RESEARCH NOTE

Q1 The unfaithful Irish voter

Q3 Michael Marsh

Q4 Trinity, Dublin

A long time ago in (what might seem like) a country far, far away, an RTE current affairs programme pictured local politicians standing on a rural hilltop and identifying all the households in view as Fianna Fáil, or (less commonly) Fine Gael. The Irish political system is no longer so dominated by these two parties; perhaps it no longer seems so dominated by parties at all. We now have many more parties represented at all levels of politics and Irish politics is remarkable, in international perspective, for the strong presence of independents both in and out of government (Weeks, 2017). It is also apparent that 'party' itself seems to carry less weight with many voters than it once did. Polls in the 1970s found most voters happy to identify with a party (Carty, 1981; Mair, 1987); in recent years, this figure is less than half of what it was then (Costello, 2018; Marsh, 2006; Thomson, 2017), and possibly lower again relative to what it might have been in the 1950s had polls been available and appropriate questions asked. We still characterise elections in terms of party performance. This is fair enough, but support won by parties is arguably very conditional, based on a candidate's achievements or locality, or (perhaps less often) based on party performance or stances on salient issues. (The 2011 election may be exceptional in being substantially driven by the government's perceived responsibility for the economic crash.)

We see this manifested in many ways. Vote transfers in general elections are much less likely to stay within the party fold than they were 40 years ago, and various waves of Irish National Election Studies (INES) found that large numbers of people who gave a party their first preference did not give the same party their second, even when the party has other candidates on the ballot (Cunningham, 2018). We also see a lot of volatility in party choices. This was very clear in the 2007–11 period, and again over 2011–16. We also see variations in outcomes between elections held at the same time, as local and European Parliament elections have been since 1999.

This was particularly striking in 2019. Typically, when we have local and European elections at the same time the parties perform similarly in each of them. We have seen some variations in support for some parties at some times, but in 2019 there were striking differences. Fianna Fáil's local election vote was 10 points better than its European election result. For parties

Q5 CONTACT Michael Marsh mmarsh@tcd.ie

© 2019 Political Studies Association of Ireland

winning at least 10% of the vote in at least one of the elections, the average difference between the two was 5 percentage points, suggesting significant volatility, far more than we appear to have seen in the past. This note explores that volatility, and compares it with what has been seen in pairs of elections from 2004 onwards.

In 2019 at least 15/100 voters did not support the same party in the locals as they did in the Europeans. We know that because the results were different and, as turnout figures were effectively the same, it would require at least 15% of voters to behave differently to account for the different outcomes. This is higher than in previous pairs of these elections where the range is between 3 and 9, averaging just 7.

However, we know that this picture of volatility, sometimes called net volatility, can be a huge underestimation of what happens at the level of individuals: that is, the number of people who voted in a different way in one election to the way they voted in the other. The general elections of 2002 and 2007 gave almost the same outcomes, with net volatility only five, but my analysis of the INES panel study 2002–7 (Marsh et al., 2008; Marsh, Farrell, & McElroy, 2017) tells us that, of those voting in both elections, less than two-thirds voted the same way in each of them.¹ In that case the two elections were separated by five years. Do we see such volatility when they occur at the same time? For the various pairs of elections we have RTE exit polls based on over 3,000 respondents reporting choices in both elections. The evidence from the 2019 exit poll is that the percentage of voters behaving differently across the two sets of elections was not 15%, but 49%, more than three times the figure apparent from the aggregate results, and constituting a near majority of those voting.

Table 1. Voting in 2019 elections.

Parties	2019 Local election	2019 EP election	2019 Either EP or local	2019 Both EP and local
FG	25	30	39	17
FF	27	17	33	12
SF	10	12	15	7
Labour	6	3	8	1
Greens	5	11	13	3
Social Democrats	2	1	2	1
SP/PBP	2	2	3	1
Independents	20	23	34	9
Others	3	1	2	*
Total	100	100	149	51

*Less than 1%.

Note: Official results (cols 2 & 3) and analysis of Red C/RTE Exit poll (cols 4 and 5). Poll weighted to correspond as far as possible to official results. Independent Alliance and Independents4Change grouped together with independents.

The basic analysis is summarised in Table 1. It shows results in each of the two elections in columns 2 and 3 and the extent of underlying consistency and inconsistency in columns 4 and 5. These last two indicate first the proportion of voters in each party who voted for it in at least one of the two elections, and second the proportion who voted for the party in both. Each party attracted more voters across the two elections than it attracted in either of them, but a significant part of that support was confined to just one of the two elections. So, Fine Gael drew a vote from 39% of voters, far ahead of the figure it won in either election, and Fianna Fáil similarly won the support of 33%.

The sort of potential demonstrated in the either/or vote is not always realised, as we see in the final column. Fine Gael got the consistent support across both elections of just 17% and Fianna Fáil of 12%, in each case well under half of the totals in column 4. In the case of independents, only a quarter of the number supporting such non-party candidate in at least one election did so in both of them.

Particular candidates are crucial to the independent vote, and candidate availability may account for why some voters for the smaller parties do not stay with that party across both elections. The Greens, for example, did not field candidates in many rural council districts, but this is hardly true of the bigger parties and hence most voters' inconsistency cannot be explained in those terms. In sum, these figures reveal the fragility in the support on which parties draw. Some voters are dependable, but significant numbers are not. Parties' success at mobilising their potential will vary across time. Various waves of INES have allowed researchers to explore this systematically, showing how big is the overlap in the support bases of different parties. These analyses have shown quite clearly that Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil do not fish in different pools, and that most parties do share some of their potential support with several other parties (Marsh 2006; van der Eijk & Elkind, 2017).

Table 2. Voting in pairs of simultaneous elections 2004–14.

	2004		2009		2014	
	Either EP or local	Both EP and local	Either EP or local	Both EP and local	Either EP or local	Both EP and local
FG	40	16	40	22	31	15
FF	41	21	34	16	30	14
SF	12	7	13	5	21	12
Labour	16	6	21	8	10	3
Greens	6	2	3	1	7	2
Independents	23	5	23	5	34	11
Others	2	1	9	*	5	*
Total	140	58	143	57	138	57

*Less than 1%.

Note: samples weighted as far as possible to correct election outcomes. 2004 from INES 2002–7 panel study, 2009 from Lansdowne /RTE exit poll and 2014 from B&A/RTE exit poll.

Table 2 indicates how 2019 compares with earlier sets of elections. Data is available for 2004, 2009 and 2014. The main question to be answered here is whether 2019 is different, and if so in what way.

The answer is that 2019 does mark a high point (to date) for volatility. The percentage voting the same way in both elections was much the same in 2004, 2009 and 2014, around 57%, and in each of these years it was higher than in 2019. The sum of those voting for a party in at least one of the elections is also lower in these years than in 2019. As far as individual parties are concerned it is perhaps not surprising to see Fianna Fáil's support decline across these three sets of elections, but while what we might term its gross support (either local or European) rose in 2019, its loyal support (local and European) fell further. Fine Gael had a poor election in 2014 and now looks stronger; Sinn Féin had a good election in 2014 and now looks weaker.

The Red C/RTE exit poll of 2019 also asked people how they would vote in the event of a general election. This allows us to see how these different groups of voters might translate their local and/or European support into support in a Dáil election. Some 12% of voters were uncertain; the analysis here is confined to those who did give a preference. Of course, this is only a voting intention, not a general election vote, but it does enable us to see how far voters separate their choices across different sorts of elections.

Of those indicating support for a party in a forthcoming general election, 47 had said that they supported that party in both local and European elections, 23% just in the locals, 13% just in the Europeans and a remarkable 17% in neither of them.² In other words, more than one in six of those who indicated support for a party in a forthcoming general election gave their support to other parties in the 2019 elections! (And this ignores those who did not vote at all, but who will vote in the next general election.)

There are some variations by party here, as we would expect, given their different performances in the two 2019 elections, but in almost all cases around a half (at best) of each party's (next) general election voters gave that party their support in both elections. In the case of the smaller parties this figure was closer to a quarter. Fianna Fáil was perhaps below par with only 44% giving consistent support. In all parties except the Greens local

Table 3. Correspondence of European and local vote and Dáil vote intention.

Year	Supported party in neither election	Supported party only in Europeans	Supported party only in locals	Supported party in both elections	Total
2019	17	13	23	47	100
2014	16	10	20	54	100
2009	20	10	21	49	100
2004	10	1	20	56	100

Sources: 2004 from INES panel study, 2009 from Lansdowne /RTE exit poll, 2014 from B&A/RTE exit poll and 2019 from Red C/RTE exit poll. Samples weighted as far as possible to correct election outcomes.

only supporters exceeded European only supporters, although in the case of Fine Gael the two figures were the same.

Table 3 shows the figures for 2019 and for earlier years. Fewer seem to have supported ‘their’ party in both elections in 2019 than in 2004 and 2014, but no less than in 2009, but these differences are barely significant. Essentially the pattern is the same across all four cases. Half support a party in both local and European elections that they would vote for in a general election, one fifth in the locals only and around one tenth in the European only.³

The impression given by Table 3 is that local support is more likely to translate into support in a general election than European election support, when either is seen in isolation. To assess this more clearly we can estimate the chances of voting for a party conditional on support in a local election, a European election, both or neither. This has been calculated for the studies used above, 2004–19, and again the samples are reweighted to accord to actual outcomes in the appropriate local and European elections. Figure 1 shows the results. In 2019, support in the Euros only gave a probability of support for a party of .30, whereas a local support (in the absence of Euro support) a probability of support of .50. Support in both makes it very likely a voter will express support in a general election (.87) whereas support in neither makes it very unlikely (.03). These differences are highly significant. Moreover, they are reproduced in the analysis of 2004, 2009 and 2014. In all cases, local

Figure 1. Probability of vote intention for a party conditional on local and European vote 2004–2019.

Note: see Table 3 for sources. Probabilities are from a simple logit analysis with Euro, local and an interaction term using a stacked data format.

election support is a better predictor of hypothetical general election support. However, it is also clear that support in just one of these is typically associated with a chance of supporting that party in a general election of less than 50%. Moreover, the fact that close to 90% of those supporting a party in both
 205 intend to vote for it in a general election must be balanced against that fact that so few voters do vote for the same party in both elections.

The elections of May 2019 did show particularly high levels of volatility, in the sense that voters chose different parties in the two elections. That said, high volatility has been common over the last 15 years at least, with voters
 210 more than willing to pick one party in the local elections and another in the Europeans. When it comes to the relationship between vote in these elections and intended vote in the next general election, 2019 looks less remarkable. Voters link local and Dáil elections more closely than they do European and Dáil elections. Although local and Dáil are separated, European elections
 215 are even more different. Arguably, big constituencies and some big personalities account for some of this, although there may also be room for voter concerns about issues to be dealt with at EU level. That is a topic for more research. Exit polls typically lack appropriate questions. European election studies typically lack any questions on the local election. What is clear is
 220 that voter behaviour in these pairs of elections underlines the shallow nature of party loyalties in the electorate.

Notes

- 225 1. Assessments of individual volatility are usually based on a recall of past vote, which is biased against change. One advantage of what follows is that it is not based on such questions.
2. It should be said that the question on future vote intention is asked after those on European and local votes, sometimes well after.
- 230 3. The INES 2002–7 panel study allows us to see how people did vote at the general election three years later. The figures are similar to those for 2004 voting intention: 20, 14, 18 and 48. The main difference is that many more people voted for a party they did not support in 2004. This reflects the considerable upturn in Fianna Fáil support in 2007 relative to 2004.

Disclosure statement

Q10 No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- 240 **Q12** Carty, R. K. (1981). *Party and parish pump*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
 Costello, R. (2018). Party identification in the wake of the crisis. In M. Marsh, D. M. Farrell,
Q14 Q13 & T. Reidy (Eds.), *Ireland's post-crisis election* (pp. 82–98). Manchester University Press.

- Cunningham, K. (2018). Mining the ballot. In M. Marsh, D. M. Farrell, & T. Reidy (Eds.), *Ireland's post-crisis election* (pp. 14–32). Manchester University Press.
- Mair, P. (1987). *The changing Irish party system: Organisation, ideology and electoral competition*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Marsh, M. (2006a). Party identification in Ireland: An insecure anchor for a floating party system. *Electoral Studies*, 25(3), 489–508.
- Marsh, M. (2006b). Stability and change in structure of electoral competition 1989–2002. In D. Payne, J. Garry, & N. Hardiman (Eds.), *Facing change in a new Ireland: An analysis* (pp. 94–111). Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Marsh, M., Farrell, D. M., & McElroy, G. (Eds.). (2017). *A conservative revolution*. Oxford University Press.
- Thomson, R. (2017). The malleable nature of party identification. In M. Marsh, D. M. Farrell, & G. McElroy (Eds.), *A conservative revolution* (pp. 123–142). Oxford University Press.
- van der Eijk, C., & Elkind, J. A. (2017). How generational replacement undermined the electoral resilience of Fianna Fáil. In M. Marsh, D. M. Farrell, & G. McElroy (Eds.), *A conservative revolution* (pp. 102–122). Oxford University Press.
- Weeks, L. (2017). *Independents in Irish democracy*. Manchester University Press.