self-placement significantly structures party choice in Ireland, and that the left-right divide seems to be most pronounced in 2020.

We next test whether these patterns are consistent with alternative indicators of left/right socio-economic preferences. For the 2020 election, we replace left-right self-placement with support for the statement that the 'government should reduce differences in income and wealth' (Figure 5) and attitudes towards 'more taxes and spending' (Figure 6), and rerun the multinomial logistic regression models (Table A3). Figure 5 indicates a clear divide between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael on the one side, and Sinn Féin, the Greens and the Left bloc on the other side. Voters who disagree that

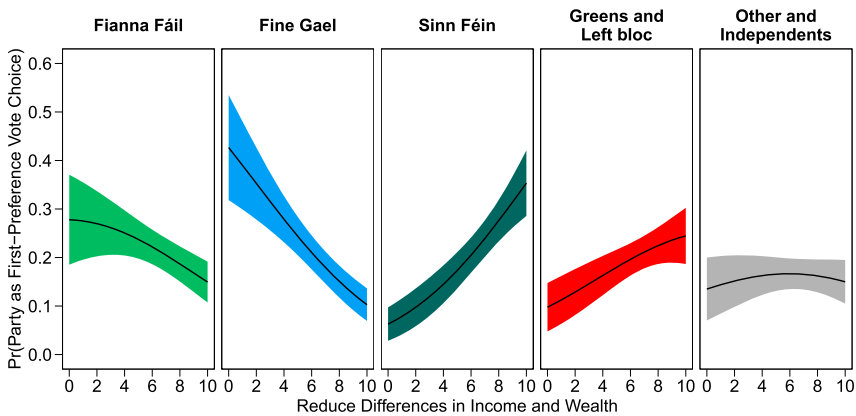

Figure 5. Predicting vote choice in the 2020 general election conditional on attitudes towards reducing differences in income and wealth.

Figure 6. Predicting vote choice in the 2020 general election conditional on attitudes towards taxes and spending.

the government should reduce income and wealth inequalities are much more likely to vote Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, while voters with the opposite view tend to vote for Sinn Féin, the Greens and parties of the Left bloc. The findings on taxes and spending are somewhat less clear, but we observe that strong levels of support increase the probability of voting for the Left bloc and reduce the probability of voting for Fine Gael (Figure 6).

Discussion

Our findings suggest that the average Irish voter increasingly self-identifies on the centre-left, and that these same self-identified left voters hold consistent and coherent socio-economic policy preferences. We think that this trend is a significant structural shift that reflects a growing left-right ideological split amongst the electorate, and a trend that will increasingly impact on Irish politics. In 2020, one of the main predictors for self-identification on the left-right scale is income. Lower-earning voters were most likely to identify on the left, whereas higher earning voters were most likely to identify on the right. In addition, women, young people, and those with a university degree were also more likely to identify on the left. Older and more religious voters were more likely to identify on the right.

Generalising somewhat, and in relation to the wider comparative political economy literature, we can argue that it is younger people with university degrees on lower-earnings that are perhaps the *most* likely to self-identify on the left, whereas older, higher-earning voters without a university degree are *most* likely to identify on the right. But perhaps most importantly, the left/right self-identification *in itself* has become a very powerful predictor of voting behaviour (see also Elkink & Farrell, 2021). This is perhaps the most

important empirical takeaway from our paper. Those who identify themselves on the left are more likely to vote Sinn Féin and the wider Left bloc (Greens, Social Democrats, Labour, S-BFP), whereas those who self-identify on the right are more likely to vote Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, or small parties and Independent candidates. This would suggest that Irish politics is increasingly realigning along a very clear left/right economic axis, and that voters have a clear sense of which parties reflect their ideological preferences.

What explains these clear patterns and trends? We have not systematically tested different theoretical hypotheses to this question, and leave it for future research. But as mentioned in the introduction, we think it is correlated and nested within the changing structure of the Irish political economy, and the economic inequalities associated with this. There are two dimensions that merit further consideration here. First, there has been a significant expansion of the graduate workforce, and a growth in the number of younger voters with university education. This in itself, according to comparative political economy models, creates a more socially liberal voter, but not necessarily a *left-leaning economic voter*. We think the latter is much more likely to be influenced by wealth and income position. Since the financial crash, and subsequent economic recovery, lower earning households increasingly feel aggrieved about certain economic issues, such as unequal access to housing, which was an issue that clearly manifested itself in the 2020 election. In addition, these voters are more likely to be younger voters on stagnant wages in expensive housing (Roantree, Maître, McTague, & Privalko, 2021). Future research would do well to examine the relationship between unequal access to housing wealth, wage inequalities, and how this impacts preference formation and voting behaviour.

Second, our findings suggest that in 2020 these lower earning voters were not only more likely to self-identify on the left, but that they held consistent policy preferences. Given their earnings, these voters are less likely to be working in the higher-paid business-finance sectors of the economy, and are therefore less likely to directly experience the benefits that accrue from Ireland's foreign direct investment growth model. And while those who identify on the left are more likely to vote for Sinn Féin, Greens, and the wider left bloc, it is lower earning left voters that have a stronger probability of voting for Sinn Féin. This begs the question whether it was the explicit left populist strategies of Sinn Féin – focused on economic inequalities – that have 'supplied' this left-leaning identity amongst lower income voters in 2020? To test for this systematically is beyond the scope of our paper. But it does suggest that Ireland might increasingly look like Western Europe of old, where social democratic parties mobilised low to middle income households through politicising economic-class based issues. In these countries, cultural conflict has now become a more salient issue for the left, whereas Ireland would appear to be going in the opposite direction.

Notes

1. The averages after excluding respondents who placed themselves on 0 amount to 5.97 (2002), 5.86 (2007); 6.04 (2011), 5.62 (2016) and 4.75 (2020).
2. The recoded income categories for the 2020 data are as follows: (1) Less than €20,000; (2) €20,000–€40,000; (3) €40,000–€60,000; (4) €60,000–€80,000; (5) over €80,000.
3. The remaining covariates are held constant at: Age: 35–44, Gender: male; No university degree; Rural area.
4. We merge the first-preference votes to the Greens, Social Democrats, Labour, and Solidarity–People before Profit into one category called 'Left bloc'.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data and R scripts required to verify the reproducibility of the results in this article are available on Harvard Dataverse at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/0HCREG.

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