

Chapter 11: The evolving nature of the Irish policy space

Lisa Keenan and Gail McElroy

Introduction:

If there was a leitmotif of the 2020 campaign it was the repeated reference to a need and widespread desire for change. Indeed, ‘time for change’ was the introductory heading of Sinn Féin’s manifesto.¹ Similarly, the Social Democrats wanted to ‘help move Ireland in a new direction’ away from ‘the same old ways of doing politics’,² while Solidarity-People Before Profit pitched themselves as the alternative to ‘the same establishment parties that have run this country for nearly a century’.³ Overall, parties of the left went to great lengths to sell themselves as vehicles of transformation, with claims that they offered very distinct alternatives to Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

In this chapter we explore the nature and extent of these differences for the main parties competing in the 2020 election. We begin by exploring parties’ Left-Right positions over time, as revealed through their candidates’ political preferences. Next, we proceed to compare the parties own views on their left-right placement with their placement by their competitors. Finally, we explore differences between the parties across specific policy areas in 2020. In the process, we aim to answer the following questions: Where do Irish political parties fall along the left-right spectrum? Has their placement changed substantially over time? On what issues are the parties most similar and different? How distinct are Irish parties from each other on issues such as climate change and economic redistribution, for example? Are Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael really flip sides of the same coin? And is Sinn Féin really the far left alternative that it has presented itself as? In order to explore these policy issues we draw on a unique database of candidate surveys covering general elections between 2007 and 2020.

The Irish *Comparative Candidate Survey (CCS)*

Run in the immediate aftermath of each general election since 2007, the Irish *Comparative Candidate Survey (CCS)* is part of a cross-national project that aims to collect comparable data covering the views and campaign experiences of candidates running in elections to national parliaments around the world. In Ireland, the *CCS* consists of a

hardcopy questionnaire that is sent to every single individual whose name appeared on a constituency ballot paper. In 2020, for instance, 531 names in total appeared on these constituency ballots, representing 520 individual candidates.⁴ 519⁵ of these candidates were mailed a packet containing a twelve-page survey on 8 February 2020, the day of the general election, along with a freepost envelope to return the booklet to the research team. Surveys take between 20 and 25 minutes to complete. A reminder postcard was sent to all candidates two weeks after the initial mailing. Data collection continued throughout the spring. As of mid May 2020, 111 booklets were returned to the research team, representing a response rate of 21 percent.⁶

The overall response rate for the surveys conducted in 2007, 2011, 2016 and 2020 is provided in Table 11.1. This has varied by election, with nearly half of respondents replying in 2011 but just over a third in 2016 and only a fifth in 2020. The response rate varies by party also, with Labour Party and Green Party candidates tending to return the surveys more often. It is also worth mentioning that the overall response rates for the Irish CCS have been at or above international averages for similar studies. For instance, in the 2017 German election survey, where only a representative sample of all candidates were surveyed, the final response rate was 32 per cent. In the UK in 2017, the final response rate (in a two-wave study) was 25 per cent, while in Italy in 2013 it was just 23 per cent.

[TABLE 11.1 ABOUT HERE]

The survey contains six different modules, covering issues such as the candidate's experience on the campaign trail, their ideological beliefs, their views on democracy and (more recently) their outlook on life. These surveys are completely anonymous (meaning that respondents cannot be identified by the research team).

There are several other ways of exploring parties' policy positions. We could, for instance, compare the election manifestos of the parties, we could examine the leadership debates, or we could ask experts, such as journalists and academics, to estimate the parties' positions. Each method has its own advantages and drawbacks. In what follows, we use candidates' answers to questions about their own ideological positions and beliefs, as well as their placement of the parties along a general left-right political spectrum. We then aggregate these responses by party to produce overall party positions that are reflective of

the views of their general election candidates.⁷ We compare these overall party positions below.

Party Movement Over Time

This section compares the main Irish political parties with one another using a general left-right measure to capture the parties' positions. We do this by exploring where candidates choose to place their own parties in response to the following question: 'In politics, people sometimes talk about the 'left' and the 'right'. Where would you place your own views and the views of some Irish parties on a scale of 0 to 10? Where 0 represents Left and 10 represents Right.'⁸ Responses can take any value between zero and ten. These items are presented to respondents in a single graphical matrix, enabling them to position the parties in relation to one another across the spectrum with ease prior to making their choice. This means that we can be confident that when respondents are making their selection they are thinking about how close the parties are to one another (e.g. is Fianna Fáil closer to Fine Gael or the Labour Party?) rather than placing each party on the 11-point scale independently of one another.

In addition to party placement by candidates for each general election at which a candidate study was carried out (2007, 2011, 2016 and 2020), we include in our analysis this data from the *Local Election Candidate Study (LECS)* in 2014 and 2019. The *LECS* is an equivalent candidate study that has been carried out at local elections in Ireland since 2014. Modelled after the *CCS*, it aims to gather data on the demographics and views of candidates in Ireland's local elections. The response rate for this candidate study has thus far been in line with, or higher than, that of the *CCS* (at 40 and 31 per cent in 2014 and 2019 respectively).

Figure 11.1 presents the mean scores over time for the party positions of the main political parties. These means are computed from the scores provided by candidates running for that political party only (i.e. the score for Fine Gael is provided by Fine Gael candidates only and so on).

The first thing to note is the high degree of consistency of the mean party positions across the left-right political spectrum over time. None of the parties substantially changes position across the six elections for which we have data. The second thing to note is that while the candidates do not make use of the full left-right spectrum when positioning the

main parties in the Irish political system, it is clear that they do still make important distinctions between themselves (recall that higher values on this scale indicate a position that is farther to the right of the political spectrum). The third thing that is worth noting, unlike the case with many other European nations, is how there are no parties on the far right of the spectrum or even close to this position. None of the main political parties in Ireland self-define as clearly right-wing.

[FIG. 11.1. ABOUT HERE]

Overall, Fine Gael is consistently positioned farthest to the right, with Fianna Fáil falling relatively close to it. These two parties have staked out the centre, centre-right ideological space, with the remaining three parties (Labour, the Greens, and Sinn Féin) fanning out across the left of the political spectrum. Labour and the Greens start the period with a full point between their mean scores, but this difference narrows progressively over time, so that by the 2016 election the parties' positions are indistinguishable from one another. We see a little separation in 2020, with Labour positioned very slightly to the left of the Greens. By contrast, Sinn Féin consistently finds itself the farthest to the left across the period, with the party's position pulling away from its nearest neighbour (Labour) in 2007, and moving slightly towards the left by 2020, at the end of the period.

With relatively small movements in the positions on the left-right spectrum the most striking conclusion that we can draw from this initial analysis is the extent to which the party positions remain largely consistent between 2007 and 2020. Fine Gael begins and ends the period in the same position. The same can be said of Fianna Fáil, Labour, and the Green Party; with their 2020 mean scores representing only tiny differences. Only candidates running for Sinn Féin in 2020 are inclined to place their party identifiably to the left of its position in 2007, though this difference is only two-thirds of a point and does not represent a large jump on the scale. Taken together, these results suggest that, in the aggregate, the Irish electorate has been presented with a relatively consistent choice between parties that continue to occupy the same political space that they have long ago staked out.

To highlight this last point, Figure 11.2 graphically illustrates party placement in 2020. Each point represents a party's left-right mean position (as revealed by its candidates' responses) with the bars representing the 95 percent confidence intervals. These confidence

intervals indicate the degree of uncertainty around the true value of the mean party position, the narrower the confidence interval the greater the degree of certainty.⁹ Three things are particularly noteworthy in this figure. First, we can see clearly that in 2020 none of the five main political parties are occupying the right of the political spectrum. Indeed only one party (Fine Gael) has a mean response that places it to the right of the centre position (5), and then only barely so (with a mean response of 5.7). Somewhat surprisingly, almost all party candidates consider their own parties to be left-wing. Second, the confidence intervals for some parties (notably Labour) are very wide, suggesting party members are not in agreement about the party's position or that the party represents quite a broad church.¹⁰ The confidence intervals for Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin are not as wide as that of Labour, but they do still indicate a lack of agreement within the parties. On the other hand, the Green Party's candidates are in agreement on the party's position. Third, there is overlap in the party positions of all parties. For instance, some members of Fianna Fáil consider themselves as left-wing as members of the Labour Party. It is also interesting to note that despite the efforts of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil to differentiate themselves from one another in the minds of the electorate over the course of the 2020 campaign, even some of their own candidates fail to make an important distinction between their own party's left-right position and that of their main rival.

[FIG. 11.2 ABOUT HERE]

How do parties view one another?

Having examined where candidates running for each of the five main political parties in Ireland have positioned their own parties along the left-right spectrum, we next investigate whether the party positions assigned by partisans are shared by their opponents. That is, do candidates running for a particular political party place their own party in the same position as do candidates running for other parties in the general election?

For each of the main political parties, we computed two left-right spectrum mean scores, one computed using responses from partisans only (these scores are presented in Fig. 11.2 above), and a second score computed using the responses from all other candidates who completed that item in the CCS.¹¹ Figure 11.3 presents the party positions for both the partisans (on the X-axis) and their opponents (on the Y-axis). The results are

striking. Partisans and their opponents are broadly in agreement about whether a party is on the left or the right of the ideological spectrum. However, the two groups display significant disagreements about where *exactly* they should be positioned. Overall, partisans disagree with their opponents about how left-wing their party is; they consistently position their parties farther to the left of where their opponents place them.¹² If there was agreement on placement, we would expect the parties to line up along a 45-degree line, instead they are consistently placed above it.

We can see that Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil exhibit the largest gaps between the views of its candidates and the views of its opponents. Fine Gael agrees that it is on the right of the political spectrum, but it views itself as a party that is only very slightly right-of-centre (with a placement score of 5.7). Its opponents, by contrast, assign it a position much farther to the right (with a score of 7.6). Fianna Fáil's ratings demonstrate a similar gap between its perception of itself as a party and its opponents' evaluations. Fianna Fáil partisans position the party on the centre-left, while its opponents view it as a centre-right party. The disagreements with respect to the three other parties are smaller in magnitude but display the same pattern: Labour, Sinn Féin, and the Greens all believe they are farther to the left than their opponents do. This gap is the least pronounced for the Green Party.

[FIG. 11.3 ABOUT HERE]

It is interesting to note that whether we look at the partisan or opponent score, the ranking of the parties from left to right is consistent (Sinn Féin, Labour, the Greens, Fianna Fáil, and Fine Gael). This suggests that there is broad agreement about the order in which political parties fall across the ideological spectrum. However, the finding with respect to the consistency with which parties present themselves as being farther to the left than their opponents believe them to be bears some scrutiny.

It is possible that the discrepancy may arise because opponents and partisans have different levels of knowledge with respect to the policy positions of each of the parties. This interpretation suggests that partisan positions are 'correct' in the sense that the candidates' greater familiarity allows them to more successfully evaluate the true position of the party. Placing such an interpretation on this finding is, however, potentially problematic. In the

context of a hotly contested general election campaign we can expect knowledge of policy positions of political parties to be high amongst all candidates, regardless of their party identification. An alternative variant on this interpretation is that opponents focus on a subset of salient policy positions when making their evaluations, while partisans take into account more information.

Whatever the cause, it is clear that partisans are consistently presenting their parties as farther to the left than their opponents' placement of them. This suggests that with respect to Irish party competition it is desirable to be located more towards the left than the right of the political spectrum.¹³

Party Placement in 2020

In this section we explore in more detail the parties' positions on specific policy dimensions in the 2020 general election, as revealed by the candidates running for each party. In the previous sections we looked at the general left-right placement of parties, however this is a rather broad conceptualisation of party positions; it reduces economic and social issues to one dimension and respondents may not understand the scale in the same way. For one candidate the concept of left may mostly refer to his or her attitudes to social issues such as abortion and marriage equality whilst for another it may primarily reference attitudes to taxation and income redistribution. And while both issues probably go together for many candidates, it is, for instance, possible to be socially very liberal but fiscally quite conservative. In this section we are particularly interested to explore the degree to which the parties occupy distinct policy positions on some of the issues that mattered most in the 2020 election.

Figure 11.4 represents, in two dimensions, the Irish policy space in terms of a classic economic and social issue, income inequality and abortion rights. In both cases the candidates were presented with a differential scale, with two opposing items at either end and asked to place themselves along this continuum. With respect to the inequality item, respondents were asked to place themselves between the two opposing statements: 'the government should act to reduce differences in income and wealth' and 'the government should not act to reduce differences in income and wealth', anchored at zero and ten respectively. For the abortion issues, the two end points were 'by law, abortion should never be permitted' (0) and 'by law, women should always be able to obtain an abortion as a

matter of choice' (10). As we can see from Figure 11.4, there is surprisingly little differentiation between the parties on either of these issues. All of the parties are more in favour of inequality reduction than not, being located to the left on the X-axis. While Fine Gael is further to the right of the other four parties on this dimension, it is still more supportive of than opposed to government intervention to reduce income and wealth disparities. The Greens and Labour are barely distinguishable from each other on this dimension, while Sinn Féin is furthest left.

[FIG. 11.4 ABOUT HERE]

When it comes to the free availability of abortion (Y-axis), only Fianna Fáil finds itself nudging the upper-left quadrant of the graph, indicating lower levels of support for unrestricted access to abortion but even so this position is at the centre. This is one policy dimension where Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil exhibit a marked difference which, given the history of the recent campaign to liberalise access to abortion in Ireland through the repeal of the eighth amendment to the constitution, is not surprising.¹⁴ Sinn Féin candidates, however, have by far the most liberal views of the legalization of abortion. Overall, the lack of variation between the parties, on both of these key dimensions, is striking. With the exception of Fianna Fáil's comparatively less liberal view about abortion restrictions, all of the parties position themselves in the bottom left-hand quadrant, indicating a left-wing position on both the economic and the social dimensions.

Given the centrality of housing as an issue in the 2020 campaign, we next explore party differences on this topic. The housing crisis had intensified significantly between the 2016 and 2020 general elections, marked by high levels of homelessness and spiralling rents. The failure to adequately address the issue was seen as a significant weakness on the part of the incumbent Fine Gael government. As one of the key issues of the campaign, significant portions of all parties manifestos were dedicated to policy solutions for the problem.

Fianna Fáil adopted a three pronged approach, which included expanding social housing, bolstering tenants' rights but also offering incentives to the construction sector. In addition, the party's proposed Special Savings Incentive Allowance (SSIA)-type scheme for first-time buyers would give those saving for a deposit €1 for every €3 saved up a maximum of €10,000.¹⁵ Fine Gael meanwhile proposed the expansion of its existing Help to Buy

scheme (a tax cut for first time buyers), alongside an increase in the stock of new-build housing. Sinn Féin resolutely set itself up in opposition to these kinds of market-based solutions with its leader Mary Lou McDonald stating during one of the earlier televised debates that ‘[i]f Fianna Fáil were the party of the developers, Fine Gael are the party of the landlords’.¹⁶ Instead, Sinn Féin proposed that 100,000 public homes be built on public land over the next five years, 10,000 of which would be affordable rental accommodation. In addition, its proposal to free rents for the first three years of the next government, along with a tax credit for renters worth up to €15,000 positioned the party as a champion of renters rather than homeowners.¹⁷

In Figure 11.5 we plot the parties’ positions on the issue, by examining whether the parties have a preference for providing subsidies to renters or home buyers. Again, candidates were presented with opposing statements and asked where their view would fall between the two. With respect to housing subsidies (the X-axis on the graph), this farthest left position is captured by the statement: ‘the government should prioritise initiatives that subsidise renters to lower the cost of their monthly rental payments’, while the farthest right position is captured by the statement ‘the government should prioritise initiatives that subsidise those seeking to buy a home’. The question wording is not unproblematic, it is difficult to capture the complexity of housing policy in one simple issue item. However the question is designed to capture a preference for prioritising affordable rents over private property ownership. We would expect a left-wing partisan, when faced with this choice and forced to make a decision, to favour affordable rents over private ownership.

The Y-axis places the parties in terms of their attitudes to environmental protection, another issue that received a lot of media coverage in 2020, although as it turned out, was not a top issue for Irish voters when it came to casting their ballot (see Chapter 10 for a discussion). The anchor points of the Y-axis represent the following positions: ‘we should protect the environment even if this damages economic growth’ (0), and ‘we should encourage economic growth even if this damages the environment’ (10).

As we can see from the figure, there is some variation on the housing issue, with both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael candidates having a preference for subsidizing home ownership over renters, Labour is neutral on the issue, while the Greens and Sinn Féin have a slight preference for rental subsidies. On the environment, all parties favour its protection over economic growth with, unsurprisingly, the Green Party taking the strongest position on

the issue. But again, on these two dimensions, there is surprisingly little variation amongst the parties; they all cluster around the centre of the bottom half of the graph. This result is interesting given that the parties did exhibit significant variation during the campaign with respect to their proposed policies addressing climate change. Only the Greens' manifesto put forward very significant commitments – such as the 7 percent annual reduction in CO2 emissions – that could prove to be very economically costly.¹⁸ It is likely then that the clustering that we observe across parties on this item results either from respondents exhibiting social desirability bias, or from a rejection of the premise of the item (i.e. that there is a trade-off between environmental protection and economic growth).

[FIG. 11.5 ABOUT HERE]

To see if there were any greater differences, than those found above, between the parties on policy, we further investigated variation in party positions across four other policy areas included in the candidate study. Two of these ('right to privacy' and 'legalisation of recreational drugs') capture social issues and relate to parties' positions to issues of crime. Discussion of whether parties were 'soft' on crime did emerge over the course of the general election campaign, in part due to a number of murders that took place in the opening week of the campaign, leading Fine Gael's opponents to question its record in that area and threatening its historical position as the party of law and order.¹⁹ Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael also sought to portray Sinn Féin as soft on crime as support for that party jumped sharply in the polls. They used the three way leaders' debate to press Sinn Féin leader Mary Lou McDonald on the issue of her party's lack of support for the Special Criminal Court which is used to prosecute the most serious criminal offences.²⁰ And the issue of the parties' stance on the use of recreational drugs was very briefly covered in the wake of *Virgin Media's* two-way leaders debate between Micheál Martin and Leo Varadkar at the outset of the campaign, where the Taoiseach was taken by surprise after being pressed on his personal drug use.²¹ The two other policy areas ('regulation', and 'increasing spending and taxation') are standard items used cross-nationally capturing economic issues. The wording of these items can be found in the appendix to the chapter.

[TABLE 11.2. ABOUT HERE]

As we can see in Table 11.2, there are some interesting differences that emerge across the parties across these issues. With respect to the two items capturing social issues, we can see that it is only for the issue of drug legalisation that the parties display significant disagreement with one another. With respect to the issue of protecting privacy rights, even if this were to hinder efforts to combat crime, we can observe that the parties cluster together, with the positions of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and the Labour Party being indistinguishable on the issue. There is a slight separation between this group and Sinn Féin, with the Green Party finding itself closest to the centre. On the whole, though, we can see little variation across parties with respect to their willingness to trade off the privacy rights of the individual if it will help to combat crime.

With respect to support for the legalisation of recreational drugs, we do see the parties fanning out across the left and right to a significant degree. The Greens and Labour occupy the left of the spectrum here, with the position of the Green Party farthest to the left. While Fine Gael and Sinn Féin's positions are in the centre, just barely to the right. But it is Fianna Fáil that finds itself substantially to the right, expressing the greatest degree of opposition to legalisation. This represents an important area of separation between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, and something that emerged during the RTÉ leaders' debate, moderated by Claire Byrne. In that debate Leo Varadkar advocated for a public-health-based approach, while Micheál Martin adopted the position that drug use was a criminal justice issue.²²

With respect to the two items capturing two economic issues, we again largely observe the same pattern of clustering of parties on the left of the political spectrum. Sinn Féin is farthest to the left with respect to its support for strict regulation on business and industry, and support for increasing taxation and expenditure on health and social services. The party is followed by the Greens, then Labour. We see some very slight separation between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael here. Fine Gael candidates places their party to the left both with respect to attitudes towards regulation and tax/spend. Fianna Fáil however finds itself to the left of its closest rival on the tax/spend item, but very slightly to its right with respect to regulation of business and industry (though still in the centre of the left-right spectrum).

Across the eight issues explored here from the survey, we found the parties to be surprisingly similar. The only issue on which we found significant variation was the issue of drug legalization which, though it was raised briefly, was notably not an issue in the campaign. And it is worth noting the separation of Fianna Fáil with respect to its attitude towards liberalisation of abortion. Overall, though, when we dig into representative issues, we can conclude that the main Irish political parties compete with one another around the left and centre of the political spectrum.

Conclusion:

Historically, Ireland has been the 'odd man out' in European politics, in that party competition has been a battle 'between two centre-right parties that were ideologically indistinct' from each other.²³ But in 2020 the campaign narrative revolved around the emergence, for the first time, of a credible alternative left-wing led government. In this chapter we explored to what extent this account of left versus right wing holds.

Overall, it is clear that the parties self-identify as occupying distinct positions on a general left-right scale, neatly lining up with Sinn Féin and Fine Gael as bookends. And these positions are maintained over time, with very little variation in the period 2007-2020. However, it is also clear that Irish parties consider themselves to be quite left-wing, with no parties occupying the right to far-right of the political spectrum. Even Fine Gael considers itself to be essentially a centrist party. Though other parties view it as more to the right.

However, when one decomposes the super dimension of Left-Right into its component parts, the degree to which the parties are offering distinct policy platforms is less clear. There is surprisingly little variation (as revealed by the preferences of party candidates) on issues such as inequality, environmental protection, housing and, even once divisive, moral issues such as abortion.

It should be noted that the analysis in this chapter focussed on the views and preferences of the candidates running for election for the five main parties, rather than on official party policy, as revealed in, for instance, party manifestos. We have taken an average of the candidates' responses to represent the party positions, however averages can hide a lot of information. As we saw in Figure 11.2, candidates from the same party can have quite varied views on issues and their own party's position.

The question of whether parties are chasing voters or whether there are large swathes of voters whose views are not represented has not been directly addressed in this chapter but it is notable that the right of the political spectrum is a space that is not currently occupied by a viable political party. It does suggest though that the framing of the 2020 election as a 'change election' with a clear left alternative being offered to voters has perhaps been overstated. In fact, there is a high degree of policy agreement between the main political parties and, in the aggregate, there has been little movement in party positions since 2007.

Appendix: Question wording

Abortion rights: 'Opposing statements are listed. Where would you place yourself on this scale?

0 = by law, abortion should never be permitted

...

10 = by law, women should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of choice'

Drug legalisation: 'Opposing statements are listed. Where would you place yourself on this scale?

0 = all recreational drugs should remain illegal in Ireland

...

10 = the use of recreational drugs should be legalised in Ireland'

Environment: 'Opposing statements are listed. Where would you place yourself on this scale?

0 = we should protect the environment even if this damages economic growth

...

10 = we should encourage economic growth even if this damages the environment'

Housing subsidies- renters/homeowners: 'Opposing statements are listed. Where would you place yourself on this scale?

0 = the government should prioritise initiatives that subsidise renters to lower the cost of their monthly rental payments

...

10 = the government should prioritise initiatives that subsidise those seeking to buy a home'

Inequality: 'Opposing statements are listed. Where would you place yourself on this scale?

0 = the government should act to reduce differences in income and wealth

...

10 = the government should not act to reduce differences in income and wealth'

Left-right party position: 'In politics, people sometimes talk about the 'left' and 'right'. Where would you place [PARTY]?'

0 = Left

...

10 = Right

Privacy rights: 'Opposing statements are listed. Where would you place yourself on this scale?

0 = privacy rights should be supported even if they hinder efforts to combat crime

...

10 = privacy rights should be restricted in order to combat crime'

Regulation: 'Opposing statements are listed. Where would you place yourself on this scale?

0 = business and industry should be strictly regulated by the state

...

10 = business and industry should be entirely free from regulation by the state'

Tax/spend: Opposing statements are listed. Where would you place yourself on this scale?

0 = government should cut taxes a lot and spend much less on health and social services

...

10 = government should increase taxes a lot and spend more on health and social services'

Table 11.1: Response rates for Irish CCS by party (%)

	2007	2011	2016	2020
Fianna Fáil	40.6	62.7	33.8	20.2
Fine Gael	40.7	40.4	23.9	14.6
The Labour Party	60.0	47.0	44.4	16.1
Sinn Féin	29.3	36.6	34.0	28.6
The Green Party	45.5	62.8	55.0	28.2
Independents/Others	23.9	39.6	35.6	22.4
Total	37.2	45.2	35.3	21.4

Fig. 11.1. Irish political party left-right placement (2007-2020)

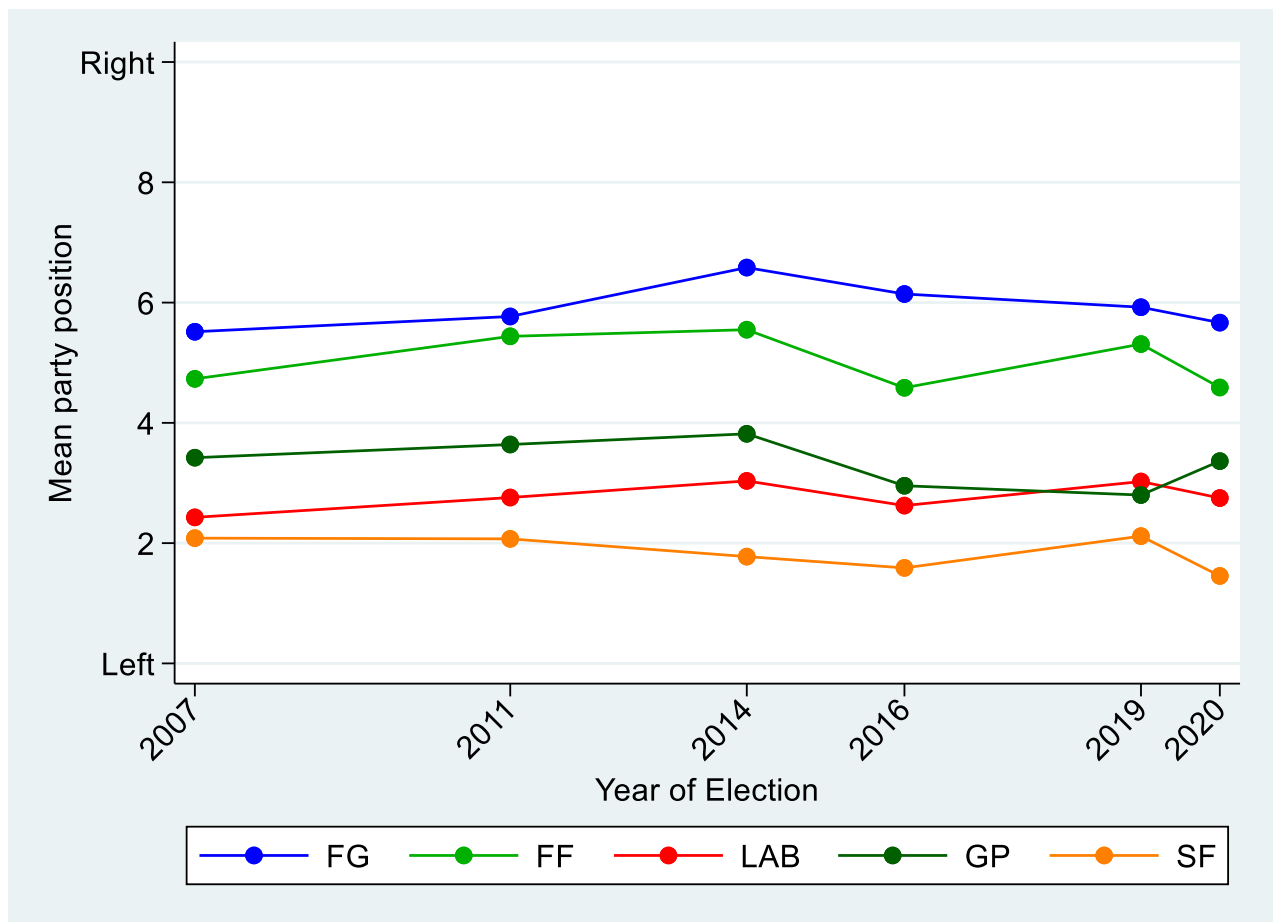


Fig. 11.2. Placement of Parties on a General Left Right scale (CCS 2020)

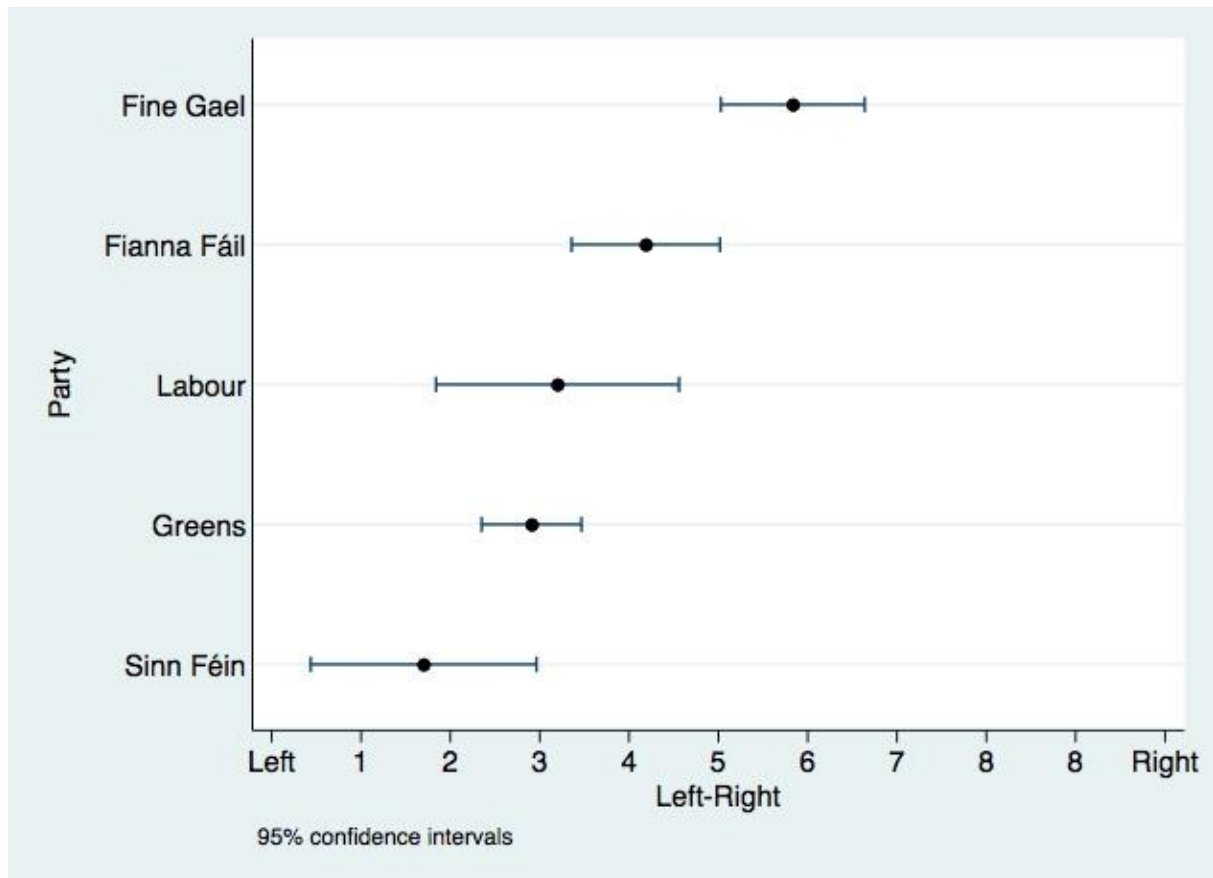


Fig. 11.3. Party positions by partisans and opponents (CCS 2020)

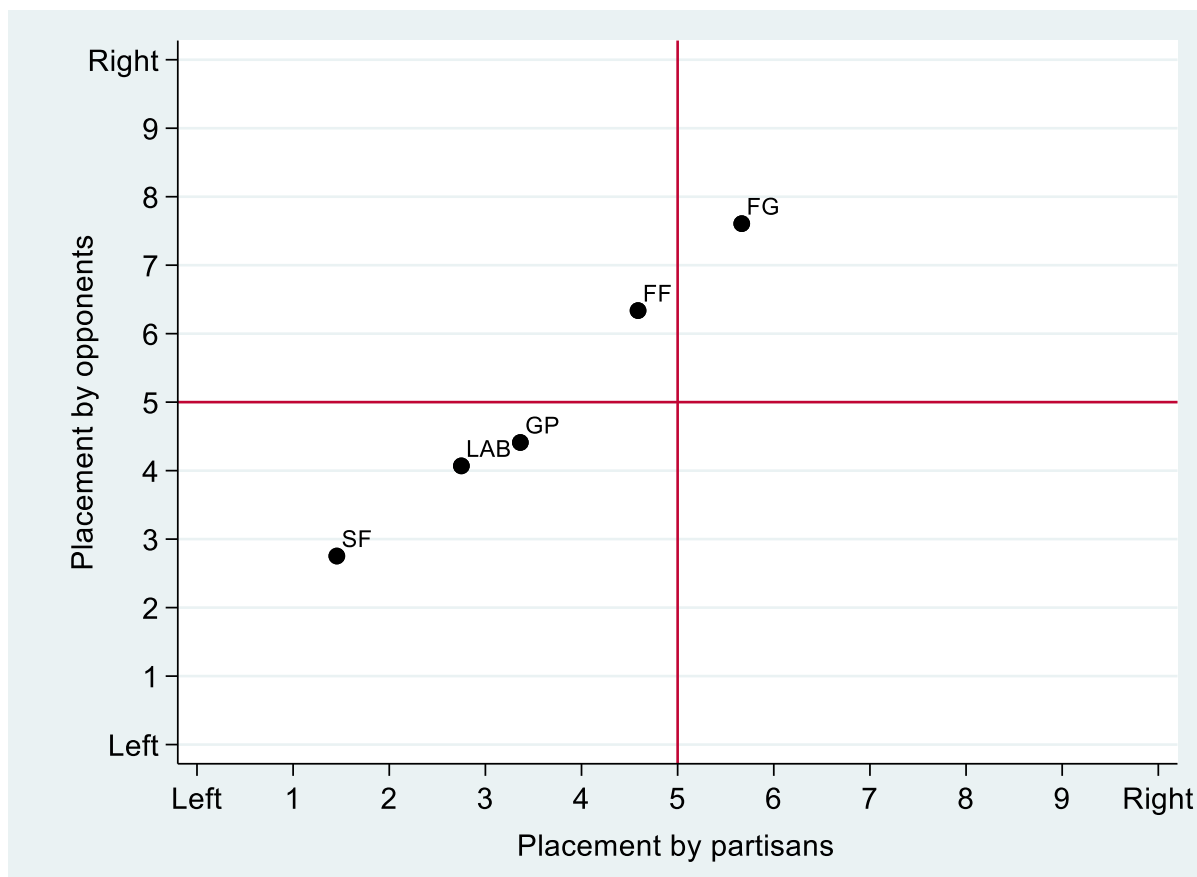


Fig. 11.4. Irish political party placement – GE2020 (abortion and income inequality)

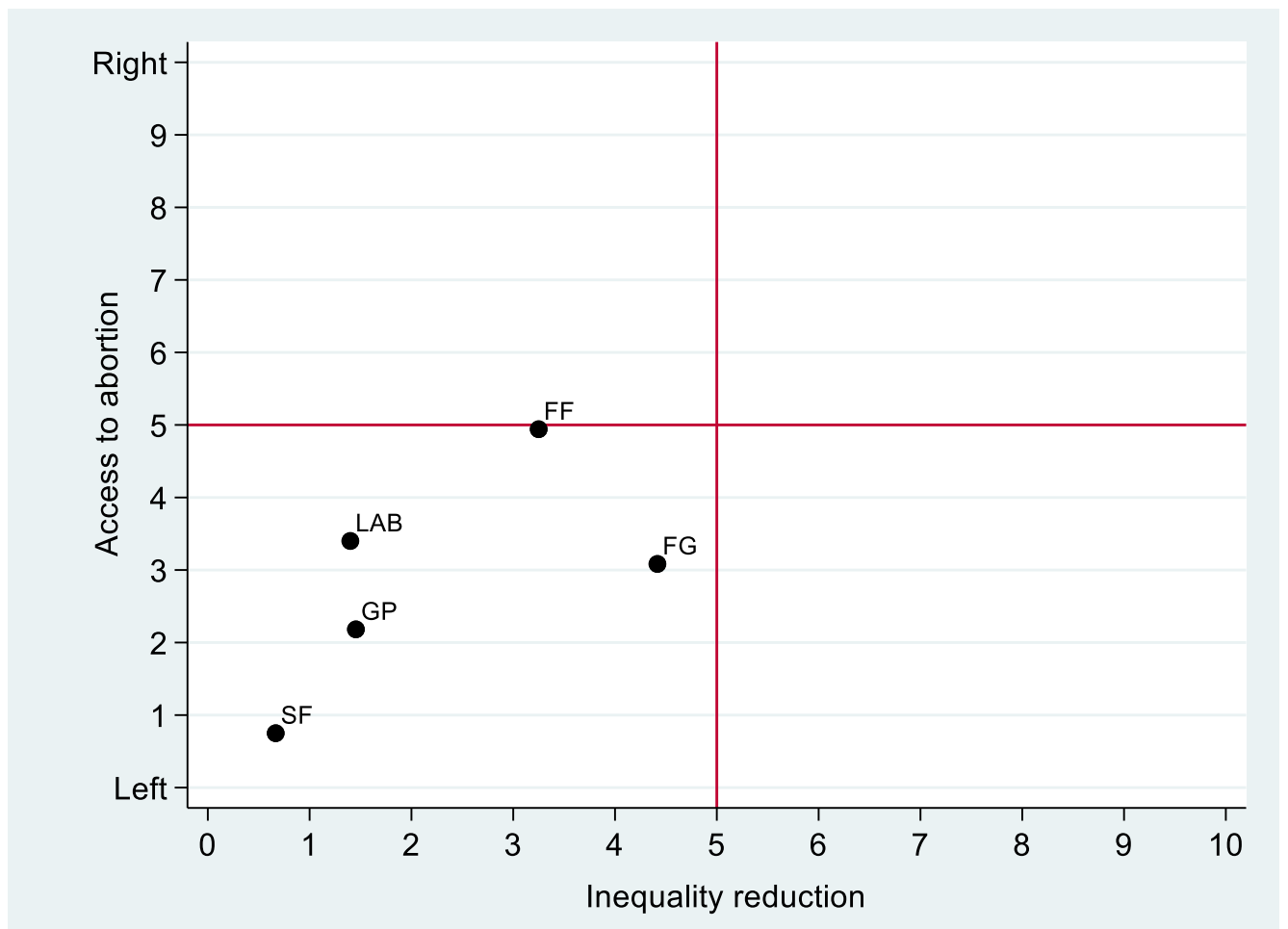


Fig. 11.5. Irish political party placement – GE2020 (environment and housing subsidies)

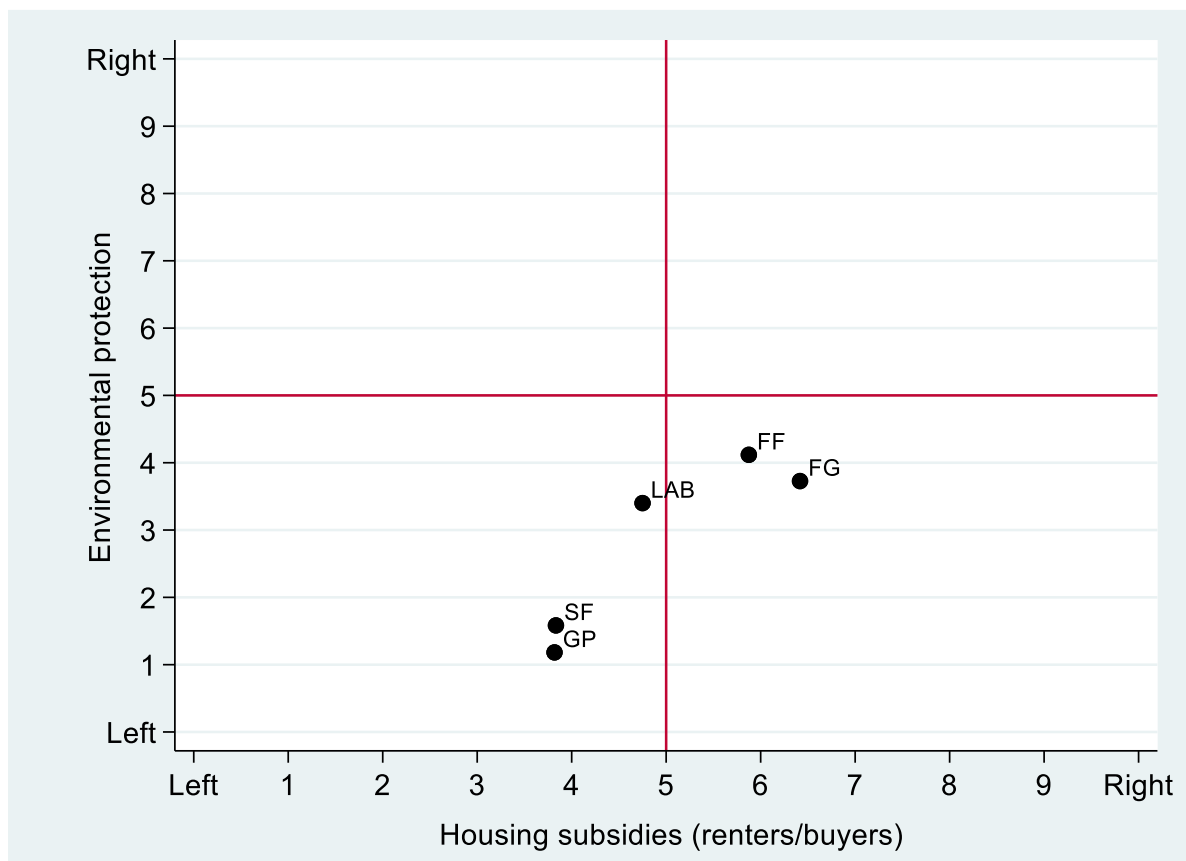


Table 11.2 Party policy positions (economic and social dimensions)

		Fianna Fáil	Fine Gael	Green Party	Labour Party	Sinn Féin
Social Issues	Privacy rights	6.40	6.58	5.64	6.40	5.92
	Drug legalisation	7.19	5.33	2.36	4.40	5.18
Economic Issues	Tax/spend	4.00	4.58	2.18	2.40	1.75
	Regulation	5.00	4.75	3.18	3.80	2.42

¹ *Giving workers & families a break: a Manifesto for Change*, January 2020, p. 3, available at: https://www.sinnfein.ie/files/2020/SF_GE2020_Manifesto.pdf

² *Invest in better: general election manifesto 2020*, January 2020, p. 5, available at: <https://www.socialdemocrats.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Invest-in-Better-GE2020-1st-Feb.pdf>

³ *People Before Profit: election manifesto 2020*, January 2020, p. 6, available at: <https://manifesto.pbp.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/People-Before-Profit-General-Election-Manifesto-2020.pdf>

⁴ Independent candidate Mr Peter Casey contested the election in two constituencies, Donegal and the Taoiseach's own constituency of Dublin West, while Mr Sean O'Leary's name appeared on the ballot in eleven separate constituencies.

⁵ Ms Marese Skehan passed away prior to the election being held but her name remained on the ballot in Tipperary.

⁶ The 2020 survey response rate was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in Ireland. Universities closed on March 12th, interrupting the data collection process.

⁷ Other research in the Irish context has been concerned with exploring intra-party variation in these attitudes using survey data. See, for example, Michael Courtney, 'Social Background and Intra-party Attitudes in Ireland', *Irish Political Studies* 30:2 (2015), pp. 178-198.

⁸ Respondents were asked to provide left-right positions for all of the main political parties discussed here (Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, Labour, the Greens, and Sinn Féin), as well as Solidarity-People Before Profit. In addition, we asked them to indicate where they would position their own views.

⁹ Where confidence intervals overlap with one another, it is not possible to conclude that the mean party positions are different from one another. So, while we can conclude that Fine Gael and Sinn Féin's position on the left-right spectrum are different from one another, we cannot say that same for that of the Greens and Labour.

¹⁰ This is also likely a function of the current number of responses that have been received from Labour Party candidates so far. We should expect this confidence interval to narrow as the response rate increases.

¹¹ Although the analysis for this chapter is concerned with the five main political parties, the mean non-partisan ideological placement score contains responses from candidates from all other parties, as well as independent candidates.

¹² The differences between the mean partisan and mean opponent scores are statistically significant for all parties except for Labour. This is likely a function of the low number of responses from the party thus far.

¹³ Certainly, there does seem to be a political calculation around placement of the political parties. When we consult the placement of Irish political parties by contributors to the *Chapel Hill Expert Survey*, we find that the experts give a score that falls between the that of the partisans and opponents. In 2014, the most recent year for which this data is available, the experts assigned the parties the following positions on a 0 to 10 scale: Fine

Gael (6.6), Fianna Fáil (5.9), Green Party (4.1), Labour Party (3.8), and Sinn Féin (2.1). Again, the ordering of the parties is consistent with both the partisan and opponent rankings.

¹⁴ Luke Field, 'The abortion referendum of 2018 and a timeline of abortion politics in Ireland to date', *Irish Political Studies* 33:4 (2018), pp. 608-628.

¹⁵ *An Ireland for all Éire do Chách*, January 2020, p.57.

¹⁶ Pat Leahy, 'Leaders' debate: Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil target Sinn Féin's economic policies', *Irish Times*, 5 February 2020, available: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/leaders-debate-fine-gael-fianna-f%C3%A1il-target-sinn-f%C3%A9in-s-economic-policies-1.4161976>.

¹⁷ *Towards 2030: a decade of change*, January 2020, available at: https://www.greenparty.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/GREEN_PARTY_TOWARDS_2030-WEB-VERSION.pdf

¹⁸ *Giving workers & families a break: a Manifesto for Change*, January 2020, p. 3, available at: https://www.sinnfein.ie/files/2020/SF_GE2020_Manifesto.pdf

¹⁹ Conor Lally, 'Election 2020: Is Leo Varadkar right when he says Ireland's crime rate is low?', *Irish Times*, 20 January 2020, available: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/election-2020-is-leo-varadkar-right-when-he-says-ireland-s-crime-rate-is-low-1.4144587>.

²⁰ Philip Ryan, Cormac McQuinn and Hugh O'Connell, 'General Election 2020 Prime Time debate: leaders clash over housing and Special Criminal Court', *Irish Independent*, 4 February 2020, available: <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/election-2020/general-election-2020-prime-time-debate-leaders-clash-over-housing-and-special-criminal-court-38927804.html>.

²¹ Fiach Kelly, 'I'm not going to go into any more detail' - Varadkar faces drugs question again', *Irish Times*, 23 January 2020, available: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/i-m-not-going-to-go-into-any-more-detail-varadkar-faces-drugs-question-again-1.4149131>.

²² Patrick Freyne, 'Election 2020 TV debate: The best debater is, unexpectedly, Richard Boyd Barrett', *Irish Times*, 28 January 2020, available: <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/tv-radio-web/election-2020-tv-debate-the-best-debater-is-unexpectedly-richard-boyd-barrett-1.4153796>.

²³ Gail McElroy, 'Party competition in Ireland', pp. 61-82 in Michael Marsh, David Farrell, and Gail McElroy (eds), *A Conservative Revolution?: Electoral Change in Twenty-First Century Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) at pp. 61.