

University of Galway Research Repository

The "green wave" that never happened: the general election in 2007

Title	The "green wave" that never happened: the general election in 2007
Author(s)	Rau, Henrike
Publication Date	2010
Publication information	Rau, H (2010) 'The "green wave" that never happened: the general election in 2007' In: P. Share and M.P. Corcoran (eds) Ireland of the Illusions: A Sociological Chronicle 2007-8. Dublin: IPA. Dublin : IPA.
Publisher	Institute of Public Administration
Link to publisher's version	http://www.ipa.ie/index.php?lang=en&p=product&id=240&prodid=167
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/3884

Published as:

Rau, H. (2010) 'The "Green Wave" That Never Happened: The General Election in 2007', in P. Share and M.P. Corcoran (eds) *Ireland of the Illusions: A Sociological Chronicle 2007-8*. Dublin: IPA, pp. 163-175.

CHAPTER 11

The 'Green Wave' that Never Happened: The 2007 General Election

HENRIKE RAU

General elections provide a useful snapshot of public opinion in Ireland. People's voting patterns tend to reflect their values and attitudes, which both mirror and influence wider social and economic conditions. The general election in June 2007 and its aftermath captured the mood of the Irish electorate at a time when some already predicted that the economic boom of the Celtic Tiger years would come to an abrupt end. Prior to the election, speculation abounded about a radical transformation of the Irish political landscape. Many commentators suggested that support for the ruling centrist party, Fianna Fáil, and its smaller coalition partner, the liberal-right Progressive Democrats (PDs), would shift towards the main opposition parties: centrist Fine Gael and the left-leaning Labour Party. Others predicted a 'Green Wave' that would see the number of Green Party/Comhaontas Glas seats increase significantly. Some also believed that the focus of public opinion and debate had shifted away from material and economic concerns towards quality of life and environmental issues, and that this marked the beginning of a post-materialist era in Irish politics that would benefit smaller parties like the Greens. It was predicted that the economy would play a less significant role in the run-up to the elections and that support for the opposition parties would increase as a result.

Expectations of a shift in power were not met. Fine Gael and Labour failed to make the necessary gains and the Greens did not increase their representation in Dáil Éireann. Instead, the election results confirmed the status quo and revealed the reluctance among a large part of the Irish electorate to end Fianna Fáil's political hegemony. Nevertheless, the 2007 general election marked an important turning point in Irish politics. Unable to secure an absolute majority of seats, Fianna Fáil was once again forced into coalition. After intense negotiations and a vote of the Green Party membership on the proposed programme for government, the Greens made the controversial decision to join a Fianna Fáil-led coalition government that included the PDs and that was supported by three independent TDs. Some commentators welcomed the Greens' ascent to power, arguing that this multi-party coalition signalled the end of Fianna Fáil's dominance and an 'environmental turn' in Irish politics. Others argued that the Greens' decision to leave the opposition benches and support a Fianna Fáil-led government represented a sell-out that would ultimately lead to their electoral demise.

Why did the predicted victory of the opposition and the 'Green Wave' fail to materialise? And what helped the Greens' ascent to power after almost two decades in opposition? Political analysts have identified a range of factors, including the effectiveness of the Fianna Fáil campaign, the popularity of the then Taoiseach Bertie Ahern and the failure of the main opposition parties to capitalise on 'Bertiegate' (an inquiry into the Taoiseach's financial matters). This chapter argues that the 2007 election results, and the subsequent formation of a multi-party government including the Greens, reflected wider social, cultural and economic circumstances. It examines some

international public opinion surveys to identify changes in Irish people's views of economic and environmental matters that coincided with the Greens' transition from protest movement to government party. Suggestions that these changes in public opinion represent an intergenerational cultural shift towards post-materialism that will have long-term implications for the environmental agenda and politics in Ireland will be critically assessed.

Environmental politics and post-materialist values

Did the gradual ascent of the Green Party to a party in government reflect a cultural shift towards post-materialism in Irish society? Social research into the relationship between politics and cultural change links increased environmental awareness and the rise of environmentalism and Green politics, including the foundation and electoral success of Green parties in many developed (and some developing) countries over recent decades, to the spread of post-materialist values.¹ A post-materialist orientation encompasses a strong focus on quality of life issues and participatory decision making and the prioritisation of non-materialistic goals such as freedom, self-expression and identity building over materialistic needs and economic growth. Post-materialist values are most likely to be found in late modern, (post)industrial societies such as Ireland, which offer their citizens relative economic and political stability.

... post-materialist values [*reflect*] a cultural shift that is emerging among generations who have grown up taking survival for granted. Self-expression values give high priority to environmental protection, tolerance of diversity and rising demands for participation in decision making in economic and political life.²

Attempts by social scientists to measure post-materialist values, attitudes and behaviour have largely concentrated on survey research, including Ronald Inglehart's original four-item post-materialism index.³ More recently, Inglehart and Christian Welzel have used aggregate statistical information from the World Values Survey (WVS) to rank countries along two dimensions: whether their citizens have more traditional or more secular-rational views and whether survival values or self-expression values associated with post-materialism dominate.⁴ Their comparison of WVS results from 1981, 1990 and 2000 reveals that Ireland's position on the traditional/secular dimension remains close to the traditional pole. According to Inglehart and Welzel, this suggests the continued importance of religion in society and the persistence of traditional values regarding the role of the family, the state and the community. Ireland's survival/self-expression score, on the other hand, doubled between 1981 and 2000. While Irish people continue to report relatively traditional views, there has also been a dramatic shift among Irish respondents towards post-materialist values.

Inglehart's post-materialism theory and his proposals for measuring and comparing post-materialist values across countries using questionnaire surveys have attracted considerable criticism.⁵ While a detailed discussion of Inglehart's work is beyond the

¹ R. Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977; B. Tranter and M. Western, 'The influence of Green parties on post-materialist values', *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 60, no. 1, 2009, pp. 145–167.

² www.worldvaluessurvey.org (accessed December 2009).

³ Inglehart, *op. cit.*

⁴ R. Inglehart and C. Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005; www.worldvaluessurvey.org (accessed December 2009).

⁵ Tranter and Western, *op. cit.*

scope of this chapter, it seems relevant to draw attention to its limited emphasis on intra-national diversity regarding post-materialist views and party support. This seems particularly problematic in the Irish context, where voting patterns reflect regional differences, among other things, and where electoral support for ‘new politics parties’ such as the Greens is largely concentrated in urban areas. More importantly, many debates on post-materialism tend to overlook the role of political parties in shaping people’s value orientations. Sociological research has shown that deep-seated differences in (political) culture, which may or may not coincide with identifiable rural/urban and socio-economic divisions in Irish society, influence how people conceptualise ‘the environment’ and participate in environmental argument and debates.⁶

Nevertheless, recent studies suggest that post-materialist values are increasingly widespread in Ireland. Using a refined version of Inglehart’s post-materialism index, Oliver Hansen and Richard Tol detect a genuine trend towards post-materialism in Ireland between 1976 and 1997.⁷ This historical period saw dramatic changes in Ireland’s political landscape, brought about by the emergence of an environmental movement and the foundation and gradual ascent of the Green Party.⁸ The growing importance of independent candidates and smaller political parties and the resulting ‘normalisation’ of coalition governments in the 1990s, following decades of predominantly one-party governments, indicates a diversification of voting patterns often associated with a post-material value shift. Similarly, grass-roots activities outside the conventional political system (such as environmental protests, community development initiatives, setting up of NGOs) have increased in recent decades, suggesting a growing desire for bottom-up democratic participation, which is a central element of the post-materialist agenda.

Ireland was often seen as an exceptional case when compared with other European countries because of low public concern about environmental issues, a relatively weak environmental movement and the absence of a Green voice in parliamentary politics until the late 1980s.⁹ However, recent Eurobarometer comparative surveys reveal that Irish people express strong pro-environmental opinions in key areas and that their level of awareness of environmental issues is much more similar to the ‘European average’ than it was in the past. Some see this as indicative of a wider shift towards post-materialist values. But do these values actually translate into pro-environmental practices and what electoral effect, if any, do they have?

The dominance of economic issues during the 2007 election campaign

Ireland’s economic boom in the 1990s and 2000s had very real political consequences. For Michael Marsh and his colleagues, the 2002 general election was ‘the real political assessment of the so-called “Celtic Tiger”’.¹⁰ It resulted in another electoral success for

⁶ R. Edmondson and H. Rau (eds), *Environmental Argument and Cultural Difference: Locations, Fractures and Deliberations*, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008; H. Tovey, *Environmentalism in Ireland: Movement and Activists*, Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2007.

⁷ O. Hansen and R. S. J. Tol, ‘A refined Inglehart index of materialism and postmaterialism’, Hamburg University, Research Unit Sustainability and Global Change Working Paper FNU-35, 2003, available at www.fnu.zmaw.de/fileadmin/fnu-files/publication/working-papers/inglehart.pdf (accessed December 2009).

⁸ L. Leonard, ‘The Irish Greens in the 2007 general election: Dealing with the devil or playing for power?’, *Environmental Politics*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2008, pp. 126–130.

⁹ Tovey, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ M. Marsh, R. Sinnott, J. Garry and F. Kennedy, *The Irish Voter: The Nature of Electoral Competition in the Republic of Ireland*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008, p. 4.

the governing Fianna Fáil party, which managed to present itself as the architect of Ireland's 'economic miracle'. Fianna Fáil's electoral success was repeated in 2007, despite widespread expectations of substantial seat losses and a change in government. There had been speculation that the negative social and environmental consequences of the boom would give the opposition parties an opportunity to increase their support. However, attempts by the opposition to draw attention to the failings of the incumbent Fianna Fáil–PD government in areas such as public services (health, education), crime, environmental protection and quality of life proved largely unsuccessful. Instead, the issue of Ireland's economic future loomed large.

According to Michael Gallagher the 2007 general election was 'an earthquake that never happened'.¹¹ The performance of the Green Party in 2007 was also disappointing as it won the same number of seats as it had in 2002. The predicted 'Green Wave' that would have resulted in three or four additional TDs joining the parliamentary party never materialised.

I was one of the three great hopes for the Green Wave or Green tide that never quite materialised. I was pictured in the *Sunday Times* on a surf board alongside Mary White from Carlow-Kilkenny and Deirdre de Búrca from Wicklow as the great Green hopes. . . . The fact that we did not get our message across . . . had some bearing on our failure to win a seat as did the efforts of other parties to undermine us. However, the biggest factor of all was the overall mood of the electorate [which returned] the same five TDs once again.¹²

The Green Party's failure to make any significant gains seemed somewhat surprising given the prominence of global and local environmental issues in 2006 and early 2007, which many consider the party's key area of competence. Attempts by the Greens to broaden its appeal by offering well-developed policy proposals in areas other than the environment did not have the desired effect. For example, the Greens' economic manifesto *Fairness and Prosperity: A Green Approach to the Economy*, which presented a detailed fiscal programme based on the principles of equity and prudence, received only limited attention and failed to entice voters. Some took this to mean that the Greens could rely on an environmentalist/post-materialist core vote that would guarantee them a certain number of seats now and in the future, but that their chances of further gains would be limited. This contrasted with media comments in 2002 that interpreted the electoral success of the Greens as a sign of the party's broadening appeal beyond the young, urban middle class.

Is there a place for a post-material agenda in Irish politics?

The disappointing performance of the Greens in 2007 raises the question of whether there is a place in Irish politics for a post-materialist agenda and, if so, whether it will be largely confined to the margins of the political system. The Greens' commitment to policies that move the emphasis away from economic growth and (over)consumption and towards long-term sustainability did not get sufficient backing from the electorate to challenge the current materialistic-economistic direction of Irish politics effectively. Observable post-materialist values and attitudes in Irish society, including an increase in

¹¹ M. Gallagher, 'The earthquake that never happened: Analysis of the results', in M. Gallagher and M. Marsh (eds), *How Ireland Voted 2007: The Full Story of Ireland's General Election*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 78–104.

¹² Cllr Niall Ó Brolcháin, Green Party candidate for Galway West in 2007, in Gallagher and Marsh, *op. cit.* pp. 76–77.

pro-environmental views, have yet to be translated into sufficient electoral support for post-materialist politics.

There are too many possible reasons for this apparent discrepancy between people's values and their actual voting behaviour to be discussed here. Some relate to the nature of the Irish political landscape, which remains distinct from that of other European countries, albeit less so than in the past. Political conditions during the formative years of the Irish nation-state in the early twentieth century and the prevalence of a conservative ethos minimised ideological differences between the main political parties. People's voting behaviour thus reveals very little about their social standing. More than thirty years ago, John H. Whyte argued that Irish politics are 'without social bases'.¹³ Even today the influence of socio-economic cleavages on voting behaviour in Ireland remains much less pronounced than in other countries, although some of the smaller Irish parties – most notably Sinn Féin and the Green Party – tend to draw their core vote from specific socio-economic and professional groups. Moreover, a recent shift across Europe towards 'catch-all' parties appears to have somewhat reduced cross-national difference.

Policy issues were given low priority during the 2007 election campaign. Candidates' personal votes, not their party's policies, were seen as the deciding factor for their electoral performance. This partly relates to the Irish electoral system: proportional representation by the single transferable vote promotes open competition between individual candidates rather than parties. For example, the popularity of the then Taoiseach Bertie Ahern proved crucial to the success of Fianna Fáil in 2007. Selecting high-profile candidates is generally seen as more important by party activists than presenting a convincing political vision and policy programme. US-style leaders' debates prior to major elections illustrate the importance of a high-profile party leader. The Greens' decision in 2001 to elect Trevor Sargent as party leader represented a major step towards improved electoral performance because it recognised the importance of the personal vote in Irish politics. The party's relatively high incumbency rate – five of the sitting Green TDs were re-elected in 2007 – seems to confirm this.

Post-materialism in times of economic crisis

Economic crises such as the current global recession tend to increase materialism, albeit often only in the short term. A Gallup poll published in the United States in March 2009 showed that for the first time in twenty-five years the majority of Americans ranked the economy as more important than the environment and that Americans are more willing than ever to sacrifice the environment for economic growth and energy production.¹⁴ This raises interesting questions about the stability of post-materialist trends over time and the usefulness of Inglehart and Welzel's thesis in times of economic downturn. It remains to be seen how the current economic crisis and the rise in unemployment will impact on post-materialist views in Ireland, particularly regarding the environment, and how a temporary surge in materialism might affect the Green Party's future performance (as well as those of other parties). Many voters continue to view the Greens as 'the party for the environment' whose expertise and competence in other areas, including the economy, is limited. This could hurt the party in the next election. On the other hand, it has become increasingly aware of the importance of the personal vote in Irish politics, which may benefit the party in the future.

¹³ Cited in Marsh *et al.*, *op. cit.* p. 3.

¹⁴ Gallup report published on 19 March 2009, available at www.gallup.com/poll/116962/Americans-Economy-Takes-Precedence-Environment.aspx?CSTS=tagrss (accessed December 2009).

Comment [j1]: Please include first name.

In the run-up to the local and European elections 2009 speculation abounded as to whether the Greens were planning to ‘jump from a sinking ship’ and leave an increasingly unpopular government. Green Party Senator Dan Boyle’s call for a review of the programme for government initiated a heated debate regarding the state of the government, the possibility of an early general election and the apparent ‘identity crisis’ and possible demise of the Greens. These debates also drew attention to ‘legacy issues’, including the over-inflation of the Irish property market in the early 2000s. However, attempts by Green Party TDs and senators to link the current economic crisis to past political mistakes by successive Fianna Fáil–PD governments, and thus to an era prior to their participation in government, had only limited success.

Despite the specificities of the Irish case outlined above, some of the difficulties and trade-offs of being in power that the Irish Green Party faces today closely resemble the experiences of other European Green parties. The prioritisation of economic considerations over social and environmental concerns, which is exacerbated by crises such as the current global ‘credit crunch’, continues to persist in many countries both inside and outside the European Union. This often hampers the Greens’ ability to push for social-environmental policies, in particular if they involve eco-taxes or other unpopular fiscal measures. Moreover, voters see the core competencies of the Greens as being in areas such as environmental protection and quality of life, *not* economic policy.

For much of the 1990s [the Irish Green Party’s] economic policy seemed incongruent to a polity experiencing sustained economic growth, low inflation and astonishing reductions in unemployment. However, since the 1997 election considerable midnight oil has been burnt on developing a wider, more appealing policy platform. . . . much of [the Greens’] future success will rest on its ability to present a credible and wider political project.¹⁵

The global economic downturn in 2008 forced the Greens in Ireland (and elsewhere) to focus on one of the policy areas where the party had been traditionally weak, and to develop a coherent economic strategy. A concerted call by Green parties around the world for a ‘Green New Deal’ as a strategy for addressing the global economic crisis was intended to address this perceived deficit. It remains to be seen whether this new emphasis on economic expertise and competency will convince non-traditional voters to support the Greens. The consequences of an ‘economic turn’ in policy and strategic thinking for both internal party structures and processes and the electoral performance of the Greens in Ireland remain to be seen.

Conclusion

Prevailing socio-economic conditions and their representation in the media and in public debate have repeatedly influenced the outcome of Irish elections, albeit in complex and sometimes unpredictable ways. Negative stereotypes that portray the Irish voter as a self-interested *homo economicus* who responds most strongly to ‘open wallet’ political promises and generous pre-election budgets bring this into focus. This dominance of economic issues influences the performance of new political parties with agendas that include a range of post-material concerns for improved quality of life and social and environmental sustainability.

Following the economic downturn in 2008 the Green Party found itself at the centre of political controversy about the economic (in)competence of the Irish government.

¹⁵ G. Taylor and B. Flynn, ‘It’s Green, but is it of a light enough hue? Past performance, present success and the future of the Irish Greens’, *Environmental Politics*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2003, pp. 225–232.

Initiatives in other policy areas, most notably the environment, planning and energy, and their long-term transformative effects on the Irish economy received little or no recognition. Being in power during a period of unprecedented political and economic turmoil has thus presented considerable challenges for the Greens. However, there may also be some opportunities for increasing their support in the longer term. Being associated with an alternative vision for the economy – the Green New Deal – and building up expertise in the area of economic policy may give the party the opportunity to broaden its appeal while also maintaining its commitment to post-materialist politics.

Predictions that the current economic crisis will slow or perhaps even reverse trends in Irish society towards post-materialism throw up interesting questions about the fluidity of values more generally, and their impact on the socio-cultural and political landscape. Suggestions that more traditional materialist perspectives regain popularity in times of economic hardship, at least temporarily, clearly challenge notions of intergenerational changes in values as unidirectional and irreversible. Applying Inglehart's post-materialism thesis to Ireland reveals the complex and at times contradictory relationship between people's values, which may or may not be accurately reflected in public opinion polls and social surveys, and their actual voting behaviour. Recent election results show how Ireland's specific political and cultural landscape reflects and shapes people's views in relation to economic and environmental issues. This said, they also demonstrate the impact of wider economic, socio-cultural and political influences beyond the nation-state on Irish people's values and actions, including their (post)materialist orientations.