

Chapter 5. What the 2024 Manifestos Reveal: Issue Salience and Left–Right Positions

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Introduction

Historically dominated by two centre-right parties, Ireland's political landscape has long puzzled international commentators and academics. Three recurring questions arise: Why has the left traditionally been so weak? Why is there no far-right party represented in Dáil Éireann? And perhaps the biggest conundrum of all, what truly sets Fianna Fáil apart from Fine Gael? These questions have contributed to Ireland's reputation as an outlier among its Western and Northern European peers, with a party system often described as *sui generis*. Recently, however, there have been signs of a more classic left-right dimension emerging, and the 2020 election marked a significant turning point when a party of the left won a plurality of the votes.¹ In this chapter, we examine the evolving nature of the Irish policy space by analysing the 2024 election manifestos of all the main political parties, assessing how distinct the parties are from one another, both in terms of the policies they prioritise and their ideological stances on the main issues.

While most voters will never read an election manifesto, these documents serve multiple functions, and their launch is one of the key moments of any campaign. First, it is a party's moment in the sun with guaranteed media coverage – how manifestos are launched and how they are received can set the tone for the remainder of the campaign. In this electoral cycle, Sinn Féin's decision to delay the publication of its manifesto until after the first leaders' debate was roundly criticised by both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. The delay itself even became part of the campaign narrative. Second, manifestos are an official statement of party policies and commitments, a comprehensive and unique summary of what the party stands for. Political parties prepare their manifestos in different ways, but the final document is the party line for all candidates, informs individual campaigning, and 'can be singled out as a uniquely representative and authoritative characterisation of party policy at a given point in time'.² Third, these documents serve as a (non-binding) contract with the electorate, with election pledges intended to hold governing parties accountable. However, in coalition governments, accountability is more complex, as parties may need to compromise on their pledges (for more on this, see chapter 3 in this volume). Fourth, manifestos also reveal differences in campaign strategies, such as expressed sentiment or the focus on the future versus the past.³ Fifth, party manifestos serve as an essential document during government formation processes, and many manifesto promises make it into programmes for government.

Political scientists place great emphasis on manifestos, despite knowing that most voters never read them. As definitive statements of party policy, regularly published manifestos offer unparalleled data for researchers mapping policy spaces and tracking the dynamics of party competition. Numerous scholarly papers have utilised manifesto data to analyse the structure of national party systems, as well as to compare party systems across countries and time. Two main themes dominate this work. First, the examination of what policies are most salient for parties, through the analysis of what is and is not highlighted. And second, the measurement of parties' ideological positions derived from the content of policy statements. This chapter explores both themes.

Over the years, the methods for analysing manifesto data have significantly evolved. Initially, documents were exclusively hand-annotated by trained coders. Native-speaking

coders would divide the manifesto into policy statements, known as ‘quasi-sentences’, and assign each statement to a pre-defined set of exclusive policy categories. The frequencies of these policy categories were used to estimate policy priorities (saliency) or to derive ideological positions based on the degree to which they focus on ‘left’ or ‘right’ topics. More recently, and building on this earlier manual work, computational approaches have been applied to combine these human annotations with machine learning techniques, resulting in methods that are, typically, faster, cheaper, and less prone to individual human error.

In what follows, we use these newer techniques to explore the manifestos of all the main political parties competing in election 2024. The chapter first provides a brief overview of the 2024 manifestos, comparing them with the manifestos from previous elections. Second, we explore the policy emphasis in each manifesto, examining what topics dominated in 2024 and which were omitted and, again, how this compares with previous elections. Finally, we use the manifesto data to examine the placement of the main political parties on a left-right spectrum.

The 2024 Manifestos – Background

The launch of an election manifesto is an important moment in any party’s campaign, providing an opportunity for the parties to project their ‘brand’ to voters and, perhaps more importantly, the media, who distil the party’s message for the electorate.⁴ With the November election date long anticipated, most parties had done almost all the work on their manifestos well in advance of 8 November, with reports suggesting, for example, that Labour had been working on theirs since the summer of 2023.⁵ Nonetheless, it was notable that only three parties launched their manifestos during the first week of the campaign – with Fianna Fáil firing the starting gun on Monday 11 November, followed quickly by the Green Party (12 November) and People Before Profit rounding out the first week with their launch on the 14 November.⁶ This relatively slow start was followed by a flurry of launches during the second week of the campaign, when five parties published their manifestos. Fine Gael and Labour both launched on 17 November and, similarly, Sinn Féin and the Social Democrats had clashing launches two days later. Independent Ireland was the last of the main parties to release its manifesto, holding off until exactly one week before polling day (publishing their manifesto on Friday, 22 November).

Party manifestos vary significantly in length and 2024 was no different. While there has been a notable increase in manifesto length over time, strong differences remain both across and within countries. Earlier research has demonstrated that Ireland, along with Portugal, is particularly notable for its very variable manifesto lengths. The 2024 election continues this trend with Independent Ireland’s manifesto little more than 10 per cent that of the Labour Party’s 133-page tome (see Table 5.1).⁷ People Before Profit also opted for brevity with a manifesto less than half the length of all other parties (excluding Independent Ireland).

Table 5.1 About Here

To explore the 2024 data in historical context, Figure 5.1 documents manifesto length at each Irish election since 1997. Eyeballing this figure, and in line with international trends, Irish party manifestos appear to be getting longer over time. The boxes and lines in this graph help us understand how the data is spread out. The median is shown by the horizontal line

inside each box. The box itself represents the range of values that contain half of the data points. In 1997, the typical manifesto was just under 10,000 words in length, while in 2024 this figure was closer to 35,000 words. The 2007 election appears to be an outlier, in that average manifesto length was significantly greater than in 2011. Research has demonstrated that manifesto length is a product of many contextual and political factors, a key one of which is the time parties have to prepare the document, i.e., is it a regular versus an unexpected 'early' election? It is noteworthy that the 2007 contest, like the 2024 one, was very much an anticipated election, following the third longest Dáil term (29th) in history, lasting four years and 324 days.

Other than this trend towards greater length over time, there do not appear to be many other very strong party, ideological, or government-opposition dynamics at play in explaining manifesto length as revealed in Figure 5.1. The Labour Party, which had the longest manifesto in 2024, indeed the longest of any party since 1997, clearly tends to favour a longer publication when compared with its peers. Interestingly, it had one of the shortest in 2020, well below the median word count (represented by the horizontal black bar in the figure). Fine Gael had the longest manifesto in 2011, 2016, and 2020 but the shortest in 2002. The outgoing governing Fianna Fail and Green parties had notably short manifestos in 2011, perhaps recognising nothing could save them at the polls that year and that the parties were fated for the opposition benches or oblivion.

Also of note, in the last two elections, there has been a significant increase in the word length of Sinn Féin documents, reflecting the party's more detailed elucidation of their policy positions, as it became the main opposition party. The newer People Before Profit has always favoured a shorter document. The party had no manifesto in 2016, opting instead to issue a joint set of 'common principles' with their allies, at the time, the Anti-Austerity Alliance. Party age and size are two factors that have been demonstrated to affect manifesto length, both in terms of resources available to dedicate to the task and experience of the process. And this year, the youngest party of all, Independent Ireland, had by far the shortest manifesto. Likewise, Aontú had a manifesto well below the median length. New parties might not have developed positions on all issues but focus on a narrower range of policies, which in turn reduces the length of their manifestos. The Social Democrats, on the other hand, had the second-longest manifesto, despite the party being less than 10 years old.

Figure 5.1 About Here

The 2024 election manifestos varied dramatically in length, but there does not appear to be a clear explanation for their garrulity. We next turn to a more systematic analysis of these documents exploring, in the first instance, the policies that were most salient for each party both in 2024 and across time.

The Issue Focus of Manifestos

In this section, we examine the key themes and priorities highlighted by the parties in their manifestos. Although the manifestos differed significantly in length, did they converge on similar policy priorities or diverge in focus? Did smaller parties emphasise distinct topics, carving out specialised policy niches? Furthermore, were specific topics intentionally excluded from the manifestos?

Saliency theory posits that parties use manifesto space strategically to differentiate themselves in the political market, emphasising the policies for which they have the strongest reputation with the electorate, essentially those policies over which they have ‘issue ownership’.⁸ This theory argues that political parties do not mention other parties or their policies in their manifestos, nor, interestingly, do they take radically different positions on key political problems. Rather, parties use their manifestos to selectively emphasise the issues they believe the electorate will reward them for. According to this logic, we expect centre-right parties to focus on issues such as economic growth, tax cuts, and law and order, while left-wing parties will stress expanding the welfare state and better public services. More recent work has challenged the core assumptions of saliency theory and especially its applicability to multi-party systems, finding that parties do indeed confront each other on the main policies.⁹

To investigate issue emphasis in the 2024 manifestos, we employ advanced machine learning techniques to analyse 17,212 sentences and headings across the manifestos of the nine registered parties that secured representation in the 2024 election.¹⁰ The only excluded materials are title pages, introductory remarks by the party leader, appendices, pictures, and lists of contents.¹¹ Content written in Irish was also removed to allow for a consistent classification. Irish sections of manifestos are usually translations or summaries of the English text, and this duplication does not add extra value in identifying issue salience. In essence, we attempt to identify the focus of each sentence and section title and categorise them into one of 18 separate policy areas (plus one undefined ‘other/no policy area’ category), and we then calculate the proportion of each manifesto dedicated to that policy topic.

There are four parts to this policy classification process. First, so-called transformer models transfer information from general language understanding to domain-specific expertise. The underlying DistilBERT language model was trained on English Wikipedia (over 2,500 million words) and a collection of books (800 million words). This process enables the model to capture contextual relationships between words and phrases. The second step involves ‘fine-tuning’ this model to the task of identifying policy areas. To train the model, we use an existing dataset from the Irish Policy Agendas Project (IPAP), which includes over 66,000 hand-coded sentences of 67 Irish manifestos from 1982 to 2020. We aggregate the IPAP codings into 18 policy areas relevant in election 2024 to create a machine learning model based on these existing data that can identify the most likely policy area in new data.¹² Third, we assess the performance of the model by comparing the machine learning classification to IPAP codings not used in the training process and a random sample of 500 sentences from the 2024 manifestos.¹³ We find that the classification performance aligns with previous studies on machine learning classifications of policy areas.¹⁴ After confirming that the classification is accurate, we use our model to identify the policy area of all 17,212 sentences from the 2024 manifestos.

To illustrate the outputs from this process, Table 5.2 presents the most typical terms appearing in 2024 party manifesto sentences in each of the 18 policy categories. Even a cursory examination attests to the validity of the model. The words most associated with a sentence being classified as relating to *Agriculture* policy, for instance, are: *farmers, farm, agriculture, farming, animal welfare, beef, tillage, fisheries, fishing, food, animals, horticulture, agricultural, dairy, farms*. Similarly, the words that best predict *Law and Crime* are: *gardaí, crime, garda, victims, policing, justice, prison, domestic violence, Garda Síochána, gender-based violence, offences, court, trafficking, family law and violence*. There is no overlap in the words most closely associated with each policy domain, even when one

compares similar policy areas such as *Defence* and *International Affairs and Foreign Aid*. In addition to providing a validity check of the automated classification, Table 5.2 provides relevant insights into issues discussed during the 2024 campaign.

Table 5.2 About Here

Issue Emphasis in the 2024 Manifestos

Turning to the analysis of the 2024 manifestos, Figure 5.2 presents the top five most salient issues for each party manifesto. Unsurprisingly, *Housing* is a major focus of attention for all the political parties, with six of the nine parties dedicating more (or an equal share) of their manifesto to this topic compared with any other policy issue. For Fianna Fáil, the Social Democrats, and Aontú, it was a close second in terms of policy attention. This focus on housing mirrors voters’ top priorities, as revealed in the Irish Times/RTÉ/TG4/TCD exit poll, with 28 per cent of the electorate identifying this as their primary concern.¹⁵

This heavy focus on housing policy by all political parties is not consistent with the expectations of saliency theory, which would predict that the incumbent governing parties, who were widely criticised for not resolving the crisis, would de-emphasise the issue. *Health* is another major area of focus in all the manifestos and topped the agenda in the Fianna Fáil, Social Democrats, and Aontú documents and was just as salient as housing for People Before Profit and Fine Gael. Interestingly, education received as much attention as housing in the SF manifesto but was not in the top five issues for Aontú, the Green Party, or the Social Democrats.

Some of the more unique areas of focus are also worth noting, hinting at policy niches for the smaller parties, in particular. For instance, *Transportation* only made the top five focus areas for the Green Party. Similarly, Aontú was the only party to have *Law and Crime* occupy a large portion of its manifesto. *Agriculture* did not feature in the top five policy areas for the three big parties but was emphasised by Aontú and Independent Ireland, each of whom dedicated more than 10 per cent of their manifestos to the topic. Unsurprisingly, *Environmental and Energy* issues were topmost in the Green Party’s manifesto. Despite a widely discussed *Friends of the Earth* study that labelled Labour as the strongest on climate action/policy, environmental issues did not rank among the top five priorities in the Labour Party’s manifesto.¹⁶

Figure 5. 2 About Here

To further explore the question of issue focus, Figure 5.3 presents the proportion of each of the nine manifestos dedicated to the 18 key policy areas. The black points indicate the average issue focus across all manifestos, while the horizontal lines show the range of plus or minus one standard deviation. Longer lines indicate larger differences in issue emphasis across the parties. The figure can be read from top to bottom in terms of policy saliency. Overall, and in keeping with expectations, *Housing* is the most salient policy area of all, followed closely by *Health*. These two topic areas dwarf all others, with *Environment and Energy*, *Education*, and the *Welfare State and Childcare* forming a second cluster of focus.

Perhaps the most interesting detail to emerge from this figure is the very low number of sentences dedicated to *Immigration and Refugee* policy in any of the manifestos, especially

given the prominent role played by this topic in the local and European elections in June (see chapters 2 and 11 in this volume). As Figure 5.3 reveals, this issue had, on average, the least number of manifesto sentences dedicated to it. Except for Independent Ireland, no party devoted more than 3 per cent of its manifesto to the topic. In part, this may be explained by the timing of the election: the immigration issue had largely receded from the public's mind by the end of 2024, with only 6 per cent of voters citing it as their top priority in the Irish Times/RTÉ/TG4/TCD exit poll, compared with the 20 per cent who listed it as their top reason in deciding how to vote in the European elections in June.¹⁷ However, we must also allow that highly contested and controversial policy issues may be omitted from manifestos and there is some research to suggest that party manifestos are particularly weak at revealing a party's populist stance when compared with other types of political text such as internal party documents or speeches.¹⁸ Of the nine parties, only Independent Ireland dedicates 5 per cent or more of its manifesto to this policy area. Also of note, and despite the global backdrop of war in Ukraine and the Middle East and an isolationist US president entering office, none of the parties seem to have much to say about *Defence* in their respective manifestos, with no party dedicating more than 4 per cent of available space to the topic.

When we look at party variation across the 18 policy areas some interesting patterns emerge, especially for the smaller parties. Aontú's manifesto is significantly less focused on *Education, Environment and Energy* and *Cultural Policy and Natural Heritage* when compared with all other parties. Likewise, People Before Profit, notably, does not emphasise *Banking, Finance and Businesses, Agriculture, Transportation, or Law and Crime* in their manifesto. Independent Ireland pays significantly less attention to *International Affairs and Foreign Aid, Environment and Energy, and Civil Rights and Inclusion*.

Figure 5.3 About Here

Policy Saliency Across Time

Was 2024 an outlier in terms of the policy debates and the focus of the political parties? To examine this question, we explore the attention dedicated to six key policy areas in the four elections since 2011. We use the human-coded manifestos from the *Irish Policy Agendas Project* and aggregate the sentences into the 18 policy areas used for the classification of the 2024 manifestos. We compare the proportion of each manifesto devoted to six policy areas that were extensively discussed during the Election 2024 campaign: *Education, Environment and Energy, Housing, Health, Labour and Employment, and Welfare State and Childcare*.

Figure 5.4 displays the trends revealed in this data. Not surprisingly, *Housing* has become much more of a focus over time. At the height of the recession in 2011, when housing prices were plummeting from their Celtic Tiger era peak, this topic barely featured in manifestos with less than 5 per cent of sentences related to this theme. However, with the Residential Property Price Index (RPPI) reaching an all-time high in November 2024 and homeless figures, similarly, breaking records, this topic now dominates the manifestos. *Health*, always a key policy area, also experiences a rise in saliency, reflecting a health system under strain due to a growing and ageing population. While not as stark, the focus on *Employment and Labour* declines over the same time, as the issue of unemployment recedes into the background. The focus on *Education* remains relatively static over time, as does the

space dedicated to *Environmental and Energy* policy, despite the ever-worsening climate crisis.

This graph also reveals relative shifts in party focus across time. Unsurprisingly, the Green Party always dedicates more of its manifesto to *Environment and Energy* policy and more to this topic area than any other party at each election. Sinn Féin, on the other hand, seems to switch its policy focus from election to election. In 2020, more of its manifesto was dedicated to health policy than any other issue (20 per cent) but this topic occupied only 7 per cent of its 2024 manifesto. Labour is, however, quite consistent in terms of focus on issues related to *Labour and Employment*, with roughly 8 per cent of its manifestos concentrating on the issue at each election. The emphasis on the other twelve policy issues (not shown) remained relatively stable since 2011. Exceptions are *Macroeconomics* and *Political System and Public Sector*. Both policy areas peaked after the Financial Crisis and during the economic recovery in 2011 and 2016 but did not feature very prominently in 2020 and 2024.

This analysis of manifesto saliency has revealed some interesting patterns in the extent to which parties, both collectively and individually, engaged with various political issues in the 2024 election. Overall, the results indicate that *Housing* (followed by *Health*) was the dominant focus of party manifestos, reflecting the top concern articulated by voters, in various opinion polls, in the run-up to the election. In contrast to the expectations of saliency theory, no party ‘owned’ the topic. As such, we expect the parties to have offered differing solutions and proposals to tackle the problem. To examine this proposition, we turn in the next section to an analysis of the overarching policy positions taken by the parties.

Figure 5.4 About Here

The Irish Party Space in 2024

Estimating the spatial positions of parties has long been a favourite pastime of political scientists and the language of left and right is now mainstream, with most voters reasonably adept at placing parties along this spectrum.¹⁹ Theories of legislative decision-making and government formation rely heavily on our ability to measure party positions in policy space and several methods exist to facilitate this estimation. Broadly divided into two camps, expert surveys (of both academics and political elites) versus document (largely manifesto) based analysis. Advocates of the expert survey approach argue that the resulting positions are far less likely to be subject to strategic considerations on the part of respondents when compared with manifesto-based analysis.²⁰ However, these studies can suffer from low and unrepresentative response rates and are far more time-consuming to conduct. In addition, research suggests that manifesto-based left-right positions correlate highly with party positions derived from expert surveys.²¹ In this chapter, we confine ourselves to the content-based approach while recognising the criticism that party manifestos are strategically written documents, designed to maximise electoral support. As such, we acknowledge that the ideological positions revealed in the manifestos may not be ‘true’ party positions but rather the positions that parties choose to adopt at election time.

The 2024 party manifestos’ tendency to promise increased public spending while cutting taxes raises questions about how much differentiation, if any, will emerge on the traditional left-right spectrum when their content is examined. Estimating the cost of the

election promises was no simple task, but one expert calculated that the three main parties committed to tax cuts ranging from €3 to €7 billion while increasing spending between €37 and €49 billion annually by 2030.²² Given the tenor of the election promises, it would not be unrealistic to expect low differentiation among the parties on the left-right dimension in 2024.

To arrive at estimates of the party positions in 2024, we once again apply a machine learning model to the manifestos. Specifically, we use the *manifestoBERTa* model, which has already been trained and validated by the Manifesto Project (MARPOR) team on 1.6 million sentences from 1,977 international manifestos.²³ This model classifies sentences into one of 56 policy categories, predefined by MARPOR. These categories are typically unidirectional, such that positive and negative mentions of a policy area are coded separately. For example, protectionist economic policy is differentiated from policies advocating free trade and an open economy. Twenty-six of these categories are then aggregated to calculate the 'right-left' (RILE) index for each party. Researchers have identified 13 categories as 'left' topics and 13 as 'right' categories. To derive a party's left-right position, researchers subtract the number of quasi-sentences falling into the 13 'right' categories from the 13 'left' issues and divide this number by the sum of 'right' and 'left' quasi-sentences and multiply the score by 100. This aggregation results in a scale ranging from -100 to +100, where higher values imply more right-wing positions.²⁴ Much has been written about the strengths and weaknesses of this approach, yet it remains one of the most common measures of left-right orientation in the field, especially for cross-national and historical comparisons.²⁵

Figure 5.5 displays the results of applying the *manifestoBERTa* model to the 2024 Irish manifestos and aggregating the resulting categories to derive left-right positions. The horizontal lines around the positions show 95 percent confidence intervals, visualising uncertainty around the point estimates. The parties are aligned from left to right with People Before Profit occupying the most leftwards position. The parties then line up much as one would expect, with the Labour Party, the Social Democrats, and Sinn Féin all to the left of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, though with overlapping confidence intervals. Independent Ireland and Aontú occupy an independent, overlapping space on the right of the spectrum.

The only party position that might cause us to query the results is that of the Green Party. Based on the model, it occupies a position further to the right of both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael (though, again, with overlapping uncertainty estimates). Instead of focusing on redistribution, the Green Party emphasised environmental issues and capital spending to improve transport infrastructure. As we will explain in detail below, the Green Party's placement in the political centre seems to be a consequence of its low emphasis on welfare state expansion in comparison to the party's competitors.

Figure 5.5 About Here

To examine whether Irish political parties have shifted ideologically over time, Figure 5.6 illustrates their positions on the RILE scale since 2011.²⁶ The estimates for 2011, 2016, and 2020 are based on the human-codings of manifestos by the Manifesto Project team while the 2024 estimates are based on our own analysis, as documented in the preceding paragraphs.²⁷ The horizontal axis refers to the election year and the vertical axis represents the position for each party, with negative scores indicating more left-wing positions.

The results for Fianna Fáil suggest that the party moved significantly leftwards after its disastrous 2011 election and its position has remained relatively stable since. A very similar pattern is evident for Fine Gael. The Labour Party has been edging ever leftwards, while People

Before Profit has always been the most left-wing party, in each election they have competed in, with very little movement evident across the three elections it has contested. Aontú occupies the most rightwards space with almost identical positions in the two elections they have contested. For the remaining three parties, the patterns are more complex. First, the Green Party's manifesto in 2016 appears to have been out of line with its general party position, being a little further to the left. Second, the Social Democrats, while always quite left wing, seems to have been even more so in 2020 when compared with 2016 and 2024. Finally, Sinn Féin, by these estimates, appears to have moved somewhat leftwards overall, but in 2024 Sinn Féin's manifesto was more to the right of its 2020 one.

Figure 5.6 About Here

According to the manifesto-based RILE index, Ireland is located among the most 'left-wing' party systems in Europe. The increasing focus on the MARPOR category *Welfare State Expansion*, capturing support for introducing, maintaining, or expanding public service and social security schemes, explains this development. In 2024, the average focus across all parties on *Welfare State Expansion* amounts to 21 per cent, which is almost twice as high as the average of 11 per cent in the European Union (based on all member states' most recently coded election manifestos). Except for the Green Party, Aontú, and Independent Ireland, all parties devoted over 20 per cent of their 2024 manifestos to *Welfare State Expansion*. Fianna Fáil's and Fine Gael's emphasis on this topic amounted to 26 and 23 per cent, respectively, which is on par or higher than the Labour Party (24 per cent), People Before Profit (23 per cent), the Social Democrats (22 per cent), and Sinn Féin (21 per cent). These results point to the exceptionally strong focus on public spending across the ideological spectrum, which ultimately explains comparatively left-leaning party manifestos.

Overall, the results from this section suggest that Irish political parties now occupy distinct positions on a general left-right scale and that voters are offered a choice at election time. The Irish party system is not an exception in Europe and the conclusion that the 'left right dimension is less meaningful in Ireland than in most Western European countries' is no longer true.²⁸ At the same time, the leftward drift by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the two historically largest parties, has created space on the centre right and right of the political spectrum for new parties.²⁹

Conclusion

With a booming economy, near-full employment, and a substantial budget surplus, the political backdrop to the 2024 election differed significantly from preceding ones. Parties pledged to spend billions of euro in a bid to attract voters to their camp. There was markedly little reference to raising taxes to fund this expenditure by parties on the left of the political spectrum and, similarly, little talk of reducing the size of the state by parties on the right. Much of the media analysis of the manifesto pledges hinged on the nuances of how many houses would be built or how many doctors would be hired. Economists worried about what might happen when the economic bubble bursts. The parties themselves bickered over who could be trusted most with the state's coffers.

In this chapter, we conducted a systematic text analysis of the manifestos to evaluate if parties prioritised different policy issues and whether or not they adopted different ideological positions on a general left-right dimension. Party manifestos serve multiple functions during election campaigns. Manifestos also provide high quality data for political scientists to analyse. The consistent publication of these documents, their widespread availability, and the careful attention given to their creation ensures they remain the primary source for estimating party positions and priorities. Manifestos are not, however, without their limitations as data sources. The theoretical underpinnings of the MARPOR categories, which we use in this chapter, are the subject of much debate, as is the RILE scale that is built from them. The machine learning techniques we deployed are also reliant on earlier hand coding of manifestos which are far from perfect. At a broader level, one can also question whether manifestos reflect 'true' party positions, considering their inherently strategic nature. Despite these potential shortcomings, the results in this chapter may serve as a building block for future studies that explore the Irish policy space using alternative methods, such as expert surveys of academics and political elites or voter studies.

Overall, we observe that the parties focus on the same key issues – those that are most urgent for the electorate. The issue agenda is largely similar across all parties, with housing and healthcare policy taking centre stage. We found no evidence that any of the larger parties exclusively 'own' specific issues, although some of the smaller parties try to establish their own policy niche. However, we also find that issue emphasis has shifted over time, with housing and healthcare becoming more prominent, while employment policy has seen a decline in importance.

In terms of policy positioning, we find that even in a 'giveaway election', the parties occupy different points on a general left-right scale. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael do, however, appear to be moving leftwards over time while Sinn Féin moved closer to the centre of the political spectrum in this election when compared with 2020. Nonetheless, the long-standing consensus that the Irish party system is exceptional no longer holds. Irish parties do offer voters different policy solutions on topical issues of the day.

Table 5.1: 2024 party manifesto launch dates and length

Party	Launch Date	Length (Sentences)	Length (Words)
Independent Ireland	22 November 2024	472	6,971
People Before Profit	14 November 2024	799	11,821
Aontú	21 November 2024	1,501	25,792
Green Party	12 November 2024	1,588	27,722
Fianna Fáil	11 November 2024	1,923	31,132
Sinn Féin	19 November 2024	2,307	45,771
Fine Gael	17 November 2024	2,607	50,111
Social Democrats	19 November 2024	2,953	56,830
Labour Party	17 November 2024	3,062	59,992
Total		17,212	316,142

Draft

Table 5.2: Predictive terms for each policy area

Category	Predictive terms
Housing	housing, homes, social housing, rent, homelessness, local authorities, affordable housing, affordable homes, building, renters, vacant, tenants, buildings, planning, towns
Health	care, health, patients, mental health, healthcare, health service, hospital, HSE, mental health services, services, treatment, Sláintecare, hospitals, drugs, beds
Environment and Energy	energy, renewable energy, biodiversity, water, electricity, climate, gas, renewables, waste, recycling, offshore wind, climate action, nature, water quality, emissions
Education	schools, education, students, school, teachers, student, education system, teaching, higher education, third level, children, primary, educational, special education, secondary schools
Welfare State and Childcare	childcare, carers, pension, poverty, state pension, parents, child poverty, means test, family carers, childminders, carer's allowance, foster carers, child benefit, social welfare, parent
Banking, Finance, and Businesses	tourism, SMEs, sports, sport, businesses, banking, business, consumers, competition, credit unions, small businesses, insurance, banks, enterprise, cash
Agriculture	farmers, farm, agriculture, farming, animal welfare, beef, tillage, fisheries, fishing, food, animals, horticulture, agricultural, dairy, farms
Political System and Public Sector	accountability, public services, Seanad, public sector, ministers, councillors, public procurement, local government, directly elected mayor, public, Dáil, decisions, political system, procurement, civil servants
Law and Crime	gardaí, crime, garda, victims, policing, justice, prison, domestic violence, Garda Síochána, gender-based violence, offences, court, trafficking, family law, violence
International Affairs and Foreign Aid	UN, peace, Northern Ireland, Palestine, human rights, European Union, conflict, Good Friday Agreement, Israel, Ukraine, global, humanitarian, reconciliation, international, peaceful
Transportation	public transport, cycling, transport, rail, bus, road, bike, road safety, roads, bikes, DART, electric vehicles, active travel, greenways, Dublin Airport
Macroeconomics	tax, public finances, tax credits, USC, taxation, fiscal, wealth, economy, corporation tax, public expenditure, corporate tax, tax base, inflation, debt, budgetary
Civil Rights and Inclusion	disability, LGBTQI, disabilities, rights, equality, discrimination, traveller, Roma, travellers, women, minorities, racism, gender equality, gender, disability act
Labour and Employment	workers, employers, employment, trade unions, job, employees, living wage, flexible work, minimum wage, trade union, pay, collective bargaining, low pay, work, critical skills
Cultural Policy and Natural Heritage	arts, artists, Irish language, heritage, Gaeltacht, cultural, language, culture, arts council, creative, art, Irish speakers, basic income, language planning, ports
Defence	defence forces, military, defence, neutrality, military neutrality, personnel, FDI, NATO, veterans, defence forces personnel, RDF, naval, triple lock, capabilities, defence force
Science, Technology, and Media	media, RTÉ, digital, content, online, journalism, TG4, Coimisiún na Meán, data centres, news, public service broadcasting, broadband, AI, online safety, national broadband plan
Immigration and Refugees	asylum, immigration, migration, migrants, asylum seekers, deportation, integration, illegal immigration, migration system, visa, applicant, pact, applicants, international protection, refuge

Figure 5.1: Manifesto length across time and party

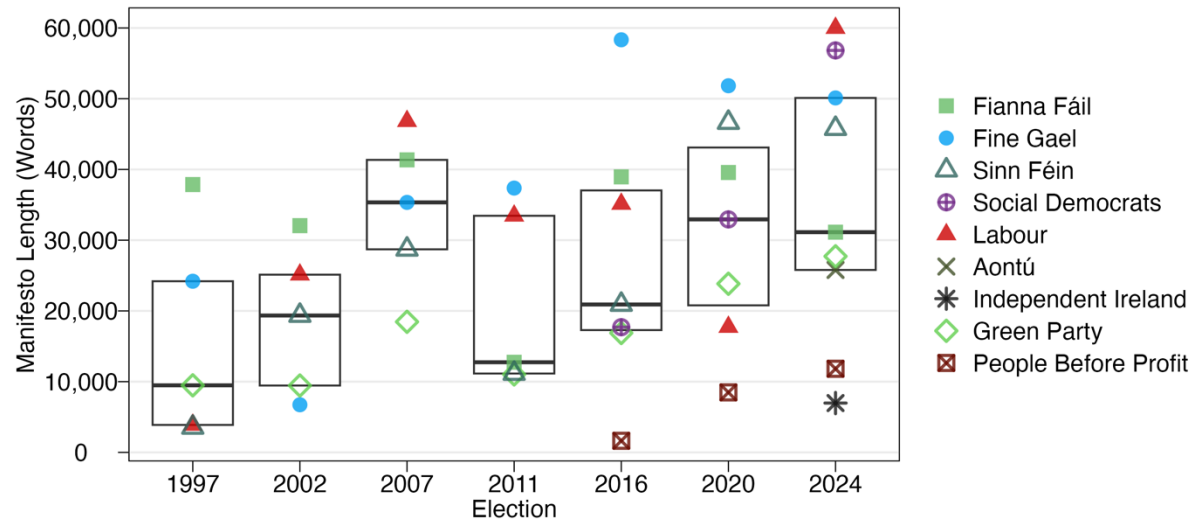


Figure 5.2: The five most salient policy areas for each party

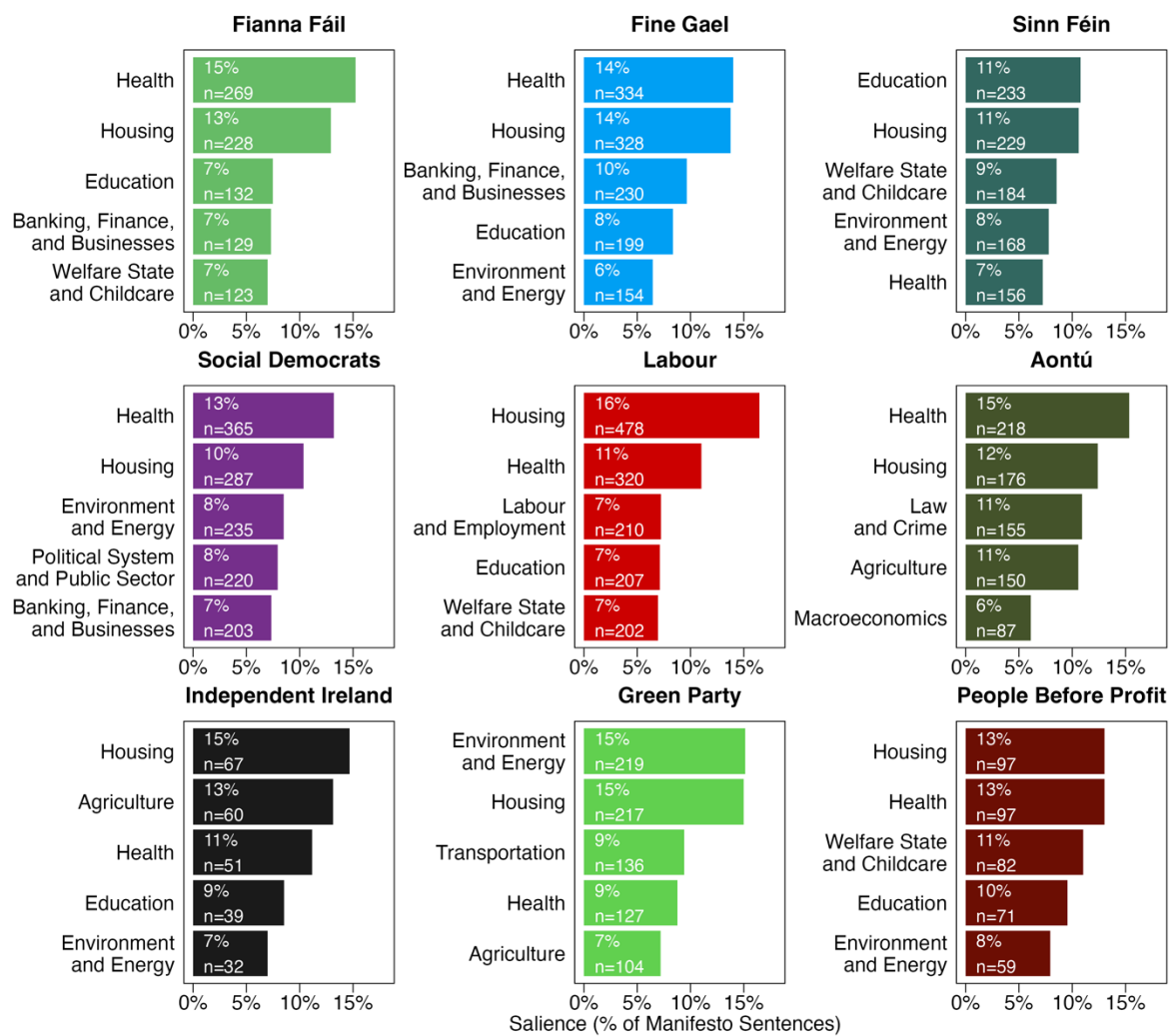
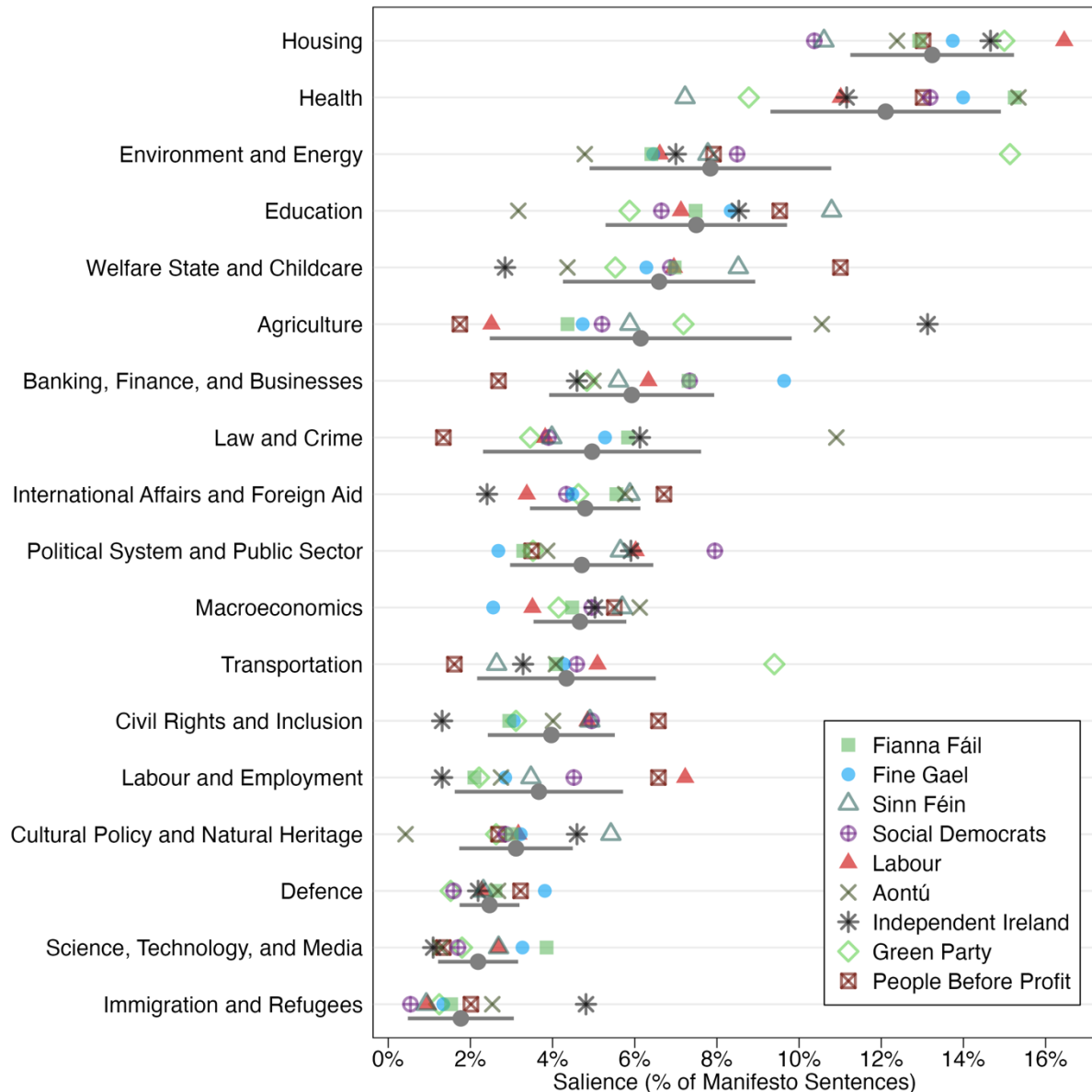
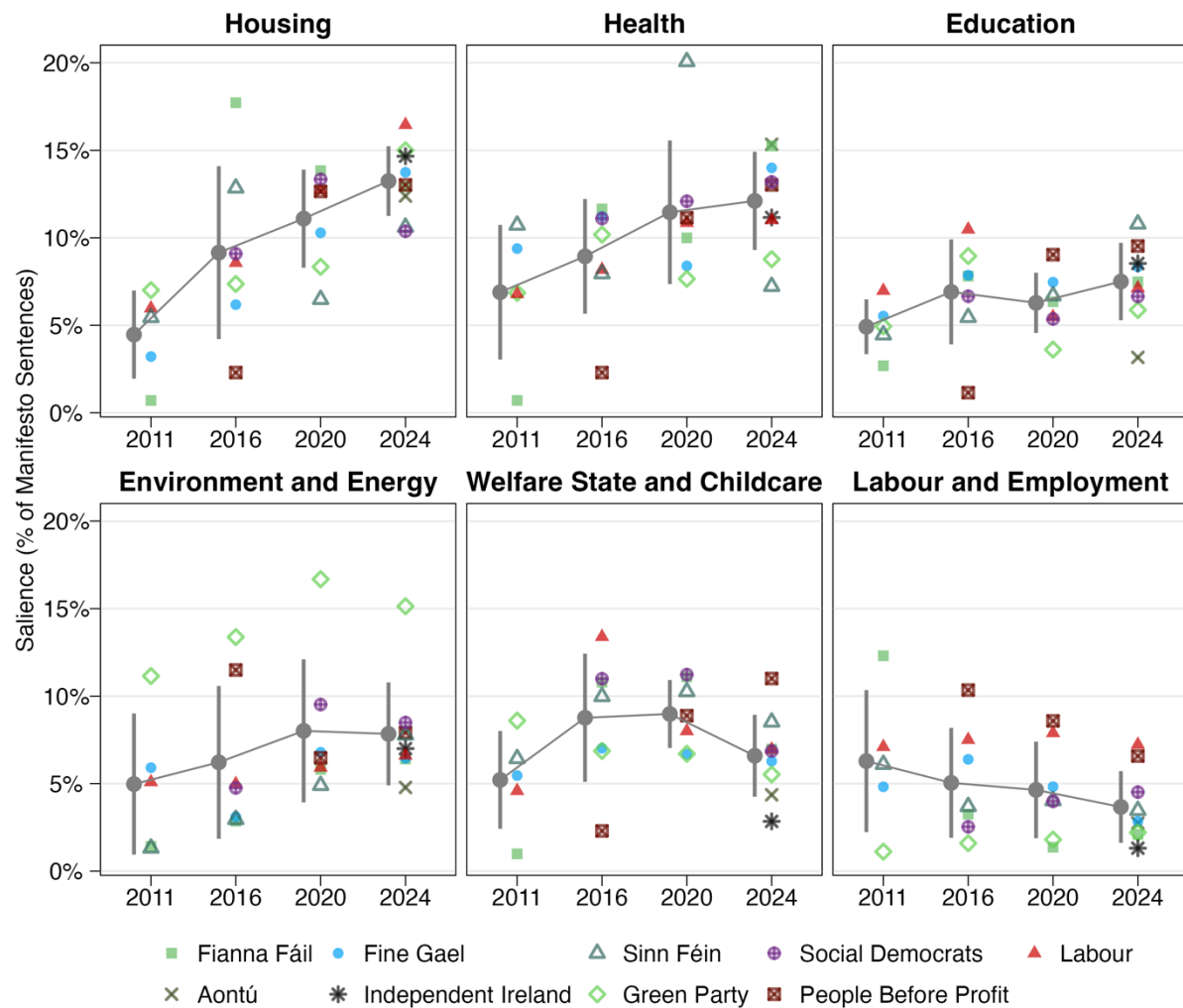


Figure 5.3: *Salience of policy areas in manifestos.*



Note: Coloured dots represent the emphasis placed on each issue in the nine party manifestos. The grey dot below each policy area indicates the average emphasis across all manifestos, while the grey horizontal lines show the range of plus or minus one standard deviation around the average.

Figure 5.4: The development of issue salience since 2011.



Note: values for 2024 are based on machine learning classification of sentences; 2011–2020 based on human annotations of quasi-sentences. Coloured dots represent the emphasis placed on each issue in party manifestos. The grey dot beside each election year indicates the average emphasis across all manifestos, while the grey horizontal lines show the range of plus or minus one standard deviation around the average.

Figure 5.5: Left-right positions in the 2024 manifestos. Horizontal lines show 95 per cent confidence intervals

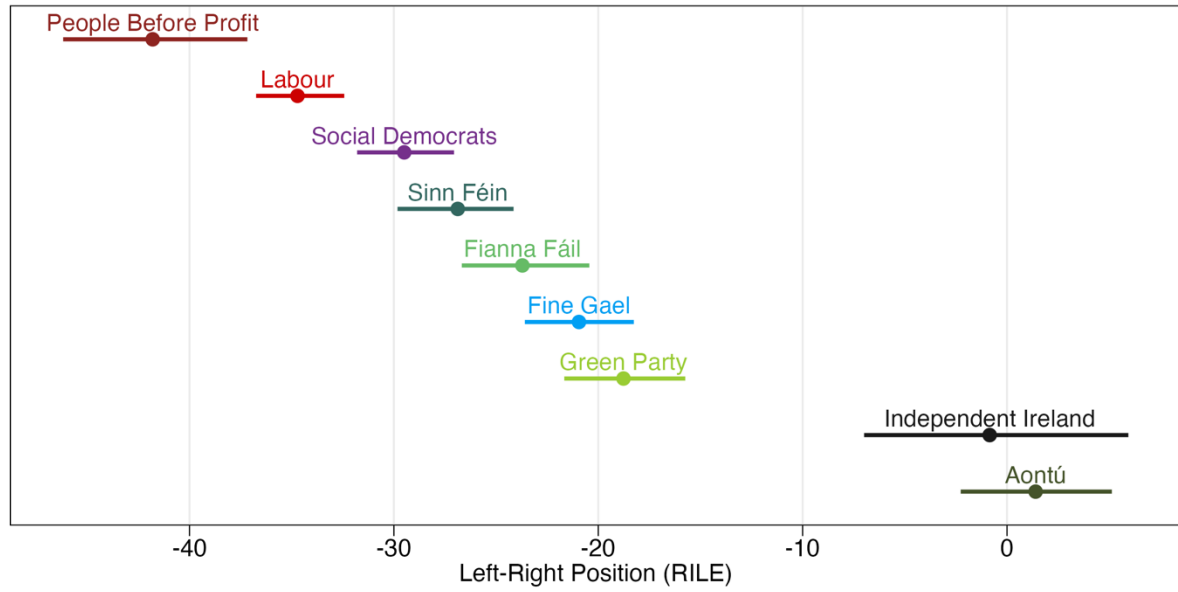
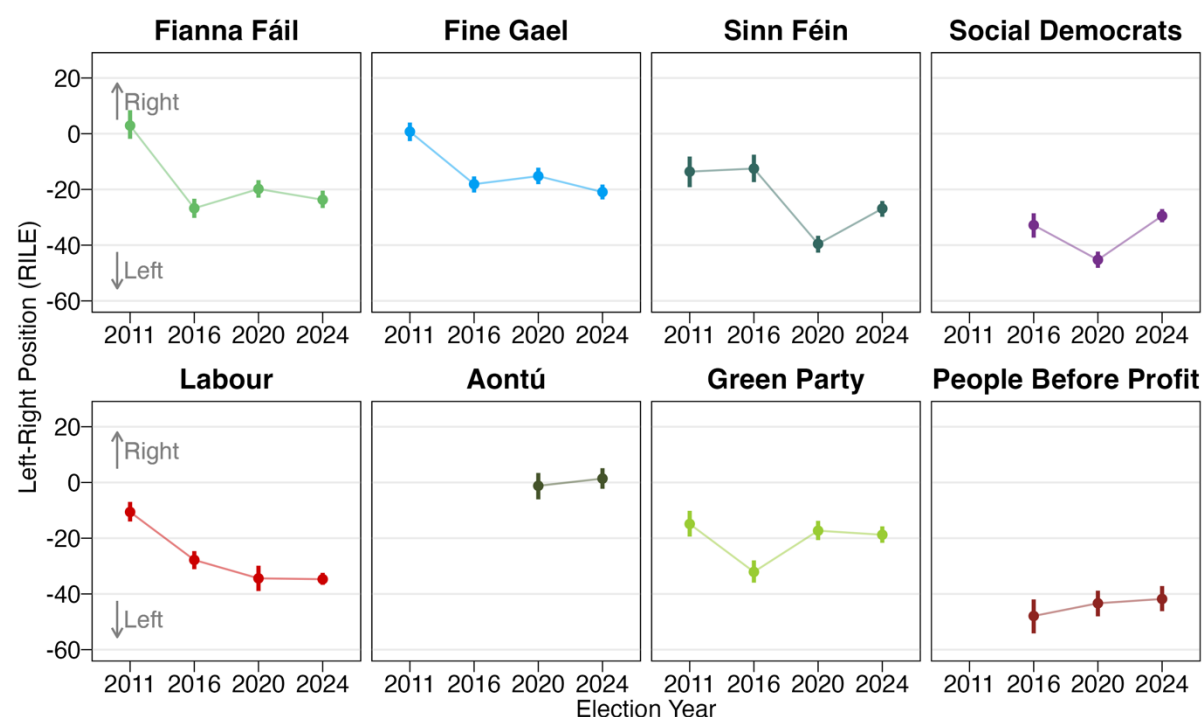


Figure 5.6: Left-right positions between 2011 and 2024.



Note: Lower values imply more left-wing positions. Vertical lines show 95 per cent confidence intervals

¹ For a discussion see: 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). Stefan Müller and Aidan Regan, 'Are Irish voters moving to the left?', *Irish Political Studies* 36:4 (2021), pp. 535–55.

² Ian Budge, 'The internal analysis of election programmes', pp. 15–38 in Ian Budge, David Robertson and Derek Hearl (eds) *Ideology, strategy and party change: Spatial analysis of post-war election programmes in 19 democracies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 18.

³ Stefan Müller, 'The temporal focus of campaign communication' *The Journal of Politics*, 84:1 (2022), pp. 585–90.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the process by which Irish manifestos are written see: Thomas Däubler, 'The preparation and use of election manifestos: learning from the Irish case' *Irish Political Studies*, 27:1 (2012), pp. 51–70.

⁵ Pat Leahy, 'Opposition parties gearing up for November election, with posters ordered and manifestos nearing completion', *Irish Times*, 22 August 2024.

⁶ To note: in this chapter we treat the People Before Profit-Solidarity electoral alliance as one party. We acknowledge that Solidarity has its own manifesto, but we use the People Before Profit one as the basis for our analysis.

⁷ Thomas Däubler and Kenneth Benoit, 'The empirical determinants of manifesto content', *EPSA 2013 Annual General Conference Paper* (2013).

⁸ See: Ian Budge and David Farlie (1983). *Party competition: selective emphasis or direct confrontation? An alternative view with data*, pp. 267–305 in Hans Daalder and Peter Mair (eds), *Western European party systems: continuity & change* (Beverly Hills; London: SAGE Publications, 1983). David Bruce Robertson, *A theory of party competition* (London: Wiley, 1976).

⁹ Ann-Marie Ekengren and Henrik Oscarsson, 'Party elites' perceptions of voting behaviour', *Party Politics* 19:4 (2013), pp. 641–64; Martin Dolezal, Laurenz Ennser-Jedenastik, Wolfgang C. Müller, and Anna Katharina Winkler, 'How parties compete for votes: a test of saliency theory', *European Journal of Political Research* 53:1 (2014), 57–76.

¹⁰ To note, the 100% Redress Party is not included in the analysis, despite achieving one Dáil seat and being registered as an official political party. This decision was made based on the party's, largely, single policy and geographic focus.

¹¹ The segmentation into sentences was done manually by Alona O. Dolinsky, Lena Maria Huber, and Will Horne, 'ManifestoVault V1.0: Annotated full-text general election manifestos at the natural-sentence level of three European countries 1970–2024' (2024). <https://doi.org/10.34894/VKQSP0>

¹² Christoffer Green-Pedersen and Conor Little, 'The issue content of party politics in Ireland: A new perspective on the Irish party system and its development', *Irish Political Studies* 38:1 (2023): 35–59.

To note, the 18 topic areas used in this paper represent a slightly amended version of the 21 major topics identified by the Irish Policy Agendas Project (IPAP). For instance, the *Energy and Environment* topics have been merged. We thank Christoffer Green-Pedersen and Conor Little for sharing the annotated manifestos.

¹³ To validate the classification process, a sample of 500 sentences from the 2024 manifestos was randomly chosen. A trained research assistant then assessed if the policy area assigned by the model was plausible (correct or incorrect). The predicted class of 461 of 500 of the sampled sentences were found to be plausible, resulting in an overall model accuracy of 92.2 per cent. The lowest accuracy score was for *Banking, Finance, and Businesses* at 75.8 per cent. 100 per cent accuracy was achieved in six of the 18 categories. We thank Ciarán Ó Brian for research assistance with these validation efforts. Stefan Müller acknowledges financial support from NexSys – Next Generation Energy Systems, a Research Ireland (SFI) Strategic Partnership Programme [grant number: 21/SPP/3756].

¹⁴ The average F1 score of the model amounts to 0.73 across the 18 categories. The F1 score is a frequently used measure of classification performance that accounts for imbalanced categories. For similar classification approaches, see: Stefan Müller and Naofumi Fujimura, 'Campaign communication and legislative leadership', *Political Science Research and Methods* (2024): 1–22; Miklos Sebők, Ákos Máté, Orsolya Ring, Viktor Kovács, and Richárd Lehoczi, 'Leveraging open large language models for multilingual policy topic classification: The babel machine approach', *Social Science Computer Review* (2024): 1–23.

¹⁵ Colin Gleeson, 'The complete exit poll results: the most important voter issues and second preference details', *Irish Times*, 30 November 2024.

¹⁶ Friends of the Earth Ireland, General election 2024 manifesto analysis for faster and fairer climate action. (2024).

https://www.friendsoftheearth.ie/assets/files/pdf/climate_assessment_of_2024_ge_manifestos_for_friends_of_the_earth.pdf

¹⁷ National Election and Democracy Survey 2024. <https://www.neds.ie>

¹⁸ Teun Pauwels, 'Measuring populism: A review of current approaches', pp. 123–36 in Reinhard C. Heinisch, Christina Holtz-Bacha, and Oscar Mazzoleni (eds), *Political populism: A handbook* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2017).

¹⁹ Anthony Downs, *An economic theory of democracy* (New York, Harper & Row, 1957); Duncan Black, *The theory of committees and elections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958); McElroy, 'Party competition in Ireland'.

²⁰ See: Alejandro Ecker, Marcelo Jenny, Wolfgang C. Müller, and Katrin Praprotnik, 'How and why party position estimates from manifestos, expert, and party elite surveys diverge: A comparative analysis of the 'left–right' and the 'European integration' dimensions', *Party Politics* 28:3 (2022), pp. 528–40. Note: we also use an alternative RILE aggregation method based on a logit scale. The substantive results remain the same. See: Will Lowe, Kenneth Benoit, Slava Mikhaylov, and Michael Laver, 'Scaling policy preferences from coded political texts', *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 36:1 (2011), 123–55.

²¹ Frederik Hjorth, Robert Klemmensen, Sara Hobolt, Martin Ejnar Hansen, and Peter Kurrild-Klitgaard, 'Computers, coders, and voters: Comparing automated methods for estimating party positions', *Research & Politics* 2:2 (2015), pp. 1–9.

²² Barra Roantree, 'How do the spending plans in each party's manifesto compare?', *The Journal*, 22 November 2024.

²³ Tobias Burst, Pola Lehmann, Simon Franzmann, Denise Al-Gaddooa, Christoph Ivanusch, Sven Regel, Felicia Riethmüller, Bernhard Weßels, and Lisa Zehnter, manifestoberta. Version 56topics.context.2023.1.1. (2023). <https://doi.org/10.25522/manifesto.manifestoberta.56topics.context.2023.1.1>. Validation checks reveal very high correlations (of 0.94) between the automated measure based on machine learning predictions of natural sentences and the human annotations of quasi-sentences.

²⁴ For a detailed introduction to the RILE index, see: Andrea Volkens, Judith Bara, Ian Budge, Michael D. McDonald, and Hans-Dieter Klingemann, *Mapping policy preferences from texts: statistical solutions for manifesto analysts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁵ Lowe et al., Scaling policy preferences.

²⁶ Independent Ireland is omitted from this analysis, given it has not competed in previous elections.

²⁷ Pola Lehmann, Simon Franzmann, Denise Al-Gaddooa, Tobias Burst, Christoph Ivanusch, Sven Regel, Felicia Riethmüller, Andrea Volkens, Bernhard Weßels, and Lisa Zehnter, The manifesto data collection: Manifesto

Project (MRG/CMP/MARPOR), Version 2024a. Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB) / Göttingen: Institut für Demokratieforschung (2024). <https://doi.org/10.25522/manifesto.mpds.2024a>

²⁸ Ronald Inglehart and Hans-Dieter Klingemann, 'Party identification, ideological preference and the left-right dimension among Western mass publics' pp. 243–73 in Ian Budge, Ivor Crewe and Dennis J Farlie (eds), *Party identification and beyond: representations of voting and party competition* (London: Wiley, 1976), p. 254.

²⁹ Rory Costello, 'The ideological space in Irish politics: comparing voters and parties', *Irish Political Studies* 32:3 (2017), pp. 404–31. Müller and Regan, 'Are Irish voters moving to the left?'

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