

CHRONICLE OF A DEATH FORETOLD? UNDERSTANDING THE DECLINE OF FINE GAEL

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ABSTRACT

Since its highpoint in the early 1980s, when under Garret FitzGerald, Fine Gael received almost 40 per cent of the first preference vote and took the party to within five seats of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael's electoral support has declined significantly and steadily to a stage where in 2002 they received little over 20 per cent of the vote. We examine some hypothesised causes of this decline, including the effect of the arrival of the PDs, and Ireland's new coalition politics since 1989. We adapt Peter Mair's hypothesis that 'coalitionability' would strengthen Fianna Fáil, to argue that it has also caused the decline of Fine Gael by making the party less relevant to voters who wish to influence the formation of a government. This had the effect of allowing parties such as the PDs to continue to take support from Fine Gael. We offer empirical evidence to support this claim.

Introduction – Fine Gael at the polls

Fine Gael approached the second Irish general election in November 1982 with genuine hopes of becoming the largest party in the Dáil. At the end of October 1982 an *Irish Times*/MRBI poll put it level with Fianna Fáil at 36 per cent. The governing Fianna Fáil party was seriously split, which saw two ministers resigning from the government. The *Taoiseach*, Charles J. Haughey was unpopular and not trusted, so a good campaign could see the many undecided voters swing to Fine Gael to provide an alternative government. This hope represented a significant change of fortunes for a party that had been heavily defeated in the 1977 election. Fine Gael went on to receive historically high support in 1982, but the party failed to

outpoll Fianna Fáil or become a consistent challenger to the larger party. Fine Gael's support and seat share fell further to an historic low in 2002.

Fine Gael has consistently been the smaller of Ireland's two catch-all parties since Fianna Fáil entered government in 1932. From then Fine Gael governed only intermittently – when the opposition parties could temporarily put aside their policy differences in favour of the attractions of high office. Fine Gael had been shocked by the scale of its defeat in the 1977 election and so instigated a series of reforms in party organisation and presentation. It hoped to dispel its image of well-meaning amateurs, and to rival Fianna Fáil in its professional organisation. Led by Garret FitzGerald, the party not only renovated its organisation but also introduced a liberal policy programme that appealed to the young and to the middle classes. The first two elections in 1981 and 1982 showed a remarkable increase in support for Fine Gael.

In November 1982 Fine Gael received almost 40 per cent of the vote and came within five seats of Fianna Fáil. Although there was some disappointment at not having outpolled Fianna Fáil, there was also some optimism that the new coalition could govern relatively comfortably compared to the previous two governments. Fine Gael could then build on this success to finally challenge Fianna Fáil's hegemony.

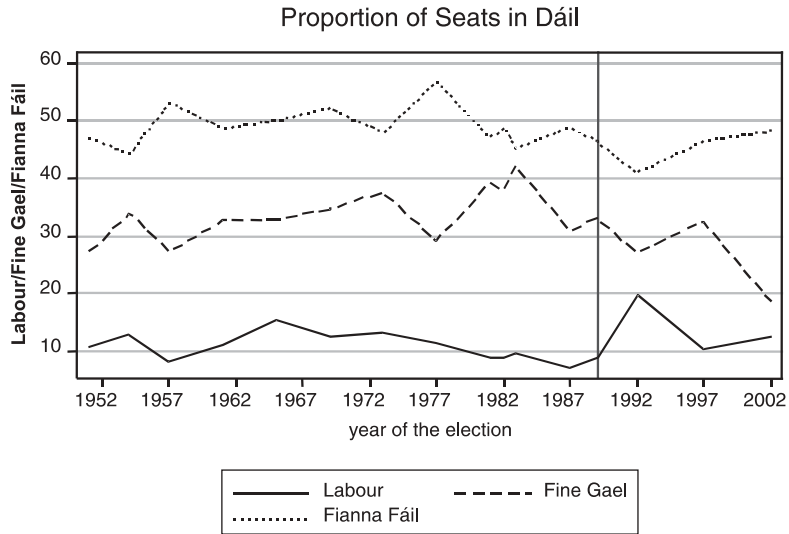
The sea change never took place. Fianna Fáil's vote share has fallen from even its early 1980s levels, but it has managed to translate the declining vote into a similar number of seats. However, Fine Gael's vote share has also declined and its seat share has fallen further. The historical link between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael support no longer applies. Figure 1 shows that when one party did well the other did badly. Fine Gael appears to have lapsed into a slow decline culminating in the disastrous result in 2002. In this election Fine Gael fell from 54 to 31 seats – less than half of its 1982 historic high of 70 seats and its lowest ever proportion of seats.

The fact that Fine Gael has declined so greatly might not be a huge surprise to some political scientists. It is perhaps something that should have happened a long time ago. The existence and size of the two main Irish political parties and the Irish party system generally is something of a mystery to political scientists. It is referred to as the 'problem child in Western European schema' (Urwin and Eliassen, 1975: 97). The system is generally described as *sui generis* (Whyte, 1974: 648).

As it is reasonable to ask what the difference is in policy terms of the two biggest Irish parties, and assuming that people's votes are affected, at least in part, by the policy offered by the candidates' parties, one might expect that the more successful of two similar parties would prosper and the less successful would suffer. This could happen because voters look for policy results and use their vote to have some policy effect. If one of two

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FIGURE 1
PROPORTION OF SEATS FOR THE THREE MAIN PARTIES
FROM 1951 TO 2002



parties offering similar policies is continually in government, the incentives to support the non-governing party are reduced as voting for it has no effect on policy. In particular, in plurality electoral systems the voter risks letting a third, policy-distinct party into power, without having a majority of the vote. The larger party acts as a focus point of like-minded voters and the smaller party should drop away due to psychological effects (Cox, 1997; Duverger, 1978).

It appears that Ireland can no longer support two catch-all parties, but what happened to bring this about in the 1990s? What is the proximate cause of Fine Gael’s steep decline? We first ask whether there is a steep decline at all, or if results in the early 1980s and 2002 represent outliers in Fine Gael’s historical support. In this article we look at a number of possible factors that could explain the decline of Fine Gael since the 1980s. These include the formation of the PDs, Fianna Fáil’s move to coalition politics and Fine Gael’s policy positions. We conclude that while the PDs and Labour have taken support from Fine Gael, this is caused by the loss Fine Gael’s *raison d’être* – to provide the basis for alternative governments. More generally, this raises questions about different party types. Are some parties ‘natural’ parties of government, and other parties more suited to opposition? Is it inevitable that parties of government will decline if they are not afforded the oxygen of political power?

Explanations for Fine Gael's Decline

In a discussion of Fine Gael's long-term decline, it is important to establish that the party is in fact declining. Figure 1 shows that that, though in 2002 the party's performance was poor, there may not be a long-term trend of decline. The 1997 result was better than some in the 1950s and in 1977. If one reads the graph from 1981 on, the trend is certainly of decline but, over the longer term, perhaps 1981 was an unusual high and subsequent election results represent a regression to the mean. However appealing this line of thought might be, it seems that Fine Gael's good results seem to be getting worse. Fine Gael received a two and a half percentage points smaller share of the vote in 1997 – considered a good year in recent Fine Gael folklore – than in 1977 – the election that caused wholesale changes within Fine Gael.

Rational choice explanations of voting behaviour point to policy as voters' primary motivation for involvement in the political process (Downs, 1957: 36–8). These predict that the policy positions of a party would have an effect on the parties' support. The contenders in the recent Fine Gael's leadership election also point to policy. One of those, Phil Hogan, in response to questions as to why Fine Gael has been in decline in the last 20 years, said, '[Fine Gael] have lacked a policy platform that is distinctive and credible with the electorate. What we must do now is to state clearly our core beliefs and be modern and professional in our approach in relation to the core beliefs we stand for' (interview with Vincent Browne, *The Irish Times*, 3 June 2002). Another, Gay Mitchell, echoed the point: 'The electorate was unsure what we stood for.' The other contenders claim that Fine Gael's failure is due to its being perceived as an establishment party. As Fianna Fáil, who did rather well, could also be accused of being an establishment party, this might be interpreted as meaning that Fine Gael was an establishment party without anything distinctive to offer.

If Fine Gael's policy positions are unclear, incoherent or inconsistent, it would hardly be the only Irish party accused of this. Many parties make desperate promises at election time and lack a coherent political philosophy, but perhaps Fine Gael has moved about the political spectrum more than most. Fianna Fáil is also accused of regularly changing policy position, but it may have tracked the movements of the median voter more closely.

Gallagher points to the formation of the Progressive Democrats (PDs) as a possible cause of Fine Gael's decline (Gallagher, 2003: 95). Others made this point at the time of the PDs' formation (Lyne, 1987; O'Byrnes, 1986). The relative success of the Labour Party could also be a reason for

a diminished Fine Gael. This may be as a result of these parties receiving support from middle-class floating voters who supported Fine Gael in 1982. It is generally accepted that the formation of the PDs caused a decline in Fine Gael support in the first election they contested in 1987. The PDs' liberal, free-market policy platform appealed to the traditional Fine Gael voter (Lyne, 1987). Aggregate data (see Figure 1) also suggests that part of Labour's surge in 1992 was at the expense of Fine Gael.

As Gallagher notes, the PDs and Labour may indeed have helped the decline of Fine Gael, but not by taking Fine Gael's votes. Peter Mair (1990) predicted that the Irish party system would be changed radically by the 'coalitionability' of Fianna Fáil. Mair (1990: 213–19) pointed out that Fianna Fáil's decision to enter coalition with the PDs in 1989 might strengthen Fianna Fáil's hold on power, as any feasible coalition (at the time) involved Fianna Fáil. Laver and Shepsle argued that the later Fianna Fáil–Labour coalition was the most stable possible government both politically and in policy terms given the Dáil's arithmetic, and that it could have looked forward to a majority over two terms (Laver and Shepsle, 1996: 138–46).

It is possible that this has also had an effect on the electorate's assessment of Fine Gael. Arguably, Fianna Fáil's 'coalitionability' has removed Fine Gael's *raison d'être*. Fine Gael had been the 'natural' party of government up to the early 1930s, but since then became a party of opposition. However, it has been an essential element in any attempt to remove Fianna Fáil from power. With Fianna Fáil able to coalesce, voters who wished to influence the composition of the government could do so without either supporting or relying on high support for Fine Gael. It is then possible that Fine Gael's decline stems from their irrelevance to government formation.

We now go on to look at these hypotheses in more detail and then test them. As well as using descriptive statistics and analysing some survey data to test the hypotheses, we also apply the technique of survival analysis to the survival rates of incumbent TDs. This technique is explained in Appendix 2.

Discussing and Testing the Hypotheses

Policy Incoherence

Has Fine Gael's policy platform become inconsistent or incoherent, as some senior party members suggested? The 2002 election showed that Fine Gael was willing to use the sort of populism of which they once accused Fianna Fáil. Proposals to compensate taxi drivers and *Eircom*

shareholders smacked of desperation and went against Fine Gael's traditional free market philosophy. Are these examples of a trend of Fine Gael changing policy too often? This could have the effect of making voters distrustful of the party, as voters may not feel certain for what they are voting.

Certainly when Fine Gael achieved its highest support, the party had a definite and to many, an attractive, policy platform. Fine Gael recognised the grave state of the economy and proposed a radical tax reform package (including the reduction of the standard rate to 25 per cent). It would finance this by increases in indirect taxation. For younger voters, another attractive aspect of Fine Gael under FitzGerald's leadership was the party's liberal outlook. It proposed a more pluralist republic in which the state was less involved in people's lives. It would be a republic that Northern Irish Protestants would find more attractive. However, the liberal aspirations of Fine Gael in the 1980s were in stark contrast to Fine Gael's conservative policies in the past.

Though FitzGerald tried valiantly to implement these policies, the realisation of the parlous state of the economy, which simultaneously experienced high unemployment and high inflation, and his coalition partner's demands, made this impossible. According to Marsh and Mitchell (1999: 45), 'Fine Gael were more than willing to make policy concessions to Labour in order to get into government'. FitzGerald also allowed the government to get mired in a divisive abortion referendum, and he lost the divorce referendum. These factors made the 'Constitutional Crusade' falter before it started (Murphy, 2003).

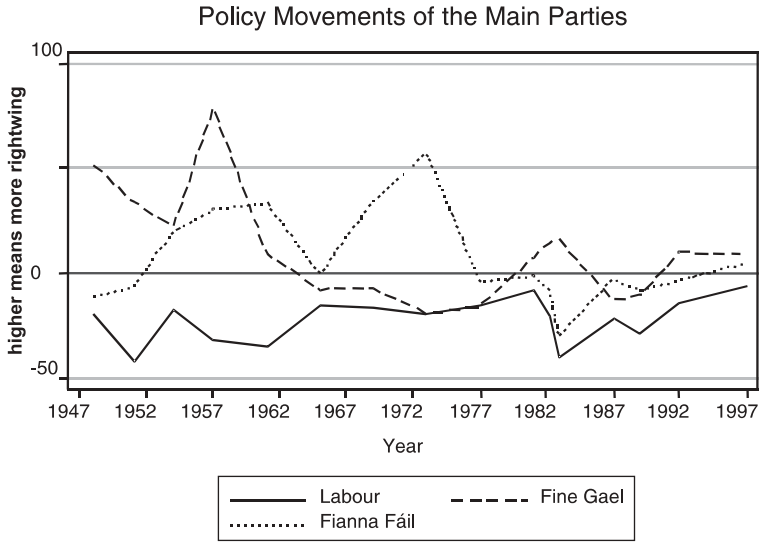
We can see if Fine Gael has moved about the policy space more than the other parties. Figure 2 shows the policy movements of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour on a left-right scale over time. Higher values in the Manifesto Research Group data indicate more right-wing policy (see Budge, 2001). Fine Gael has crossed the neutral zero-line four times up to 1997; more than the other major parties. However, as Table 1 indicates, it has not been significantly more prone to movement than Fianna Fáil.¹

TABLE 1
POLICY POSITIONS ON A LEFT RIGHT SCALE (1948-1997) 16 ELECTIONS

	Fianna Fáil	Fine Gael	Labour
Mean	6.41	11.11	-22.06
Std. Error mean	5.58	6.54	2.63
Median	-2.18	9.02	-19.15

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FIGURE 2
POLICY MOVEMENTS OF THE MAIN IRISH PARTIES
ON A LEFT-RIGHT SCALE



This table produces each party's mean on the same MRG left–right scale where zero is neutral and the limits are ± 100 . Of the three main parties, Labour has been most consistent in its policy positions, so consistency in itself does not necessarily bring rewards. One might argue that we should only look at the last 20 years. Even if we do this the standard deviations of the two main parties are not dissimilar.

If, as it seems, Fine Gael has not been significantly more prone to policy change, even in the last 20 years, it is possible that Fine Gael has not moved in the way it should had it wanted to attract the median voter. Put simply, maybe Fine Gael was on the right when the electorate was on the left, and vice versa. In the 1990s, when the economy was booming, Fine Gael found itself in coalition with Labour and (an admittedly less radical) Democratic Left. While Fine Gael's traditional constituency in Ireland was becoming wealthier, Fine Gael in government was forced to focus on economic redistribution. Were Fine Gael's policy movements insufficiently in accordance with those of the median voter?

This hypothesis can be tested using a survival analysis of *incumbent* TDs from 1965 to 2002 and policy position data from the MRG. The analysis shows that a party's policy movements from a hypothesised 'median voter' do not affect the incumbent TDs' chances of survival

(see Table 2; interested readers should see the appendices for an explanation of the procedure, description of the data and explanations of the variables). If continually moving one's policy away from the median voter is influential to the incumbents chance of re-election then this coefficient should be negative and significant. Nor does distance affect just Fine Gael TDs, as an interaction of the distance variable and being a Fine Gael incumbent also proved insignificant (not shown). Only the Fianna Fáil dummy variable is significant, which shows that being a Fianna Fáil TD almost halves one's hazard ratio (chances of losing one's seat).

The model does not control for many other factors. Though it is likely that 'distance from median voter' correlates highly with party, in a bivariate analysis the 'median voter' variable is not significant. We also enter other variables that are normally thought important for election (as opposed to survival) into the model. Like 'median voter', these factors do not prove important. This model, and the other data shown in Table 1, suggests that policy is not an important factor in estimating the electoral success of parties' candidates. In any case, by 1987 Fine Gael's once-attractive policy platform was usurped by a new rival.

Labour, PDs and the Capricious 'Floating Voter'

Another recent event in Irish politics that plausibly could have led to Fine Gael's decline was the arrival of the Progressive Democrats. Founded in 1985, by mostly ex-Fianna Fáil deputies, it promised to 'break the mould of Irish politics' with its unashamedly socially liberal and free-market policies. In winning 14 seats in 1987 the possibility that the PDs might 'break the mould' looked likely. Although most PD

TABLE 2
SURVIVAL ANALYSIS MODELS

Hazard ratio coefficients	
Fine Gael	0.75 (1.34)
Fianna Fáil	0.54 (2.89)**
Female	1.35 (1.22)
Nepotism	0.69 (1.75)
Time in Dáil	1.05 (1.28)
Distance from 'median voter'	0.98 (1.40)
LR chi-square	23.03
Observations	1005

Absolute value of z statistics in brackets. **Significant at 1%.

support was expected to come from Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael suffered most. With the benefit of hindsight this does not seem surprising. The PDs programme was attractive to middle-class, liberal voters, a good description of Fine Gael's support in the early 1980s. Opinion polls indicate that almost one-fifth of Fine Gael's 1982 voters switched to the PDs as opposed to eight per cent of Fianna Fáil's 1982 voters (Laver, Marsh and Sinnott, 1987: 109).

While the PDs certainly took votes from Fine Gael in the 1987 election, Fine Gael recovered ground in 1989, whereas the PDs looked close to collapse. Even though the PDs' four-seat gain in the 2002 election came at the expense of Fine Gael (Gallagher, 2003: 95), the PDs still only have eight seats and polled just four per cent of the first preference vote. This can hardly account for Fine Gael's loss of 40 seats since 1982. Even if we assume that the 1982 result was an outlier, this cannot explain the 23-seat drop from 1997.

Labour took many Fine Gael votes and seats in their 'surge' election in 1992. However, previous Fianna Fáil voters accounted for 30 per cent of Labour's 1992 vote as opposed to 17 percent from Fine Gael (Marsh and Sinnott, 1993: 110). It is possible that the type of voter that moved to Fine Gael in 1981–82 and to the PDs in 1987 went to Labour in 1992. This would suggest that 1981–82 was merely a short-term surge in support for Fine Gael. With just cross-sectional survey data, testing this proposition remains difficult.

However, we can construct an argument and provide some evidence for this. Excluding the possibility that a surge in support for a party takes place through the receipt of a significantly higher proportion of first-time voters than other parties receive, then it is common sense to suggest that for a party to surge in support in one election it must gain support from other parties' voters. From our own analysis of the 2002 RTÉ exit poll data, we know that defection rates are higher among Irish ABC1s (56 per cent of ABC1s who could recall that they had voted, voted for the same party. This compares with 66 per cent of non-ABC1 voters remaining loyal voters (or 65 percent if farmers are excluded)). ABC1s are more likely to be 'floating voters'.

If we look at the elections where a party's support surged or fell away significantly we can compare the surge and drop in this group compared to the population at large. It is clear that for a party to have a 'surge' election, it usually needs significant support from the middle classes. In 1992 Labour received a five-point increase in vote share, but among ABs this gain was ten percentage points. It is also the case that of the mainstream parties in Ireland that suffer a decline, they lose support from the middle class to a greater degree than other classes. Of Labour's 1992

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TABLE 3
PERFORMANCE OF PARTIES IN THEIR 'SURGE' AND 'DECLINE' ELECTIONS

Percentage point change in support for party from the previous election			
	All classes	AB	Difference
'Surge' elections			
Fianna Fáil 1977	6	8	+2
Fine Gael 1981	5	10	+5
Fine Gael 1982 (Nov.)	2	7	+5
Progressive Democrats 1987	14	22	+8
Labour 1992	5	10	+5
'Decline' elections			
Fianna Fáil 1981	5	-11	-6
Fine Gael 1987	-15	-28	-13
Progressive Democrats 1989	-8	-12	-4
Labour 1997	-4	-5	-1
Fine Gael 2002	-5	-5	0

Sources: Sinnott (1995) and various editions of *How Ireland Voted*.

voters, 55 per cent of its AB voters defected in 1997 compared to 34 per cent of DE class voters.

What does this tell us? It offers some evidence to suggest that Fine Gael's performance since 1982 may be accounted for by the gain and loss of a core group of middle-class floating voters. These voters were subsequently attracted to the PDs in 1987 and Labour in 1992. Fianna Fáil may have attracted some of these voters to it in 1997. Given the volatile nature of this vote, Fine Gael may be able to re-attract this support in the future. Worryingly for Fine Gael, however, is that the decline in 2002 did not come more heavily from this core group of voters.² In the absence of longitudinal data it is difficult to make firm conclusions about floating voters, and if their loss has caused Fine Gael's decline. However, there may be an important reason to believe that these voters would be less interested in Fine Gael.

'Irrelevance to Government Formation' Hypothesis

Given that there is some evidence to suggest that 'floating' middle-class voters cause surges and declines in party support in Ireland, and that this group has dealt an injurious blow to Fine Gael, the next puzzle to consider is why floating voters have moved away from Fine Gael. Aggregate data suggest that policy does not matter greatly. The next, and we think most plausible, hypothesis is that Fine Gael has lost support because it is no longer necessary to form an alternative to a Fianna Fáil

single-party-government. Judging by the size and consistency of their support, many voters like having Fianna Fáil in government; in the last 40 years Fianna Fáil has only been accorded an overall majority on two occasions, and has failed to get such a majority since 1977. This is especially true when the Fianna Fáil leader was someone Fine Gael members (in 1999) did not like and we might assume Fine Gael voters (of their day) also did not like (see Gallagher and Marsh, 2002).

In recent times it was only the Fianna Fáil leader most popular among present Fine Gael members who received overall majorities – Jack Lynch – with a thermometer rating of 59 (Gallagher and Marsh, 2002: 200). Though we cannot be certain about the movements of individual voters in the 1969 and 1977 elections, Figure 1 suggests that the surge in support for Fianna Fáil in the 1977 election seems to have come at the expense of Fine Gael. We can assume that at least some voters were willing to vote for either party, and that these voters moved to Fianna Fáil when it had a leader that was well liked and more moderate and moderating in his nationalism.

Fine Gael might have provided a service to those voters who wished to temper Fianna Fáil. Certainly, any alternative government to Fianna Fáil required a strong Fine Gael component. It was the bedrock on which the anti-Fianna Fáil movement was based. So voters of other parties had an incentive to support Fine Gael candidates in their STV transfers. Under STV the parties, or rather the parties' candidates, often need to attract transfers from other parties' candidates. Co-operation between Labour and Fine Gael was 'crucial in depriving Fianna Fáil of an overall majority at each election except 1977' (Gallagher, 1990: 78). Co-operation increased at times in the 1950s, the 1970s and 1980s when Fine Gael-led governments were elected (Sinnott, 1995: 214–15).

However, in 1989 the most important event for the Irish party system took place since Fianna Fáil's entry to the Dáil. The 1989 general election was called by the then Fianna Fáil *Taoiseach*, Charles Haughey. Haughey thought Fianna Fáil could reap the benefit of an improving economy to secure an overall majority, but the party lost seats to Fine Gael. The Dáil arithmetic after the 1989 general election meant that the most likely government would be a coalition with Fianna Fáil and the diminished Progressive Democrats (see Gallagher and Sinnott, 1990). Fianna Fáil's anti-coalition stance, which was probably no more than a long-standing electoral ploy, was set aside to assist the formation of a government.

When Fianna Fáil went into coalition the whole Irish party system became open to change. Mair (1990: 996) argued that Fianna Fáil could remain in power by choosing coalition partners from the PDs on the right or Labour on the left. Albert Reynolds, who described the 1989 coalition

as 'a temporary little arrangement', was soon to lead that coalition, and in 1992, to lead Fianna Fáil into another coalition with the Labour Party. Mair's analysis seemed to come true. The Fianna Fail/Labour government had the largest majority of any modern Irish government and was expected to last for more than one term.

Fianna Fáil has not continually stayed in power from 1989, choosing coalition partners at will, as Mair and others argued it could (Laver and Shepsle, 1996; Mair, 1990). Errors by the Fianna Fáil leadership led to a breakdown in trust between Fianna Fáil and the Labour Party and a 'rainbow coalition' consisting of Democratic Left, Labour and Fine Gael was invested in late 1994 (see Garry, 1995). Fine Gael's vote recovered in 1997 just as it did in the 1950s after the party returned to government following 16 years of opposition.

The danger for Fine Gael is that voters no longer need to support it to cause a change in government. Its role might be reduced to that of an unlikely protest party. Social democratic supporters of Fine Gael could support Labour in the hope of instigating a FF/Labour coalition, while those on the right could support the PDs. Though many voters would remain loyal, this number might be expected to decline over time.

So what evidence is there that this is the case? One thing we should notice is that general elections when the electorate knew that Fianna Fáil is coalitionable are different to other elections. The vertical line in Figure 1 shows that the traditional relationship between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael ends after the 1989 election. From 1951 to 1987 the two lines representing each party's seat-total mirror each other. High Fianna Fáil support meant low Fine Gael support and vice-versa. From 1992 the relationship between the two parties' levels of support ends. This means that should Fianna Fáil lose support, Fine Gael might not be the natural beneficiary as it had been in previous elections. Though we cannot say that defecting Fianna Fáil voters had moved directly to Fine Gael, the aggregate seat totals suggest that whether by direct defections or defections through other parties, Fine Gael was the main beneficiary of dissatisfaction with Fianna Fáil. This relationship ended possibly because after 1989 dissatisfied ex-Fianna Fáil voters knew they could now influence the composition of the government in another way.

Another way to check the hypothesis is to look at transfer patterns. An effect of Fianna Fáil's non-coalitionability was that Fine Gael received transfers from voters for all non-Fianna Fáil parties. This occurred because only a strong Fine Gael party could remove Fianna Fáil from office. Now that governments can be changed without a strong Fine Gael performance, voters need not transfer to Fine Gael, but rather may prefer to transfer to other parties, perhaps including Fianna Fáil.

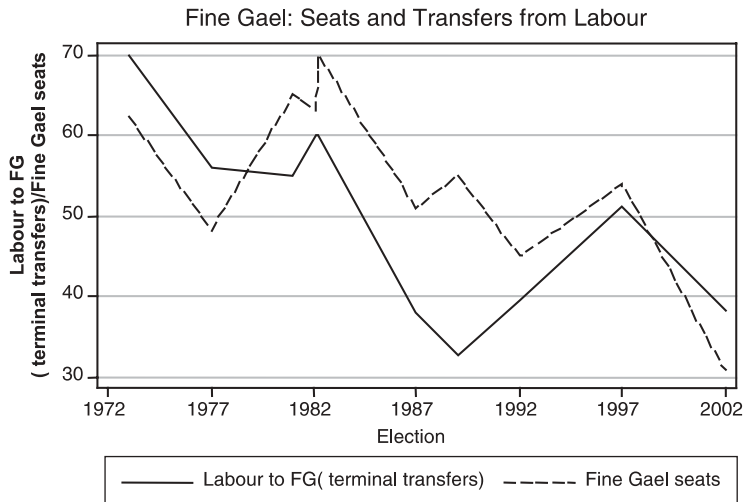
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It is noticeable from Figure 3 that Fine Gael’s parliamentary strength is linked to the transfers it receives from Labour. An exception is 1989 when voters switched back from the PDs and transfers from the PDs possibly became relevant as Fine Gael was in a position to use them. Another notable feature is that transfers from Labour are highest when Fine Gael and Labour are expected to try to form a government together, as in 1973, the early 1980s and 1997. However Labour voters are now much less likely to give terminal transfers³ to Fine Gael. Fine Gael receives fewer from the source that had provided the party with its regular seat bonus.

An indirect but efficient measure of the actual effect of transfers might be the seat-to-vote ratio. The ratio is also a function of the district magnitude and the effective number of elective parties, but since 1987 these have been relatively stable. In 2002 Fine Gael received 83 per cent of the seats pure proportionality would deliver on the level of its first preference vote. This compares with a ratio of 1.17 in 1997 – when Labour regarded Fine Gael as potential government partners. Unless Fine Gael is seen as a realistic prospect for government, vote transfers to Fine Gael decrease.

If the theory of Fine Gael’s irrelevance is true, voters for other parties like Labour and the PDs (and especially ‘switchers’ to these parties from Fine Gael) should also be much more likely to cite ‘influencing the formation of a government’ as an important determinant of their vote. People

FIGURE 3
LABOUR’S TERMINAL TRANSFERS TO FINE GAEL,
FINE GAEL NUMBER OF SEATS



citing this issue in opinion polls are so few that analyses do not yield statistically significant results. However, other data can help. For instance, many surveys asked respondents questions of the likelihood of a government not led by Fianna Fáil. If we look at those people who switched their first preference vote from Fine Gael and those who stayed with Fine Gael between 1997 and 2002, we would expect that those who stayed with Fine Gael between those elections were more likely to think that there was an alternative government to those potentially led by Fianna Fáil. With the 2002 RTÉ exit poll, we can do this.

Table 4 show the incidence of voting for Fine Gael in 2002 according to whether one thought that there was a real alternative to a Fianna Fáil-led government. Of those who voted for parties other than Fine Gael in 1997 and thought that another type of government was possible, 16 per cent voted for Fine Gael, as compared to six per cent support for Fine Gael among those who saw no realistic alternative government.

Of those who voted for Fine Gael in 1997 and thought that there was an alternative to a Fianna Fáil-led government, 77 per cent voted for Fine Gael again in 2002. This compares with just 60 per cent of those seeing no likely alternative voting for Fine Gael. These differences are statistically significant.

It is incontrovertible that Fine Gael voters in 2002 are different, and more likely to think that Fine Gael could be part of the government. It is

TABLE 4
INCIDENCE OF VOTING FOR FINE GAEL IN 2002 ACCORDING TO WHETHER ONE THOUGHT THAT THERE WAS A REAL ALTERNATIVE TO A FIANNA FÁIL-LED GOVERNMENT

	2002 vote	
	Other	Fine Gael
Other party/independent/non-voters in 1997 ^a		
Yes – real alternative to FF	83.91	16.09
No alternative to FF	93.82	6.18
Total	90.14	9.59
Fine Gael voters in 1997 ^b		
Yes – real alternative to FF	22.90	77.10
No alternative to FF	33.98	60.12
Total	28.46	71.54

^aN = 2419, Pearson χ^2 (1) = 61.82; Pr = 0.000; Fisher's exact = 0.000.

^bN = 513; Pearson χ^2 (1) = 16.00; Pr = 0.000; Fisher's exact = 0.000.

also true that the people who switched from Fine Gael were more likely to think a government with Fine Gael impossible (assuming that a grand coalition of Fianna Fail and Fine Gael was ruled out by all respondents). There also seems to be (admittedly circumstantial) evidence for the corollary of Mair's thesis on the 'coalitionability' of Fianna Fáil – that Fine Gael would suffer due to the loss of its *raison d'être*.

Conclusion: Implications for Fine Gael

Fine Gael's performance in 2002 signalled a decline that the party itself recognised as 'beyond [its] worst expectations and fears'.⁴ Fine Gael's problems are compounded when one looks inside the aggregate loss of the seats. The party retained only three seats and 14.5 percent of the vote in Dublin a place where it traditionally had strong support. In urban areas generally, it did badly. As urban areas are the areas that are experiencing the greatest population growth, Fine Gael's weakness there should be a source of much concern. Its strongest showing was in Connacht-Ulster, the least populated and most rural of Ireland's regions.

A potential problem for Fine Gael is its ability to attract quality candidates, especially in urban areas. Most high quality candidates, those would-be national figures, also typically want to enter government. As government looks distinctly less likely for Fine Gael, high quality candidates might choose to stand for other parties. This in turn will hinder its ability to compete for government, putting the party in a vicious circle leading to reduced support.

However, Fine Gael is still the second largest party in the state. Smaller parties would prefer to have 31 TDs than what they hold. Yet being the second largest party in the Irish party system is not advantageous if one's aim is to govern. The largest party is most often in government, and except for Austria, grand coalitions of the two largest parties are rare. Ambitious would-be politicians seeking a place in government are better advised to join Fianna Fáil, Labour or the PDs.

Fine Gael's ability to attract useable transfers is also affected by the party's overall support and in turn by its likelihood of entering government. Transfer patterns are found to be elite-led (Kennedy, 2002), so arguably a change in directions from the elite to the voters could recover the old party system of Fianna Fáil versus the rest. For this to work, Fine Gael may have to position itself to the left of Fianna Fáil.

There are more parties represented in the Dáil than in the 1980s, but a large number of parties had Dáil representation in the late 1940s and early 1950s. However, a coalition of Fine Gael, Labour, PDs, Greens and Sinn Féin seems inconceivable when one of the smaller parties could be

offered a place in government by Fianna Fáil. While this may happen, Fine Gael's destiny is not in its own hands.

If Fine Gael continues to struggle to be relevant, its support will continue to wither. The party's great virtue was that it was Fianna Fáil's largest challengers, and a magnet for those who wished to vote against Fianna Fáil. Now that even small parties can challenge Fianna Fáil in government, Fine Gael's support might fall further, further reducing its relevance. Fine Gael is a traditional 'party of government' that finds itself in near-permanent opposition.

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Notes

1. It should be noted that the Manifesto Research Group data, while a useful resource, is also potentially replete with measurement error. This is because individuals code each document and though it is possible that inter-coder correlations are high, this has not been checked.
2. Fine Gael's heaviest losses came from small farmers (who number very few) and C1s whose support for the party dropped nine points to 19 per cent.
3. These are transfers from voters who can no longer transfer to their first preference party.
4. These were the Fine Gael leader Michael Noonan's words as he accepted responsibility for the result and tendered his resignation (RTÉ News, 18 May 2002).

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Appendix 1

List of Covariates in Models

The models use a number of covariates as predictors of electoral defeat. The following covariates are included:

Fianna Fáil: coded 1 if the incumbent is a Fianna Fáil candidate and 0 otherwise.

Fine Gael: coded 1 if the incumbent is a Fine Gael candidate and 0 otherwise.

Sex: this is a dummy gender variable coded 1 for female and 0 for male.

Nepotism: this is a dummy variable coded 1 if the incumbent has a family member who previously held political office. Data is taken from the *Nealon's Guides*.

Movement from 'median voter': this is a value for each party at each election, which measures the movement towards or away from a hypoth-

esised ‘median voter’. The ‘median voter’ is set to move from a point (the unemployment rate) set at zero in 1961. That is, the 1961 unemployment rate of five per cent (taken from Leddin and Walsh, 1998) is set to zero. The next election (1965) saw a movement in the unemployment rate down to 4.6 per cent. This change is -0.4 . It went back up at the next election (1969) by $+10.4$ etc. We propose that movements down in unemployment mean that the electorate will move to the right whereas increases in unemployment will move the ideal position of the electorate’s ‘median voter’ to the left.

Simultaneously each party’s manifesto has a position on a left–right scale according to the Manifesto Research Group data (see Budge, 2001 for details). This figure with theoretical limits at -100 and $+100$ is measured so that positive numbers indicate right leaning and positive movements, over time, indicates movement to the right. So as to get the two measures moving ‘in the same direction’ we invert the movement in unemployment rate. We then take the absolute difference between these two measures, which gives the movement to or from the hypothesised ideal point of the ‘median voter’ (we take absolute values because we are not interested in the actual direction, just where the parties’ movements are in relation to the ‘median voter’). The measure has little resistance to outliers, so we started with 1961 but only use data from 1969. This will allow any extreme values to regress to the mean. An advantage of this measure is that it does not make any prediction as to where the ‘median voter’ should be – remember: all manifestoes are set to zero in 1961 and it measures movements over time rather movements to or from the ‘median voter’.

All our calculations can be replicated and checked using a do-file in Stata (Version 8) Please contact the authors for details.

Appendix 2

Survival Analysis

Originally developed in the field of biostatistics to estimate the effects of drug treatments on patients suffering from an ailment, survival analysis is concerned with the analysis of time to a particular event. It is particularly useful as a more efficient and accurate methodology to examine time-to-event problems than OLS regression as it is able to distinguish censored and uncensored cases and will not produce negative durations.

The primary locus of information in survival analysis is the hazard rate; it provides users with the likelihood that a particular observation will fail given that it has survived to a particular point in time. One can then

determine the effects of covariates by examining their effect on the baseline hazard rate.

A variety of different techniques can be used to estimate survival analysis models. For this study we have employed a Cox proportional hazard model to test our hypotheses. The Cox model was selected because the relationship between the covariates and the hazard rate can be estimated without having to specify the shape of the hazard rate in advance as one does with parametric survival models. This is particularly useful for studying complex human behaviour where universal trends or directions, such as the hazard of incumbency, may be difficult to identify. Taking into consideration the elegance and simplicity of the Cox model, the fact that this study is not yet interested in making out-of-study predictions (parametric models would facilitate that task) and that our interest in duration dependence is low we choose to follow Box-Steffensmeier and Jones's lead and select the Cox proportional model as our first choice among modelling strategies (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones, forthcoming). However, due to the fact that our dataset consists of discrete time segments (time is measured in blocks – periods between elections) and a considerable number of tied failures (failures that occur at the same time) we are obliged to use an *exact marginal discrete method* whereby our temporal data is treated as discrete rather than continuous as would ordinarily be the case with the Cox model.

Appendix C

Data

Complete or near complete career path data was collected on every member of the Dáil from each new first-time incoming class elected from the April 1965 general election until the most recent May 2002 general election. (Data were obtained from Sean Donnelly's ElectionsIreland website at www.electionsireland.org. Thanks also to Conor Quinn for making his data available to the authors.) Then each incumbent was tracked from his or her first re-election bid until their last term served in office. (TDs who lost an election and subsequently won a later election have been coded as separate identities. Additionally, by-elections are not included in the dataset. TDs who were previously elected in a by-election are considered first time candidates in their first general election.) TDs first elected in 1965 obviously do not enter the 'riskset' until 1969 election. At each subsequent election, incumbents are recorded as either re-elected (having not experienced failure) or defeated (having experienced failure). Once an incumbent experiences failure, he or she exists the

riskset and can no longer re-enter the dataset. The last first-time incoming class on which data was collected was in 1997 as 'freshmen' in the 2002 election obviously cannot be observed. Our model estimates the risk of incumbent defeat in a general election given that the candidate decided to run for re-election. The outcome variable in this model is dichotomous where 0 = reelected and 1 = defeated (as we are interested in failure).

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