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### Election Pledges and their Enactment in Coalition Governments: A Comparative Analysis of Ireland

Rory Costello<sup>a</sup>; Robert Thomson<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Political Science, Trinity College Dublin,

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# Election Pledges and their Enactment in Coalition Governments: A Comparative Analysis of Ireland

RORY COSTELLO & ROBERT THOMSON

Department of Political Science, Trinity College Dublin

*ABSTRACT* This study examines election pledges and their enactment in Ireland. Much previous research focused on countries where single-party governments are the norm (the United Kingdom, Canada and Greece), and the presidential system of the United States with separation of powers. The present research draws on evidence from existing studies of pledge enactment in Ireland and the Netherlands. In addition, it adds new evidence on election pledges and their enactment in the most recent Irish government: the majority centre-right coalition of Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats, 2002–2007. By adding this new evidence, we are able to make stronger inferences on the impact of coalition governance on the types of pledges made and rates of pledge enactment. We also study the impact of prominent mechanisms of coalition governance – government agreements and ministerial portfolio allocations – on the likelihood of pledge enactment. In addition, in an effort to move beyond existing research, we present evidence on the extent to which election pledges are featured in media reports during the election campaign.

Election pledges are an important part of election campaigns in two respects. First, politicians make specific promises to take particular actions or to achieve particular outcomes if they are returned to office. Such promises are intended to convince voters that their personal circumstances and those of the country would improve if the party behind the promises were to receive sufficient votes. Specific pledges also deflect criticism that a party is light on policy. Second, parties that were in government prior to the campaign are held accountable for their record of pledge fulfilment during the previous period of government. If a governing party did not fulfil the promises it made during the previous election campaign, then the pledges it makes during the present campaign would not be credible.

This paper contributes to the literature on election pledges in two respects. First, it adds to the body of evidence on the fulfilment of election pledges in coalition governments. We examine the detail of the election manifestos for the 2002 general election in Ireland, and compare this with the record of the coalition government's policies and performances up to the 2007 campaign. Second, we start to move

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*Correspondence Address:* Rory Costello and Robert Thomson, Department of Political Science, Trinity College Dublin, 2–3 College Green, Dublin 2, Ireland. Email: costellr@tcd.ie; thomsor@tcd.ie

beyond the exclusive focus on election manifestos as the documents in which parties make pledges. We analyse the extent to which election pledges were reported on in the media during the election campaign prior to the 2002 general election. In particular, we examine reports in the main Irish broadsheet newspaper, *The Irish Times*, on each day of the campaign to identify the extent to which parties' pledges were reported on. Previous research acknowledged that few voters actually read party manifestos, and assumed that the parties' policy stances are communicated to voters by the media.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section gives a brief introduction to the 2002 Irish general election and subsequent governing period 2002–2007, which is the main focus of our analysis. The section thereafter describes the socio-economic pledges made in the 2002 election manifestos. It also reports our finding on the extent to which these pledges were reported on by the media during the 2002 election campaign. Following this, we report on the fulfilment of these pledges. The analysis focuses first on average percentages of pledges fulfilled, and then on explanations of variation in pledge fulfilment. Before concluding, we compare our findings with research on election pledges and their enactment in other periods and countries.

### The 2002 Irish General Election

Irish elections are conducted according to the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system of proportional representation. This infrequently used system gives voters the opportunity to choose candidates rather than parties, while maintaining proportionality in multi-seat constituencies. Voters rank the candidates in order of their preferences, and a quota is calculated based on the number of votes cast, divided by

the number of seats in the constituency plus one, plus one vote  $\left(\frac{\text{votes}}{\text{seats} + 1} + 1\right)$ .

First preference votes are counted first, and subsequent preferences are taken into account if the required number of candidates does not meet the quota. Some consequences of this system include the prevalence of "personality voting", the high value placed on constituency work by elected representatives, and the relatively large numbers of independent representatives (Sinnott, 2005).

Six main parties competed in the 2002 general election. Of these, the two largest parties are Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Unlike the situation in most other European countries, these two main parties do not lie on opposite sides of the left–right divide. Their origins lie in differences over the national question rather than social or economic conflict, and both are essentially centre-right parties (Mair & Weeks, 2005). They are joined on the right by the Progressive Democrats, a small liberal party that has championed free market policies in Ireland. The Labour Party is the main left-wing party, but it has never received more than 20% of the vote and has never led the government. The other parties on the left are Sinn Féin, which is primarily focused on the unification of Ireland but has strong socialist leanings, and the Green Party.

**Table 1.** Results of the 2002 Irish general election

	Sinn Féin	Greens	Labour	Fine Gael	Fianna Fáil	Progressive Democrats	Other
Seats	5 (3.0%)	6 (3.6%)	21 (12.6%)	31 (18.7%)	81 (48.8%)	8 (4.8%)	14 (8.4%)
Share of first preferences	6.5%	3.8%	10.8%	22.5%	41.5%	4.0%	17.5%

*Source:* Gallagher *et al.* (2003)

The results of the 2002 election were a success for the incumbent coalition government of Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats, with both parties increasing their representation significantly (Table 1). They could then go on to form a majority coalition government, in contrast to their previous minority government. This result was generally interpreted as an endorsement of the liberal economic policies of the outgoing administration. The six seats won by the Greens also represented a major success for that party, as it had previously not held more than two seats. These gains were made largely at the expense of the main opposition party, Fine Gael, which suffered one of its worst results on record.

### Looking Back at Election Pledges from 2002

When researchers study election pledges, the first two questions they must answer are “where to find election pledges?” and “what statements qualify as pledges?” We examine the election manifestos published by parties before the election. Party manifestos provide detailed and authoritative accounts of where each party stands on a broad range of issues. Manifestos are the basis of the positions taken by party candidates and leaders during the election campaign. Although few voters actually read all manifestos in detail, these documents contain the most definitive statements of the policies forwarded by parties during the campaign.

We consider a statement to be a pledge if it contains unequivocal support for a specific action or outcome that is testable. This definition follows the definition proposed in more detail by Terry Royed, and applied by several other researchers (Royed, 1996; Thomson, 2001; Mansergh, 2004; Mansergh & Thomson, 2007).<sup>1</sup> By applying this definition, we are able to compare our findings with previous research on pledge fulfilment in Ireland and other countries. Unequivocal support usually takes a form of words such as “we will” or “we promise to”. Whenever a statement in a manifesto implies that the action or outcome referred to will be realized during the next government period, we record this statement as a pledge. For a statement to be recorded as a pledge it also has to refer to a “specific” and “testable” action or outcome. In other words, manifesto writers must provide us with criteria on the basis of which we can examine whether the pledge is fulfilled. Thus, pledges are quite

distinct from other statements found in manifestos, such as evaluations of the past government's record in office, or statements of the general principles to which a party would adhere when in government. For example, the statement "we will introduce a fairer system of taxation" would not be recorded as a pledge according to our definition, while the statement "we will reduce the top rate of income tax to 40%" would be.

We examined the election manifestos published by each of the six main parties that competed in the 2002 general election: Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Labour, the Progressive Democrats, Sinn Féin, and the Green Party. Readers might wonder why we examined the manifestos of all parties, rather than only those of Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats. After all, only these two parties went into government and so could be expected to have acted upon their pledges. There are two reasons for including the manifestos of opposition parties in the study. First, elections are supposed to be about choices between alternatives. We need to include the manifestos of all parties to identify the nature and extent of those choices. If all parties promised more or less the same things, this would certainly affect how we look at figures on pledge fulfilment. Second, election pledges made by parties that do not enter government after elections may also be fulfilled. Indeed, some studies of other government periods found rates of pledge fulfilment of opposition parties' pledges that did not differ markedly from those of governing parties' pledges. We will return to this point later. For now, we note that whether governing parties fulfil more of their pledges than pledges made by opposition parties is an open question. Answering it requires that we include the manifestos of all parties in the study.

Due to the large numbers of pledges made by parties, limited research resources prevented us from studying all of the pledges. Instead, we study the fulfilment of pledges made on socio-economic issues, broadly defined. This covers pledges that fell under the jurisdiction of seven government departments: the Department of Finance, the Department of Social and Family Affairs, the Department of Health and Children, the Department of Education, the Department of Environment and Local Government, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. We examine 401 pledges made by the six main political parties that competed at the 2002 election. This covers approximately half of the total pledges made by each of these parties. Lucy Mansergh's previous study compared the rate of fulfilment of pledges made by Irish parties in the area of economic policy with pledges from all other policy areas, and found no significant difference between them (Mansergh, 2004). It is therefore reasonable to assume that the pledges selected for this study are a representative sample of all pledges.

Table 2 identifies the total numbers of socio-economic pledges found in each election manifesto and the relationships between the pledges in different manifestos. Each column refers to the pledges made by a particular party, while the rows provide information on the relationship between these pledges and the pledges of the other parties. A pledge made by a particular party can be classified as being in consensus, in disagreement or unrelated to the pledges made by another party.<sup>2</sup> The first clear finding is that all parties are prolific in the numbers of election pledges they make. Manifestos are not confined to general statements of approval for lofty

goals, or to tirades against or praise for the last government’s performance. Manifesto writers clearly feel the need to give substance to the general principles their parties support by elaborating policies in some detail. This does not mean that the quantity of pledges made by a party is related to its subsequent electoral performance; as Table 2 shows, the largest party (Fianna Fáil) actually made the fewest number of pledges on socio-economic issues.

A second finding from the quantitative evidence presented in Table 2 is that most pledges are not directly related to the pledges made by other parties. This can make it difficult for voters to identify exactly how the parties differ from each other on policies. In some cases, it is clear that if a pledge is made by only one party, it is

**Table 2.** Election pledges on socio-economic issues from the 2002 manifestos

	Sinn Féin	Greens	Labour	Fine Gael	Fianna Fáil	PDs
Consensus with SF	–	10 (18%)	23 (21%)	14 (23%)	9 (18%)	6 (9%)
Disagreement with SF	–	1 (2%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)	4 (6%)
No relation with SF	–	46 (81%)	87 (78%)	48 (77%)	39 (80%)	58 (85%)
Consensus with Greens	10 (19%)	–	12 (11%)	9 (15%)	9 (18%)	7 (10%)
Disagreement with Greens	1 (2%)	–	2 (2%)	2 (3%)	2 (4%)	2 (3%)
No relation with Greens	43 (80%)	–	97 (87%)	51 (82%)	38 (78%)	59 (87%)
Consensus with Labour	22 (41%)	12 (21%)	–	24 (39%)	20 (41%)	21 (31%)
Disagreement with Labour	1 (2%)	2 (4%)	–	3 (5%)	2 (4%)	4 (6%)
No relation with Labour	31 (57%)	43 (75%)	–	35 (57%)	27 (51%)	43 (63%)
Consensus with FG	10 (19%)	9 (16%)	22 (20%)	–	15 (31%)	16 (24%)
Disagreement with FG	1 (2%)	2 (4%)	3 (3%)	–	2 (4%)	4 (6%)
No relation with FG	43 (80%)	46 (81%)	86 (78%)	–	32 (65%)	48 (71%)
Consensus with FF	8 (15%)	7 (12%)	20 (18%)	15 (24%)	–	19 (30%)
Disagreement with FF	1 (2%)	2 (4%)	2 (2%)	2 (3%)	–	1 (2%)
No relation with FF	45 (83%)	48 (84%)	89 (80%)	45 (73%)	–	48 (71%)
Consensus with PDs	6 (11%)	5 (9%)	17 (15%)	17 (27%)	15 (31%)	–
Disagreement with PDs	5 (9%)	2 (4%)	4 (4%)	4 (7%)	1 (2%)	–
No relation with PDs	43 (80%)	50 (88%)	90 (81%)	41 (66%)	33 (67%)	–
Total	54	57	111	62	49	68

Note for reading this table. For example, the second column labelled “Sinn Féin” indicates that SF’s 2002 manifesto contained a total of 54 election pledges. The row labelled “Consensus with Greens” indicates that 10 of these 54 Sinn Féin pledges (19%) were consensually related to pledges made by the Greens. The row labelled “Disagreement with Greens” indicates that one of these 54 Sinn Féin pledges (2%) was in direct disagreement with a Green pledge. The row labelled “No relation with Greens” indicates that 43 of these 54 Sinn Féin pledges (80%) bore no direct relation to Green pledges.

likely that none of the other parties support implementing it in the next government period. For example, the 2002 Progressive Democrats manifesto contained pledges to privatize most of the publicly owned electricity and gas companies, and sea ports. None of the other parties stated explicitly whether or not they would keep these companies in public ownership, but it is unlikely that they would have supported these privatizations. In other cases, pledges are not explicitly supported or opposed by other parties, but it is unclear what the positions of other parties were on the basis of the information in the manifestos. For example, the Progressive Democrats' 2002 manifesto also contained a more detailed pledge to increase tobacco taxes. While none of the other parties took a position on this issue, it is conceivable that they were in favour of this measure. Despite the ambiguity caused by the absence of clear relationships between the pledges of different parties, unrelated pledges still provide information about where the priorities of different parties lie.

When pledges are related to those of other parties, they are generally related in the sense of agreeing with those other parties' pledges, rather than by disagreeing with them. For example, Fianna Fáil, the Progressive Democrats, Fine Gael, Labour and Sinn Féin all supported relaxing the eligibility criteria for the carer's allowance, a subsidy given to people who provide unpaid care to the ill and elderly. Some parties were more ambitious in relation to this issue than others. Labour, Sinn Féin and the Progressive Democrats all pledged to abolish the means test for the carer's allowance altogether. Fine Gael simply stated that they would relax the means test, while Fianna Fáil specified that the eligibility criteria would be increased to include all carers whose joint family income was at the average industrial wage. Despite these real differences, the fulfilment of Labour, Sinn Féin and the Progressive Democrats' pledge would mean that the pledges of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil would be at least partially fulfilled. They are therefore coded as being consensually related. Similarly, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Progressive Democrats all pledged to cut hospital waiting times. Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour all pledged to increase the number of hospital beds.

Nevertheless, on a small number of key issues, the manifestos provide clear alternatives. These involve pledges that if fulfilled, would mean by definition that pledges of other parties were unfulfilled. For example, on income tax, Fine Gael and Labour pledged to freeze rates. The Progressive Democrats, by contrast, pledged to reduce the top rate from 42% to 40%. The Greens also pledged to reduce taxes on labour, but in coordination with increases in environmentally friendly taxes. Fianna Fáil did not make a specific pledge on tax rates, but did make pledges on the overall tax burden.

### *Media Coverage*

Heinz Brandenburg and Jacqueline Hayden (2003) conducted a comprehensive analysis of the media coverage of the 2002 election campaign. Their analysis is comprehensive in the sense that it covers the main television and press media during the three-week campaign prior to election day. An important conclusion is that the

campaign received a substantial amount of coverage. For instance, the election campaign was in the headlines in almost all of the main TV news broadcasts during the campaign period.

Although Brandenburg and Hayden do not examine specific election pledges, their findings regarding the extent to which parties' policies were reported on are particularly relevant to the present paper. They note a substantial amount of variation in the extent to which different media sources report on parties' policies. *The Irish Times*, a high-quality broadsheet, contained 146 lead articles and editorials during the campaign. Of these, 66 (45%) were concerned with policy. The rest were concerned with other aspects of the campaign ("leaders, gaffes, campaign trail, sleaze, campaign management, etc."). In addition, given the constituency-based organization of the electoral system, local campaigns also featured in the media reports. Of the lead articles and editorials in *The Evening Herald*, a tabloid, only 17% were concerned with policy. Consequently, "a large proportion of the Irish electorate, those that receive their information from reading the tabloids or watching the odd news bulletin, are rarely confronted with policy questions" (Brandenburg & Hayden, 2003: 187).

Regarding the media reports of parties' manifestos, Brandenburg and Hayden note considerable variation among the political parties. They attribute a substantial amount of this variation to the parties themselves, in particular the timing of the launch of their manifestos. The manifestos of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael received considerable attention in the quality newspapers. The manifestos of the Progressive Democrats and Labour were not covered to the same extent. The Progressive Democrats launched their manifesto a week before the election campaign began, which meant that it received less coverage during the campaign itself. The Labour Party published its manifesto in several instalments, rather than as a single document. While this might have led to more coverage, it in fact led to a series of short articles. Sinn Féin also received a considerable amount of coverage due to the relatively late date of its manifesto launch, on 8 May (before the 17 May election).

We complement Brandenburg and Hayden's analysis by examining the detail of the content of *The Irish Times* during the three-week campaign. This provides information on whether the specific pledges made by parties in their manifestos were reported. In doing so, we address an important assumption that is often made in research that examines election manifestos. The assumption is that it is "in the media that the document [the manifesto] makes its main impact on electors" (Klingemann *et al.*, 1994). This more detailed analysis also allows us to examine whether more high-profile pledges are more likely to be fulfilled than pledges to which less attention is given.

*The Irish Times* is an appropriate newspaper to take for this first analysis of the extent to which election pledges are reported in the media. This newspaper is a high-quality broadsheet, and as noted in Brandenburg and Hayden's analysis, contains a substantial amount of policy content. Therefore, if we were able to cover a broader range of media, we would not expect to find substantially more pledges covered. Nonetheless, we do acknowledge that this is a limited sample of media

**Table 3.** Election pledges from the manifestos featured in the 2002 media reports

	Sinn Féin	Greens	Labour	Fine Gael	Fianna Fáil	PDs	All
Not mentioned	39 (72%)	46 (81%)	73 (66%)	5 (8%)	24 (49%)	54 (79%)	241 (60%)
1 day	13 (24%)	9 (16%)	25 (23%)	38 (61%)	16 (33%)	14 (21%)	115 (29%)
>1 days	2 (4%)	2 (4%)	13 (12%)	19 (31%)	9 (18%)	0 (0%)	45 (11%)
Total	54 (100%)	57 (100%)	111 (100%)	62 (100%)	49 (100%)	68 (100%)	401 (100%)

coverage. *The Irish Times* has a readership of 305,000 out of a total electorate of 3,002,173 (Brandenburg & Hayden, 2003). A more comprehensive analysis would cover, as Brandenburg and Hayden's study did, other newspapers and television reports.

Table 3 confirms that *The Irish Times'* coverage of the campaign included a substantial amount of information on the specific pledges of the main political parties. Of the 401 socio-economic election pledges contained in the 2002 manifestos, 160 (40%) were reported on at least one day. For example, attention was devoted to the parties' plans for reforming health care insurance, their taxation policies, and their pledges on childcare.

The information in Table 3 also confirms that there is substantial variation among the parties in the extent to which their election pledges were covered. The election pledges of the main rivals, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, received most attention. By far most coverage was given to Fine Gael's election pledges, with more than 90% of them mentioned. Just over half of Fianna Fáil's pledges were mentioned. A considerable number of Labour pledges were also mentioned, 38 in total. However, the large number of Labour pledges meant that this was only a modest percentage, 34%. For the other three parties, lower percentages of their pledges were mentioned in media reports: Sinn Féin, 28%; Greens, 19%; and Progressive Democrats, 21%. Clearly, the newspaper reports examined gave most attention to the pledges of the largest parties.

A more qualitative examination of the content of the election pledges reveals that they contained additional information that would help voters to evaluate the pledges and position the parties in relation to each other. For example, the Fianna Fáil manifesto contained a pledge to "introduce a radical new way of funding and delivering major capital programmes through the establishment of a National Development Finance Agency". The manifesto then went on to detail the activities of this agency. The other parties did not respond to this pledge in their manifestos. However, during the campaign, both Fine Gael and Labour criticized this policy proposal. They argued that it would be dangerous to the economy because it would hide public spending liabilities, thereby making public finances appear healthier than they actually were (*The Irish Times*, 27 April 2002). Similarly, the newspaper reports included Fianna Fáil's criticism of Fine Gael and Labour's plans to

introduce a system of universal health care insurance. Fianna Fáil argued that the financing of these plans had not been properly planned (*The Irish Times*, 7 May 2002).

### **The Fulfilment of Election Pledges**

We now turn to the government's record of pledge fulfilment in the period 2002–2007. For each of the pledges examined, we referred to relevant legislation, ministerial decisions, spending allocations, parliamentary (Dáil) records and official reports.

What constitutes the fulfilment of a pledge? The answer to this question is implicit in our definition of what a pledge is. Recall that we defined a pledge as unequivocal support for a particular action or outcome, specified in enough detail to enable researchers to test whether or not the action or outcome was realized. In other words, the pledges themselves tell us what evidence we would need to judge the pledge to be fulfilled. For example, we judged as fully fulfilled Fianna Fáil's pledge to establish a training fund of up to €2,500 per person for unemployed people facing serious barriers to employment. The "High Support Process" was introduced by FÁS, the National Training and Employment Authority, in 2003. This measure is designed to assist FÁS Employment Officers to better meet the needs of clients who, because of health, literacy or other difficulties, are experiencing major barriers to finding employment. In 2006, a total of €2,500 per person was available under this scheme to resource the relevant interventions such as counselling and supplemental training (FÁS Annual Report, 2003; *Dáil Debates* 623: 1596, 6 July 2006). Our strict definition of what a pledge is makes the study of pledge fulfilment easier than if we were to include more general statements as pledges. Although our research design makes our study of pledge fulfilment as objective and replicable as possible, we still had to make judgement calls on difficult cases in which we had to balance partly conflicting evidence.<sup>3</sup>

In line with previous research on pledge fulfilment, we use three categories to describe the fulfilment of pledges: "fully fulfilled", "partially fulfilled" and "not fulfilled". The partially fulfilled category is necessary because there may be some policy change in the direction indicated by the pledge that falls short of total fulfilment. For example, the Progressive Democrats' pledge to reduce the top rate of income tax from 42% to 40% was only partially fulfilled because the top rate had been reduced to 41% by 2007.

Table 4 summarizes our findings on pledge fulfilment quantitatively. A majority of the pledges made by Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in their 2002 manifestos were at least partially fulfilled. Fianna Fáil fulfilled 76% (37/49) of their pledges at least partially. The Progressive Democrats fulfilled 66% (45/68) of their pledges at least partially. If we adopt a stricter definition of "fully fulfilled" only, then Fianna Fáil fulfilled 45% (22/49) of their pledges, while the Progressive Democrats fulfilled 47% (32/68) of their pledges.

**Table 4.** The fulfilment of socio-economic election pledges in the 2002–2007 government period

	Opposition			Government			Prog. for Govt.
	Sinn Féin	Greens	Labour	Fine Gael	Fianna Fáil	PDs	
Fully fulfilled	13 (24%)	10 (18%)	30 (27%)	17 (27%)	22 (45%)	32 (47%)	25 (58%)
Partially fulfilled	10 (19%)	9 (16%)	21 (19%)	15 (24%)	15 (31%)	13 (19%)	8 (19%)
Not fulfilled	31 (57%)	38 (67%)	60 (54%)	30 (48%)	12 (24%)	23 (34%)	10 (23%)
Total	54 (100%)	57 (100%)	111 (100%)	62 (100%)	49 (100%)	68 (100%)	43 (100%)

### *Explaining Pledge Fulfilment*

There are clear differences between the rate of fulfilment for government and opposition pledges. The two governing parties fulfilled an average of 70% of their election pledges at least partially, compared to an average of 44% for the four parties that entered the opposition. Therefore, control over government office greatly influences the likelihood of pledge fulfilment. Other factors may also be important, and these are examined in this section.

We analyse factors that might influence the likelihood of pledge fulfilment separately for pledges made by government and opposition parties. Government parties are in a position to directly influence the fulfilment of pledges, while opposition parties can only influence pledge fulfilment indirectly. Therefore, the factors affecting pledge fulfilment may be different for these groups.

For government parties, the allocation of ministerial portfolios is an important determinant of policy influence, and we expect pledge fulfilment to be greater when the party that makes the pledge goes on to receive the relevant ministerial post. The relationship between parties' pledges may also affect the likelihood of fulfilment. We expect agreement between government parties to have a positive effect on fulfilment. Similarly, we expect governing parties' pledges that are in consensus with pledges made by an opposition party to be fulfilled more often than pledges that are not. The type of pledge must also be taken into account: some pledges involve a continuation of existing policies, while others relate to new policy measures. Another factor to be considered is the programme for government (or government agreement), negotiated between the coalition partners. Pledges that are included in this agreement are explicitly singled out for enactment by the government. Finally, pledges that receive media coverage become more salient, and we therefore expect them to be prioritized by the government.

For opposition party pledges, the likelihood of fulfilment is expected to depend on the relationship to pledges made by governing parties. Clearly, opposition pledges that are in agreement with governing parties' pledges stand a better chance

of enactment than pledges that are not. Agreement between opposition parties may also increase the likelihood of fulfilment, as these pledges may be prioritized by the opposition. As with government party pledges, we expect pledges by opposition parties that relate to new policy measures to be less likely to be fulfilled. Finally, opposition pledges that receive media coverage during the campaign are likely to attract more attention, and the government may seek to adopt these to undermine potential support for the opposition in the future.

We present both bivariate and multivariate tests of these expectations. We assess first the bivariate relationship between each of these factors and pledge fulfilment (defined as partial or complete fulfilment). In addition, Table 5 shows the marginal effect of each variable on the probability of pledge fulfilment, controlling for other factors. This is based on a logistic regression model, estimated separately for the 117 government party pledges and the 284 opposition party pledges. The marginal effects are calculated as the difference between the probability of enactment when the variable in question has a value of 0 and when it has a value of 1, evaluated at the mean of the remaining variables.

For pledges made by governing parties, the division of ministerial posts does not explain observed variation in pledge fulfilment: 70% (45/64) of the pledges made by a governing party that received the relevant ministerial post, were fulfilled at least partially. Likewise, 70% (37/53) of pledges made by a governing party that did not receive the relevant ministerial post were fulfilled at least partially. Table 5 shows that the probability of fulfilment, controlling for other factors, increases by just 2% when the party that made the pledge receives the relevant ministry. The effect of this variable in the logistic model is not statistically significant. However, it should be

**Table 5.** Marginal effects of variables on the probability of pledge fulfilment

	Government party pledges	Opposition party pledges
Ministry	+0.02	–
Consensus between government parties	+0.08	–
Consensus between government party and opposition party	+0.17*	+0.23**
Consensus between one or more opposition parties	–	+0.07
Change	–0.22*	0.00
Media attention	–0.09	+0.07
Government agreement	+0.12	
n	117	284
Model Chi square (df)	12.57 (6)	33.11 (4)
P	0.05	0.00

*Note:* \* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ . Estimates based on logistic regression model. Figures represent the difference in the estimated probability of fulfilment when the relevant variable is 0 and 1, evaluated at the mean of the remaining variables. These analyses were performed using the Clarify (King *et al.*, 2002).

noted that the relevance of the estimates of statistical significance are questionable since this is not a simple random sample.

Agreement among the governing parties has a small positive impact on the likelihood of pledge fulfilment: 82% (28/34) of the pledges made by Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats on issues on which they explicitly agreed were at least partially fulfilled, compared to 65% (54/83) of other pledges made by these parties. The multivariate analysis also indicates that consensus among parties has a positive effect on the likelihood of pledge fulfilment (an increase of 8%), but again this is not statistically significant.

Agreement with an opposition party pledge has a strong effect on the likelihood of enactment for governing parties' pledges: 79% (46/59) of the pledges made by Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats that were in agreement with pledges made by one or more opposition party were at least partially fulfilled, compared to 61% (36/58) of pledges made by these parties that were not shared by any of the opposition parties. The coefficient in the multivariate analysis is also significant. Controlling for other factors, consensus with an opposition party's pledge increases the probability of fulfilment for a government party's pledge by 17%.

Not surprisingly, a similar effect is found for opposition parties' pledges. Opposition parties' pledges are much more likely to be fulfilled if they are in agreement with pledges made by a government party. Indeed, this is the most important factor affecting the likelihood of fulfilment for opposition party pledges: 65% (32/49) of opposition party pledges that were in agreement with government party pledges were fulfilled at least partially, compared to 40% (93/235) of those pledges that were not in agreement. The multivariate analysis shows a significant effect, suggesting that opposition pledges that are in agreement with government pledges are 23% more likely to be fulfilled than those that are not, controlling for other factors.

Consensus among opposition parties also has a positive effect on fulfilment, but this not as pronounced: 52% (61/117) of opposition party pledges that were in agreement with a pledge of another opposition party were enacted, compared to 38% (64/167) of opposition party pledges that were not. The multivariate analysis suggests that agreement with another opposition party pledge increases the probability of fulfilment by 7%, but this effect is not statistically significant.

Almost all of the governing parties' pledges to keep the status quo on particular measures were fulfilled (11/12). For example, Fianna Fáil, supported by other parties, pledged to set aside, as required by law, 1% of GNP for future pension obligations. Legislation was introduced in 2000 that placed a statutory obligation on the government to pay 1% of GNP into a fund each year. The law was not changed and the government adhered to it, thereby fulfilling the pledge. By contrast, pledges to achieve policy outcomes, such as reducing class sizes, require more than simply changing or not changing a piece of legislation. Such pledges are more difficult to fulfil. The variable "Change" in the multivariate analysis also reveals that governing parties' pledges to introduce policy change are significantly less likely to be fulfilled, with the predicted probability being 22% lower than for other governing

party pledges. This is not, however, an important factor in determining the rate of fulfilment of opposition party pledges.

We do not find a strong relationship between media coverage and pledge fulfilment for government parties: 69% (27/39) of government pledges that were featured in *The Irish Times* during the campaign were fulfilled, compared with 71% (55/78) of those that were not. The multivariate analysis shows a small (but not significant) negative relationship, suggesting that media coverage may actually be associated with a lower likelihood of fulfilment of governing party pledges. The relationship is in the opposite direction for opposition parties' pledges: 49% (59/121) of opposition pledges that received coverage were fulfilled, compared with 40% (66/163) of those that did not. Controlling for other factors, media coverage increases the probability of fulfilment for opposition pledges by 7%. One possible explanation for the differing effects of media coverage for opposition and government parties lies in the fact that there was a general consensus during the 2002 campaign that Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats would indeed form the next government (Murphy, 2003). Newspapers such as *The Irish Times* might therefore have sought to emphasize pledges from these parties that they believed would be difficult to fulfil – and consequently be the most newsworthy in the long run.

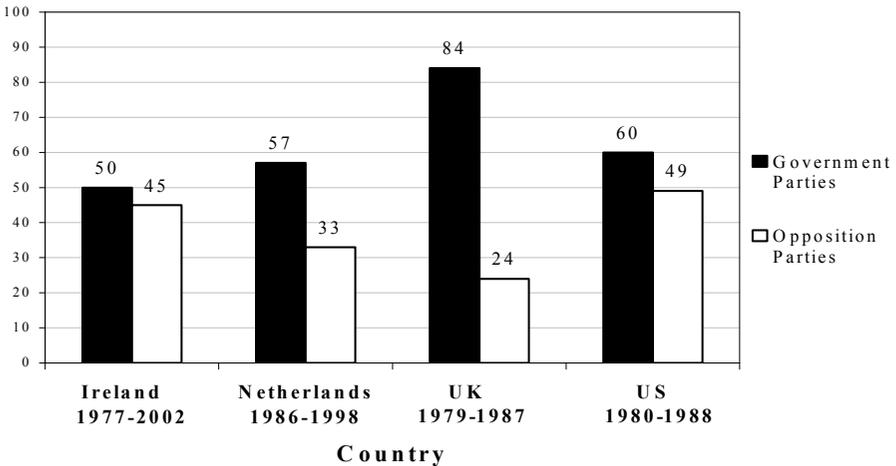
The formulation of the programme for government has a noteworthy impact on pledge fulfilment. If a party secures support for its pledge in the programme for government, there is a higher likelihood that the pledge will be fulfilled. The 2002 programme for government is a detailed document that contains many of the pledges copied verbatim from the manifestos of the two coalition partners. Of the governing parties' pledges that were copied exactly into the 2002 programme for government, 77% (33/43) were at least partially fulfilled between 2002 and 2007. Of the governing parties' pledges that were not copied exactly into the programme for government, 67% (49/74) were fulfilled at least partially. In terms of the multivariate analysis, the model predicts an increased probability of fulfilment of 12%, although the coefficient is not statistically significant.

### Comparative Pledge Fulfilment

The percentage of pledges fulfilled in the 2002–2007 period compares favourably with previous periods of government in Ireland. Recall that on average 70% of pledges made by Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats were at least partially fulfilled. Mansergh's research on the period 1977–2002 found that on average 50% of governing parties' pledges were fulfilled at least partially (see Figure 1; Mansergh, 2004). Her study covers pledges in all policy areas, not only socio-economic policy. The governing period 1997–2002 offers a particularly interesting comparison. During that period, Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats were also in power. However, they did not have a clear majority of seats. We might, therefore, expect the Fianna Fáil/Progressive Democrats coalition to have fulfilled fewer of its pledges in the 1997–2002 government than in the 2002–2007 government. However, Mansergh reports that in the period 1997–2002 Fianna Fáil fulfilled at least partially 68% of 228

pledges, while the Progressive Democrats fulfilled at least partially 64% of their 85 pledges. Undoubtedly, both governments from 1997 to 2007 had the benefit of being in power during a time of great economic prosperity and growth. Previous governments, particularly those of the 1980s, faced far more difficult economic conditions.

The rate of pledge fulfilment we find for the 2002–2007 government period also compares favourably to those of other countries where parties share power. Dutch governments, for example, are also coalitions of at least two parties. Research on pledge fulfilment in the Netherlands found that on average 57% of pledges made by parties that entered governing coalitions were at least partially fulfilled (Thomson, 2001). In the United States, Royed (1996) reports that on average 60% of the pledges made by the Republican Party were at least partially fulfilled during the 1980s when Ronald Reagan was in the White House. The US system also compelled inter-party cooperation during this period since the Democrats controlled Congress part of the time. The single-party governments of the United Kingdom offer a very different point of comparison. Single-party governments in Westminster typically fulfil high percentages of their election pledges. Royed reports that the Conservative Party fulfilled at least partially 84% of its pledges when Margaret Thatcher was in



**Figure 1.** Main findings from comparative research on the fulfilment of election pledges. Percentages of election pledges at least partially redeemed.

*Source:* Mansergh & Thomson (2007), compiled from other sources. Numbers of election manifestos of government/opposition parties (and total numbers of pledges) from which above percentages were calculated. Ireland: 16 programmes of government parties (1,143 pledges) and 22 programmes of opposition parties (1,042 pledges). *Source:* Mansergh (2004).

The Netherlands: seven programmes of government parties (574 tested pledges) and five programmes of opposition parties (430 tested pledges). *Source:* Thomson (2001). UK: two programmes of government parties (159 tested pledges) and two programmes of opposition parties (381 tested pledges). *Source:* Royed (1996). US: two programmes of government parties (218 tested pledges) and two programmes of opposition parties (384 tested pledges). *Source:* Royed (1996).

power in the 1980s. Similarly high percentages have been reported for other time periods in the UK (e.g. Rallings, 1987; Rose, 1984).

## **Conclusion**

Our research on the fulfilment of election pledges on socio-economic issues confirmed that the 2002 manifestos of Irish parties contained substantial numbers of election pledges, as did election manifestos in other years and countries. The governing Fianna Fáil/Progressive Democrats coalition that was in office 2002–2007 fulfilled on average 70% of those parties' pledges at least partially. As discussed in the previous section, this rate of pledge fulfilment compares favourably with other periods and countries. We conclude by drawing out some implications of the findings for key questions about the quality of democracy in general and in contemporary Ireland.

To what extent are voters offered choices at elections? The findings indicate that in addition to offering voters choices between alternative leaders and general principles, parties offer voters different sets of specific policies. Each of the parties made large numbers of specific pledges of substantive importance to broad groups of citizens. This is an important conclusion. If parties did not offer voters policy choices, elections would lose their significance as crucial junctures in the democratic process. Our findings on the numbers of election pledges are not unusual. Lucy Mansergh (2004) conducted the most comprehensive study of election pledges in Ireland. Her study examined election pledges made by all the main parties from 1977 up to and including the 1997 election. She reports similar numbers of election pledges in these manifestos. Similarly, research on election pledges in the Netherlands, the United States and the United Kingdom indicates that Irish parties are not unique in making large numbers of pledges (Royed, 1996; Thomson, 2001).

We also pointed out that the choice is constrained. Most of the pledges made by each of the parties did not relate directly to a pledge made by any of the other parties. When there was a relationship between pledges made by different parties, these pledges were usually similar. This of course makes it difficult for voters to identify clear differences between parties on policies. This pattern of parties "talking past" each other has also been identified in many other political systems, and in the other studies of election pledges referred to above. This phenomenon is central to the "saliency theory of party competition" (Klingemann *et al.*, 1994). The essence of this theory is that parties compete indirectly with each other, mainly by the extent to which they emphasize or de-emphasize different policy themes relative to each other. Saliency theory posits that parties avoid taking direct stances against each other. Instead, in order to distinguish themselves from their opponents, they emphasize themes on which they have an advantage over their opponents. Although saliency theory is not undisputed, it does correctly identify the indirect nature of competition that typifies much of parties' policy statements during the campaign.

We added an analysis of one of the major media outlets during the election campaign. We found a substantial number of pledges from the manifestos reported in newspapers. In addition, in the media reports, parties were more explicit in their

disagreement with each other's policies. Such disagreement provides voters with more information to evaluate where parties stand in relation to each other.

Are enough election pledges fulfilled? The findings reported in this paper and by other studies make clear that it would be inappropriate to state blithely that parties do not keep their election pledges. We found at least some policy action in fulfilment of clear majorities of pledges made by Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in 2002. Furthermore, it does matter which parties enter government office, because a pledge is more likely to be fulfilled if the party that made it entered government office after the election. This is also a noteworthy conclusion. One of the most important justifications for holding elections is that it provides voters with some influence over the way in which the country is run. If there were no congruence between election pledges and subsequent government actions, this justification would not be credible.

Apart from government office, the most important determinant of pledge fulfilment was found to be the relationship between parties' pledges. As we might expect, opposition party pledges are much more likely to be acted upon when they are in agreement with government party pledges. Interestingly, pledges made by government parties are also more likely to be fulfilled when they are in consensus with pledges made by opposition parties. Agreement between government and opposition indicates that the pledges reflect broadly shared societal demands, rather than partisan interests. Some other factors did not have the expected effect on pledge fulfillment: for example, governing parties' pledges that received media coverage during the campaign were no more likely to be enacted than other pledges.

It may seem intuitively obvious to most voters and politicians that parties which enter government should fulfil their pledges: indeed, that they are under some moral obligation to at least attempt to do so. However, liberal democratic theory offers a more nuanced view. William Riker is famous for noting that no election result provides an unequivocal message encapsulating "the will of the people" (Riker, 1982). Election results generally do not provide clear messages about what "the people" want. When the largest party receives a plurality of around 40% of the votes, it might still be argued that a clear majority of votes did not support that party. Some variants of liberal democratic theory take this argument to the extreme, by arguing that election results provide no message on policies whatsoever. At best, elections provide a chance for voters to select leaders rather than policies, and to "throw the bums out" for gross incompetence.

This rather extreme liberal democratic position is disputable. With today's programmatic parties, it is not possible for voters to disentangle their support for particular leaders from their support for particular policies. Furthermore, voters and politicians generally hold the view that parties which enter the coalition should attempt to fulfil their pledges. Therefore, without specifying a particular number for adequate pledge fulfilment, we consider a substantial linkage between election pledges and subsequent government actions to be one of the signs of a healthy functioning democracy. Michael McDonald and Ian Budge (2005) recently revised the traditional mandate theory of democracy in the form of the median mandate theory. Extending the canonical median voter theorem to democratic politics, McDonald

and Budge argue that the median voter's position on the left–right continuum holds the unique claim to be the truly democratically justifiable policy outcome. If the electoral system is unbiased, the median voter's position will be reflected in the position of the median parliamentarian, who will in turn exert determining influence on government policies. In doing so, median mandate theory resolves one of the more uncomfortable consequences of previous formulations of mandate theory: namely, government mandate theory justifies governing parties in implementing their election manifestos even when they received only minority electoral support. This advance in democratic theory also requires that we refocus our analysis to give particular attention to the fulfilment of election pledges of the party that receives the support of the median voter.

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### **Notes**

1. The studies referred to also report reliability tests for the identification of pledges. Although we have a clear definition of what a pledge is, researchers must judge whether or not a statement qualifies as a pledge. Mansergh, Royed and Thomson tested the reliability of their coding procedure for identifying pledges by comparing their judgements with those of second readers. Of the hundreds of statements recorded as pledges, there was usually agreement on well over 80% of cases, and no evidence of systematic biases.
2. A pledge made by one party is considered to be consensually related to a pledge of another party if the fulfilment of the latter would automatically result in the partial or complete fulfilment of the former. Given that some pledges are more specific than others, it is possible for one pledge to be consensually related to a second pledge, while the second pledge is not consensually related to the first. For example, Fine Gael pledged to increase the amount put aside for the Pension Reserve Fund and the Progressive Democrats simply pledged not to raid that fund. Clearly, if the Fine Gael pledge were fulfilled, this would automatically fulfil the Progressive Democrats' pledge. Therefore, the Progressive Democrats' pledge is consensually related to the Fine Gael pledge. However, the reverse is not true, because the fulfilment of the Progressive Democrats' pledge would not automatically fulfil the Fine Gael pledge.
3. Previous research using the same procedure for studying pledge fulfilment showed high levels of reliability. Thomson's (2001) study of Dutch parties, for instance, reports a high level of agreement between his judgements on pledge fulfilment with the judgements of independent experts.

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