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The Preparation and Use of Election Manifestos: Learning from the Irish Case

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Abstract

Election manifestos are important documents, but very little is known about the way parties create their manifestos and how they use them. This is unfortunate, since such knowledge can inform both the academic study of party politics and political practice. This article presents original results from interviews with actors who played a key role in creating the 2007 national election manifesto in the major Irish parties. It describes the sequence of actions in developing the manifesto, and how those involved in preparation perceive its functions. The results suggest that preparation processes are similar to those found a decade ago, but a trend towards giving party activists a larger say seems to be emerging. This finding is at odds with the prediction of the cartel party model that party leaders seek to reduce the influence of activists. Another finding is that manifestos are not only used to address voters, but are also tools for intra-party coordination, for communication with interest groups and are especially important in the government formation process. Students of party competition should take this multi-purpose nature of the documents and variation in preparation modes into account. Finally, if there is a lack of policy debate in Irish election campaigns, the reason does not lie in a lack of policy material on the side of the parties.

Keywords: *election manifestos; manifesto preparation; party organization; cartel party; party positions.*

An earlier version of this article was presented at the PSAI Conference at DIT, October 8-10, 2010, where participants provided helpful feedback. I am greatly indebted to the party representatives (in alphabetical order: Colm Ó Caomhánaigh, General Secretary of the Green Party; Gerry Hickey, former Programme Manager of the Taoiseach; Andrew McDowell, Director of Policy in Fine Gael; Shannonbrooke Murphy, National Director of Policy in Sinn Féin; and a senior figure from the Labour party who prefers to be anonymous) who spent a good share of their precious time for answering my questions. I also would like to thank John Garry for valuable suggestions at the beginning of this project, Elaine Byrne for precious help with finding the interviewees, and Ken Benoit as well as Séin Ó Muineacháin for comments. All errors are my own responsibility.

Party manifestos are a standard accessory of elections in most democratic countries, including Ireland. Presenting summaries of parties' policies to the voters, manifestos are closely linked to the idea that elections provide parties with policy mandates (APSA, 1950; Rose, 1984; Powell, 2000; McDonald, Mendes and Budge, 2004). In addition, manifestos may be used as intra-party documents, for communicating with interest groups or in the post-electoral government formation process. Since manifestos are so widely used and considered to be “authoritative” and “representative statements for the whole party” (Klingemann et al., 2006:164), political scientists also frequently use them to infer party positions. However, “for all the importance of party programmes to democratic theory and practice, we still know very little about where these programmes come from” (Scarrow, Webb and Farrell, 2000:144). This is unfortunate for several reasons. First, learning more about manifesto creation and their use can inform the scientific study of party organization and party position-taking. Second, since policy-making by parties is a crucial element in representative democracy, studying manifesto creation is important for political practice. As a case study contribution for bridging the gap of knowledge about manifesto preparation, this article presents results from interviews with actors who were closely involved in drawing up the manifestos for the 2007 Irish parliamentary election. It is described how Irish parties developed the 2007 manifestos and how the authors of the documents see the preparation process and their use.

The results show that the manifesto preparation process was pretty similar in Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Labour and Sinn Féin, where policy directors in cooperation with other staff and/or parliamentary spokespersons were mainly responsible. In the Green Party, on the other hand, the grass-root influence in manifesto creation was strong. The degree to which party representatives see the manifesto as tool for informing voters varies. In contrast, the document is consistently considered very important in government negotiations, and all parties communicate with interest groups during preparation and/or use it in exchanges with these groups after its publication. Overall, ways of preparation and views of usage are similar to those found about a decade ago (Garry and Mansergh, 1999; Holmes, 1999). Given that the Green Party has made the process more inclusive and that Labour (and possibly Sinn Féin) are opening up the process for the next manifesto, a trend may be emerging. This is at odds with what is predicted by influential party organization theories (Katz and Mair, 1995; Carty, 2004; Katz and Mair, 2009). The findings that preparation varies across Irish parties and that the documents serve important functions other than addressing voters suggests that students of party competition should take these factors into account when analysing manifestos. Further, the results show that Irish parties prepare an extensive set of policy proposals. If there is a

lack of policy debate in Irish campaigns, the reason does not lie in the lack of material. Taken together, the evidence suggests that manifestos do play a role in Irish politics.

The first two sections review existing research on election manifestos in Ireland and explain what can be learned from studying manifesto preparation. Subsequently, results from interviews with manifesto authors are reported, starting with a description of the preparation process, then describing views on the functions of the documents and concluding with changes made to this process for the next general election. The final section summarizes the results and discusses their implications for studies of party politics and for political practice in Ireland.

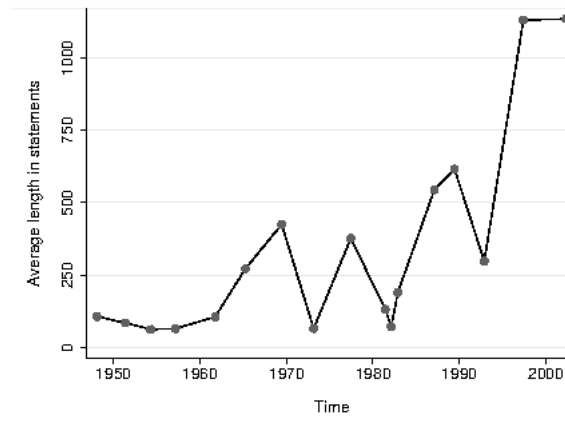
Manifestos in Ireland

All major Irish parties issue manifestos as part of the election campaign. Figure 1 shows how the average length of pre-election policy documents has developed since World War II.¹ It is clear that overall the length of the documents (measured in statements, so-called quasi-sentences) has hugely increased over time. The typical document contained around 110 statements in 1948, but around 1130 statements in 2002. Producing such lengthy policy documents requires resources. The mere fact that parties are willing to invest those resources corroborates the claim that the documents must play a role in the political process.

Manifestos may fulfil different roles (Kavanagh, 1981), and these are also apparent in the Irish context. First, the documents represent parties' policy proposals to the voters. General discussions of the party positions expressed in manifestos (e.g. Mair, 1987b; Girvin, 1993; Collins, 2003; Collins and Butler, 2008) refer to parties' vote-seeking motivations as a standard explanatory factor. On the other hand, there is also evidence for the notion that manifestos are not widely read. One result from focus group research done for Fianna Fáil before the 1992 elections was that "nobody was interested in manifestos - they were seen as irrelevant" (Farrell, 1993:23). The content of the document may reach voters indirectly, though. Parties may distribute summaries of the manifestos (Mair, 1987a) and some manifesto policies are discussed in the media (Costello and Thomson, 2008). Second, Irish manifestos

¹ Data come from the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) (Budge, Robertson and Hearl, 1987; Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006). It has to be pointed out that not all the documents in this dataset are proper manifestos according to the above-cited definition. Where no manifestos were available, the research group coded similar documents, which in the Irish case often are newspaper articles and leaders' speeches (Mair, 1987a:138-139). Judging on the basis of documents located and coded by the research group, the first Labour manifesto proper dates back to 1951. The first Fine Gael manifesto in the collection goes back to 1961. Fianna Fáil did not produce a manifesto proper before 1977.

Figure 1: Development of average manifesto length in Ireland over time



Note: Mean length based on data from the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) (Budge, Robertson and Hearl, 1987; Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006).

are important in government negotiations. Although policy factors per se may not well predict coalition composition in Ireland (Laver and Arkins, 1990; Debus, 2007), there is a close match between the manifestos of government parties and the coalition agreement (O'Malley, 2008; Ó Muineacháin, 2008). Third, election promises made in Irish manifestos guide actual policy-making, as shown by two studies which have checked the fulfilment of socio-economic pledges from Irish manifestos. In the legislative period between 1977 and 2002, Mansergh (2004) found that 50% of government and 45% of opposition policies were implemented, and Costello and Thomson (2008) report fulfilment rates of 70% (government) and 44% (opposition) for 2002-2007. What is more, Thomson (2010) finds that Irish manifestos affect policy-making much more than many citizens believe. While the electorate's assessments of pledge redemption varied with the actual fulfilment status of the promises, citizens' views were generally too negative. The actual value of what is said in manifestos may therefore be better than its reputation.

Learning from Manifesto Preparation

Given the prominent role of election manifestos, it is surprising that comparatively little is known about the process through which parties create these documents and how they use them in political practice. Information on manifesto creation in the political science literature is scattered, very limited in scope and almost exclusively descriptive (Budge, Robertson and Hearl, 1987; Katz, 1996; Svåsand, Strøm and Rasch, 1997).² Since the role of political parties

² Somewhat more is known about the main British parties (Kavanagh, 1981; Rose, 1984; Bara, 2006).

in policy development is a crucial element in the chain of representation, the gap in knowledge about manifesto creation is unfortunate. Research into manifesto preparation processes can contribute to at least two important discussions in the empirical literature on political parties.

First, recent theories of party organization take into account the notion that party leaders value flexibility with regard to programmatic party competition (Duverger, 1954; Strøm, 1990) and therefore seek to control policy formulation (Carty, 2004). Leaders may also try to exclude party activists with extreme preferences from this process (Katz and Mair, 1995, 2009). However, there is practically no attempt to empirically examine these predictions. In a notable exception focusing on OECD member states, Scarrow, Webb and Farrell (2000) conclude that policy formation remains largely in the hands of the parliamentary party leadership, but the empirical basis of this finding is limited to illustrations of single cases and informal expert feedback. Studying the creation of election manifestos can therefore also shed light on predictions of influential party organization theories.

Second, studies of manifesto creation can add to the currently mushrooming literature that empirically analyzes parties' position taking, as pioneered by Adams et al. (2004). Studies in this tradition try to explain why parties change the positions expressed in their manifestos. However, the process through which parties arrive at these documents (and thus the positions they take) is treated as a black box.³ Empirical studies of manifesto preparation can therefore point to how theoretical and empirical analyses of party position-taking could be extended.

Finally, specifically studying manifesto preparation before the Irish 2007 elections allows to update existing knowledge of the Irish case and analyze its development over time. Back in 1982, Mair found some differences in manifesto creation between parties but stated that "in any event, the procedure rarely - if ever - involves a wide range of party members" (quoted in Mair, 1987a:140). Based on interviews with actors involved in drawing up the 1997 manifestos, Garry and Mansergh (1999) as well as Holmes (1999:34-35) similarly report that the preparation processes were fairly centralized and leader-focused, with some minor differences relating to how the parties went about developing the documents. Garry and Mansergh (1999) also conclude that backbenchers and party members did not have much actual influence in any of the parties.⁴ Investigating whether or not the picture of fairly

³ A partial exception is the study by Schumacher, Vis and De Vries (2010) who analyse how party member involvement in policy-making (generally) affects party positioning.

⁴ Yet, the preparation processes within the smaller Democratic Left and the Progressive Democrats were more open to their members of the Dáil than in other parties (Holmes, 1999:34).

homogenous preparation modes (and views on the role of the manifesto) has changed in the past ten years is another aim of the following analysis.

Manifesto creation before the 2007 election in Ireland

The following analysis describes the creation of the 2007 election manifestos in the main Irish parties and assesses the role of these documents. For this purpose, I conducted semi-structured interviews with people who played a major role in preparing the manifesto of their party. Interviewees came from Fianna Fáil (FF), Fine Gael (FG), Labour, Sinn Féin (SF), and the Green Party. All interviews were conducted in 2010.⁵ While it was unfortunate that at that point of time already about three years had passed since the election, this should not pose too much of a problem, since the interest mainly lies in the general approach rather than small details of the process. What follows is based on the descriptions and assessments of the coordinators. Several of these have worked also on manifestos other than the 2007 national election document and some statements therefore apply more generally. The description of the results proceeds in three steps. First the preparation process is outlined. Then authors' views on manifesto usage are covered; and finally the changes planned for the next national election manifesto are discussed. Most of the time the results are presented party by party, in the order of the parties' vote shares in the 2002 and 2007 elections.

Outline of the preparation process

Before any preparations can begin, parties have to decide what the preparation process itself looks like. In none of the major Irish parties did the party constitution explicitly determine how the manifesto was to be developed.⁶ The actor who finally determined the shape of the process differs somewhat between the parties. In FF it was the leader himself in conjunction with the Minister for Finance who made the decision. In FG this was done by the front bench (i.e. the parliamentary spokespeople/shadow ministers), in Labour by the leader, and in SF by the National Election Department and the General Secretary. Within the Green Party, in contrast, the decision was made by the National Council, the policy making body by party constitution, where constituency representatives are in the majority.

⁵ More specifically, interviews took place on January 27 (Labour), February 23 (SF), June 8 (FG), June 11 (Greens) and September 13 (FF).

⁶ However, party constitutions may contain rules regarding policy development more generally.

Similar to 1997, some parties started preparations earlier and others later.⁷ Labour appears to have started earliest, around mid 2006, followed by FG “about nine months before the election“ (which took place on May 24th, 2007), by FF in September/October 2006, and by the Greens at the end of 2006.⁸ SF began preparations for the document as such only six weeks before the election, since before that point resources were allocated to preparing the manifesto for the Northern Ireland Assembly election (which took place in March that year). The coordinator of the manifesto creation process states that this proved to be indeed little time for preparing the Dáil manifesto.

Work on the FF manifesto was coordinated by the Taoiseach’s programme manager Gerry Hickey (the interviewee). He led a group including political advisors of departmental ministers and staff from the party's research office. A cornerstone of the process consisted of the advisors presenting policy papers to the group. The usual starting point was the evaluation of existing party and government policies, with the view to identifying gaps and areas requiring modification. The group, which met on a monthly basis, acted as a „sounding board“. Ideas brought up at party events like the annual „think-in“ or the weekly meeting of the parliamentary party were taken on board. At an early stage, the Minister for Finance was consulted in order to cost all proposals. A core group of three advisors assisted the coordinator in establishing coherence. The Taoiseach was briefed on the course of things on a regular basis.

In FG the political director, Gerry Naughton, was primarily responsible for the manifesto. There was an internal drafting group - a subset of the election strategy group - consisting of both staff and politicians which oversaw the process and acted as a feedback group. The party started from existing policy platforms. The then economic advisor and current Head of Policy Andrew McDowell (the interviewee) suggests that “writing manifestos forces parties to look at what they have“. Early on, a “simple, clear narrative why to vote for the party“ is developed. Existing material has to be evaluated in the context of this narrative and it is decided which policies need to be dropped, and which ones require an update or the addition of new material. When preparing the 2007 manifesto, early drafts were coordinated with the party spokespersons for the various policy areas. Further work on the manifesto was accompanied by five to six meetings of the strategy group and the front bench.

⁷ The following time data have to be interpreted with care, because interviewees understandably had some problems making exact statements about the onset of the work after more than three years.

⁸ Figures refer to the start of work on the manifesto as such. Preparatory work partly began earlier, e.g. in the Green Party (May 2006) or in FF, where first steps were taken two years before the election.

A manifesto committee was in charge of coordination in Labour. It was installed by the Policy Committee of the National Executive, which (at that time) had the right of policy making between party conferences. The manifesto committee consisted of three people: Eamon Gilmore as chair of the Policy Committee, the Director of Policy Dr. Colm O'Reardon, and the former General Secretary Brendan Halligan in the role of a “facilitator“ between the manifesto committee and the party's TDs. The actual drafting was done by the policy director and his colleague, assisted by two legal advisors. The team from Labour started by collating press releases, using policy documents from spokespersons, as well as policy decisions by conventions and party committees. The leader's views were also taken into account. A main task was to make all policies fit within a common framework. During the course of developing the document, the manifesto committee had about six to ten formal meetings, whose minutes also contributed to the drafts.

The National Director of Policy, Shannonbrooke Murphy (the interviewee), was responsible for the manifesto in SF. Having received a set of specifications (e.g. about the time frame and the major areas to be dealt with) from the National Election Department and the General Secretary, she asked the main parliamentary staff members to provide drafts covering the policy areas they are in charge of (usually these are several per employee). These drafts were based on policy documents that had earlier been developed by the party's seven Policy Review Groups and, after undergoing a formal membership consultation process, had been adopted by the Ard Chomhairle (National Executive) and the Ard Fheis (party convention).⁹ The party's TDs were consulted also during the process of creating the manifesto as such. As mentioned above, SF had fought the Northern Ireland Assembly election only in March 2007, so the manifesto from that election provided additional guidance in producing the manifesto for the election to the Dáil. The policy director considers the work on the manifesto mostly as summarising rather than developing policies, with the aim of establishing a “coherent, cogent and compelling political programme“ in line with wider party policy and objectives. In SF, about five main drafts were produced.

Similarly, it was mainly a single person who coordinated the creation of the 2007 manifesto within the Greens: the then secretary of the parliamentary party group Colm Ó Caomhánaigh (the interviewee). He worked together with parliamentary spokespersons, the National Council and the Policy Steering Group, which coordinates the business of the National Council between the meetings of the latter. The Greens could refer to the General

⁹ The Policy Review Groups consist of members from across the 32 counties, including Ministers and spokespersons, party advisors and staff, elected local representatives as well as party regional representatives and other invited party activists.

Policy Development Plan which had been developed after the local and European elections of 2004. In the creation of this plan the policy groups, which are led by the parliamentary spokespersons but open to any interested party member, played a major role. The main points from this plan were taken, gaps were identified and the key topics for the manifesto were chosen. Parts of a draft manifesto were then discussed at a National Council meeting at the end of 2006, and a complete version was presented at the following meeting in early 2007. At this meeting, formal and informal amendments were discussed and voted on where necessary.

Less uniform across parties were the procedures for adopting the final manifesto. In FF, the document was formally approved by the Election Committee, after the Minister for Finance had expressed consent. The FG manifesto was adopted by the front bench as well as by the parliamentary party, by consensus. Within Labour, the National Executive had to approve the document. It asked for some limited changes, mostly things that had not been included, and adopted the draft manifesto subject to changes. Those changes were then implemented by the manifesto committee after the actual adoption meeting. Generally for SF manifestos, the Officer Board clears the final draft.¹⁰ If subsections include new or significant developmental content, the Ard Chomhairle (National Executive) must formally adopt the document as well, but this was not the case in 2007. In the Green Party, the above-mentioned National Council meeting in early 2007 also adopted the manifesto and installed a subcommittee for dealing with any changes to be made later.

All parties presented their manifesto at a main launch after the election had been called (April 29th): the Greens on May 1st, Labour as well as FF on May 3rd, FG on May 7th, and SF on May 16th (Gallagher and Marsh, 2008: xvi). All parties made use of additional policy launches before and/or after this main event. The same strategy was also applied to the joint policies that Labour and FG had worked out in addition to their separate proposals in the manifestos.

Views on functions of the manifesto

Above, it was argued that manifestos can have different functions. How do Irish manifesto authors see these different uses of the documents? To start with, the assessments of the classic function of addressing voters are considered. The FF coordinator sees the main purpose of the manifesto in „get[ting] the party's policy stance before the public“. The underlying assumption is that „the public picks it up from the media“, more specifically from

¹⁰ The Officer Board is elected by the general membership and consists of the President, Vice President, Chairperson, General Secretary, Director of Publicity and two Treasurers.

the launch of the manifesto, from the daily press conferences and from party representatives expressing views taken from it. In 2007, summaries of the manifesto were distributed in every constituency, and these were also used by candidates and campaign workers for canvassing. The FG interviewee states that it was not expected that people read the manifesto. Nor was it meant to be an important electioneering guide, also because the party had (in a similar way as the manifesto) prepared a second document, the 'Contract for a better Ireland'. This was a „subset of the manifesto“, but with a „clearer political narrative“ and was presented as a set of personal commitments by party leader Enda Kenny. For the campaign, the party mainly relied on TV ads, posterings, and branding as well as the distribution of leaflets. The central aim of the main manifesto launch was to emphasise two to three core messages. The Labour interviewee refers to the classic function that the manifesto “gives you a mandate for your case“, but as a tool for informing the electorate it is mainly used indirectly and by constituency campaigners. SF members actually want the manifesto to be available as soon as possible in order to use it in their campaigns on the ground. As far as the communication with the voters is concerned, different sections of the parties have different views on the manifesto, the policy director reports. The election strategy team and the press office would be concerned more about the external reception of the manifesto than she herself. As tools for informing citizens, SF also uses, among other things, press releases, newsletters and leaflets. Increasingly, social networking is also used. The Green interviewee shares the view that few citizens read the manifesto and argues that the audience mainly consists of people in politics, the party's opponents and the media. Merely a few hundred manifestos were printed. For campaign purposes in 2007, the party also produced a mini-version of the manifesto in A5 format and distributed “tens of thousands“ of leaflets.

Linked with the question to which extent parties judge the manifesto to be a tool for communication with the voters is whether or not they use polls during preparation. FF used research into public opinion, both of quantitative and qualitative nature. Quantitative techniques mainly served to examine the amount of interest in different issues, while qualitative studies sought to find out more about specific concerns regarding a certain issue and how respective policy proposals were perceived. Key policies were tested using focus groups. Fine Gael had information about the „comparative strengths of parties and leaders against the priority of the electorate“ and used „research to test the effectiveness of messages, especially those from the “Contract for a better Ireland”. These tests referred, for instance, to language and the „presentation of ideas“. The interviewee from Labour answers that while polls give an indication of the importance of different issues to the electorate, they inform the

presentation of policy, not the formulation of policy. The Green Party also had information on public opinion available, but the manifesto coordinator does not think that it played a great role. He argues that the main task for the party was “to show people that we were about more than the environment“. The SF representative reports that the party has not used polls so far. There are discussions within the party to do so, but opinions on this matter remain divided.

Finally, it is interesting that some party representatives express concerns about difficulties in communicating policy questions through the media. One interviewee said that even political journalists were not necessarily interested in policy details. This view is echoed by another manifesto coordinator suggesting that even few journalists read the documents. Similarly, a third interviewee noticed a lack of close analysis of party manifestos in the media, also concerning the question whether or not parties have redeemed pledges from past manifestos. One interviewee also raised the issue that it was difficult to engage in a proper policy discussion while lacking a process that coordinates the press launches of a certain set of policies across parties. Absent such a mechanism, one party may talk e.g. about health care reform on the same day as another party publishes their housing policies. Finally, it was commented that the media's desire for controversy can form an obstacle to a good presentation of policy questions.

The interview respondents partly also mentioned the use of the manifesto as an intra-party document. Andrew McDowell from FG pointed out (unpromptedly) that one of the main functions of the manifesto was to obtain a „sense of scale of commitments that everybody in the party wants to make“, which „enforces discipline what commitments are possible and affordable“. Also, developing a manifesto would make it easier to agree on a certain prioritization of issues, a question that tends to create conflict within the party. Party representatives were also asked about potential intra-party conflicts during the creation process and how eventual disagreement about policy questions would be solved. Most interviewees referred to the approach more generally taken, and not to any specific instances during the 2007 preparation process. Gerry Hickey from FF states that there has not been a lot of conflict underlying the preparation of the 2007 manifesto (or the two manifestos before that). Only cost constraints on the policy proposals became an issue sometimes. FG seeks to arrive at a consensus in cases of policy divisions and does not use votes. If no consensus can be found, “staff would do further work to establish it“. Within the Labour party, policy differences are solved at an early stage, usually through negotiations. Discussions may take place in the National Executive or at the party conference. In really difficult cases, a working group or commission is formed to resolve the issue. When disagreement appears in SF, it is

usually also during the policy formulation stage, but not during manifesto preparation. Issues that are controversial at the adoption stage tend not to be treated as “settled policy“ yet and are therefore unlikely to make it into a manifesto which represents “core commitments“, so the policy director. In the Green Party the policy groups as origins of the proposals are advised not to shy away from using majority voting if decisions cannot be reached by consensus; those who have lost the vote may promote their positions again at the decisive National Council meeting.

A further topic is whether or not, and in what manner, the parties' relationship to interest groups affects the preparation of the manifesto and its later use. During preparation, the FF coordinator communicated with interest groups, sometimes on their and sometimes on his own initiative. For the party, the interest was “to hear what they have to say“. Some of the proposals from these groups were incorporated into the manifesto. Now and then the interchanges with interest groups were also used to obtain feedback on general policy questions, but not on specific proposals the party was considering. The party did not systematically send the final manifesto to interest groups. FG contacts interest groups during the drafting process in order to seek endorsements, but not drafting material. This is done in order to “drive the news agenda“, although it remains open “to which extent it drives voting behaviour“. In the Labour Party, the spokespersons and the policy director are contacted by interested groups. Their impact on policy varies, depending on whether they have “something sensible to say“ or „present useful data“. Some of the demands made can be “quite outrageous“. Later, during the election campaign, the party is also contacted by interest groups, NGOs and lobbyists who inquire about the party position on certain issues. The party sets up a separate query group to handle these requests. SF also cultivates contacts with “sectoral organisations“, to use the term that is common within the party. Parliamentary staff members or the policy director “take the opportunity to meet them“ and “listen with an open mind“. While these exchanges “do not determine what will be in the final manifesto“, coherent and congruent proposals are often taken over. The people involved in SF manifesto preparation sometimes also actively seek contact with representatives of sectoral organisations, but these are people who have been in touch with the party for a longer time. The final SF manifesto is sent to these groups, too. There is no formalised way of communication with interest groups in the Green Party. Colm Ó Caomhánaigh remarks that „nearly all of them [interest groups] would love to meet you“, but expresses that these requests appear often late in the process. Also, the policy groups maintain links with NGOs in

their area, and the party would actively seek contact with groups close to it, and occasionally with others if there are opportunities for constructive talks.

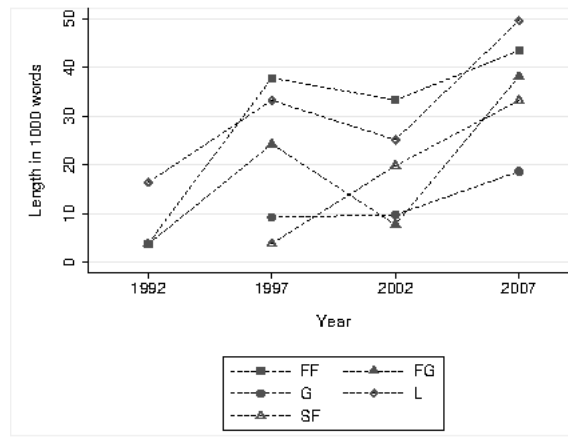
The interviewees also spoke about the use of manifestos in government negotiations. Although they did not actually get involved in negotiations, the representatives of the parties that formed the opposition after the 2007 elections also have thoughts about the matter. Andrew McDowell from FG argues that it would be almost impossible to include something in the programme for government if it has not been part of the manifesto, and that this is the case not only because of the coalition partner, but also the “bureaucracy and system itself“. He points out that the manifesto provides “authority to overcome inertia in the system“, which would prove especially relevant in the context of social partnership. The Labour interviewee similarly thinks that government negotiations would be „extremely difficult“ without a manifesto. In SF, “considerations regarding coalition formation did not and do not play a role in determining manifesto content“, but at party conferences members clearly express that manifesto content should be the basis of any such negotiations if they occur. Assessments of the representatives from the parties that formed the government after the 2007 elections are clear. For FF, the manifesto was “absolutely the basis“ for negotiation and the programme for government. Similarly, the manifesto “largely informed“ the Green Party's negotiation talks. The interviewees were also asked how policies that imply disagreement with a potential coalition partner are presented in manifestos, and more specifically how strongly the incentive to obtain a mandate from the own voters for the own position weighs compared to the incentive not to make disagreement visible. The FF manifesto coordinator reports that there was some coordination with the Progressive Democrats in order to remove minor inconsistencies in the drafts of the manifestos, but emphasises that the party's own stance was not altered. Issues of disagreement in policy terms were a “matter for negotiation“ after the election. The representative of FG states that it is mainly the incentive for obtaining a mandate from the own voters, but “tempered“ by the motivation to avoid showing disagreement with the potential coalition partner. His Labour counterpart says that one would not worry about differences, but makes the own case, let the voters decide, and „obtain[s] seats for negotiation strength“. Similarly, the SF policy director argues that appearing compatible with a potential or actual coalition partner is not an issue, and that “[i]t is party practice to seek our mandate based on our own positions and proposals“. The Green manifesto coordinator replies, that such concerns play a minor role compared to the general reception of the manifesto in public opinion. As far as it matters, the aim is “more about rising the bar

rather than lowering the bar“. He also points out that the Greens had prepared internal documents outlining the tactics for the coalition negotiations in 2007.

The use of the manifesto in the day-to-day political business of the new legislative period (just as issues of implementation) was not a focus of the interviews. Some of the party representatives, however, referred to the use of the manifesto in this way themselves. In FG, the manifesto may be used as an “encyclopedia“ when policy questions arise. Similarly, the document is seen as a “reference point“ within the Labour party. It also seems that the work on the manifesto as such is highly valued in the Labour party. The interviewee states that “we attach a great, high priority to policy issues“. This seems to be recognised by other parties, since a colleague had the impression that the manifesto had “great ideological weight“ in the Labour party.

Above it was shown that the average length of Irish manifestos has increased over time, and it was suggested that this was indicative of the general importance of the documents. Figure 2 displays the length of recent manifestos in words by party. In 2007, the Labour manifesto was the longest document with almost 50,000 words, followed by FF (approximately 43,000 words). In the middle, we find the FG (approximately 38,000 words), PD (approximately 35,000 words) and SF (approximately 33,000 words) manifestos. The Green document was clearly the shortest one (approximately 19,000 words). It is also interesting to note that the 2007 manifestos were in all parties longer than their counterparts in any of the preceding three elections. The figures are nicely complemented by information that the documents' authors provided in the interviews. Within FF, the length of the document was an issue. The party tried to shorten the document in order “to get more people to read it [and] to get it more succinct“. Conciseness is also seen as beneficial in government negotiations. On the other hand, in both FG and Labour, the length of the document was not a great concern during preparation, since the readership is expected to be limited. Within Labour, this was also a reason not to self-impose any constraints concerning the length of the document. SF's policy director explains that the party's manifestos grew longer in the 2000s, because it was a time when a lot of new policy formulation took place in the party. The Green Party was well aware of the limited audience, too, but drew a different conclusion: “Few people read it and you need to be careful not to put too much of your time and resources into this“.

Figure 2: Length of manifestos in recent elections



Note: Information for 1992 manifestos from Green Party and from SF missing.

A summary of the views on the uses of the manifesto is provided by the following statements of the party representatives. The FF manifesto coordinator Gerry Hickey believes that the manifesto “is a guide [to the campaign] as much as everything else“. For Andrew McDowell from FG, on the other hand, the manifesto is “not a campaigning document“, but a “reference document“. Similarly, the Labour interviewee suggests that “[t]he number of people who are not members of the Labour Party who read it in full is probably fewer than the number of people who do“. Shannonbrooke Murphy from SF roughly estimates that two thirds of the people using the document are internal while one third are external. And Colm Ó Caomhánaigh from the Green Party concludes that “[i]t is easy to fall into a cynical view that, in fact, most of the people who read it are looking for faults in it rather than actually hoping to find great policies“.

Changes for preparing the next manifesto

Finally, the party representatives also provided information about envisaged changes for creating the next national election manifesto and eventual „emergency plans“ in the case of early elections.¹¹ Due to feelings of uncertainty about the timing of the next election, FG started preparations much earlier, and, at the time of the interview in early June 2010, had the “manifesto pretty much ready to go“. It will be written in a “snappier“ style. Changes in the preparation process in the Labour party follow a re-organization of party structures. The day-to-day business of the party is now run by an Executive Board reduced to a size of 12 people,

¹¹ Respective information for FF is lacking, since the interviewee is not active in politics any more.

the party conference now meets annually instead of every second year, and there is a new Central Council consisting of approximately 80 people, which meets three times a year and whose main task is policymaking. Article 11 No. 2 of the party constitution (Labour Party, 2011) also states that “[t]he Central Council shall, in consultation with the Parliamentary Party and in accordance with Party policies, approve and publish the Election Manifesto“. Through these changes, the preparation process is becoming “more democratic“, the interviewee believes. Labour also possesses an emergency plan in case of early elections, which would still follow a formal process involving the Central Council.

In SF, the manifesto preparation process is still in a phase of transition from the time when it was closely linked to the formulation of new policies. For creating future manifestos, the party will be able to rely much more on updating and shortening existing material. At the time of the interview, no final decisions with regard to the developmental process for the next general election manifesto had been made. There is intention to build on the practice from creating the 2009 local election manifesto, which was more open to the participation of candidates and party activists. One motivation behind this is “to get access to good ideas that exist out there“. On the basis of good experiences with the approach, the party also wants to develop the practice of having several sub-launches of manifesto sections. At the time of the interview, SF did not have a proper “emergency plan“ for early elections, but would work from the 2007 manifesto, updating and sharpening it. Government participation is the main factor leading to changes in manifesto preparation within the Green Party. Seeking consistency with the actual government record while pointing out the necessity of compromises with the coalition partner is seen as the main task. While government participation in this sense creates constraints for writing the manifesto, the party can benefit from being “more in touch with a wider range of policy areas“ and “the reality on the economic side of things“. In order to be able to create a manifesto for early elections quickly, the party has asked the policy groups for 20 points in each policy field. Similarly, as in Labour, this manifesto would nevertheless undergo the standard formal process.

Summary and Discussion

The main formal aspects of the manifesto preparation process are summarised in Table 1. A few patterns can be detected. First, the process in the Green party is much different from the one in other parties. Starting from shaping the nature of the process all the way to the adoption of the manifesto, the representative National Council is the dominant institution. In

Table 1: Key features of 2007 manifesto preparation processes

	FF	FG	Labour	SF	Greens
Who did decide on the preparation process?	Leader	Front bench	Leader	National Election Department	National Council
	Minister for Finance			General Secretary	
Who did coordinate?	Taoiseach's Programme Manager	Political Director	Manifesto committee (3 people)	Director of Policy	Parliamentary party group secretary Policy Steering Group
Who was strongly involved?	Advisors from government departments and party research office	Drafting group (politicians and staff)	Parliamentary spokespersons	Parliamentary team	National Council
	Department of Finance	Front bench	Leader		Parliamentary spokespersons
Who did adopt?	Minister for Finance	Front bench	National Executive (will be different next time)	Officer Board	National Council
	Election Committee	Parliamentary party			

the other parties, the influence of rank-and-file members on the manifesto is only indirect inasmuch as the party conference is engaged in policymaking and inasmuch as conference decisions are considered in the drafting process. In FF, FG, Labour and SF it is the party leader or leadership who decides what the preparation process looks like, and the policy directors (or the Taoiseach's programme manager in the case of FF) play a considerable role. Elected representatives (compared to advisors) seem to play a lesser role in FF than in the other parties. Finally, the fact that both the front bench and the parliamentary party group

adopted the manifesto makes FG stand out. Preparing manifestos is mainly summarising and updating existing material, with a special emphasis on establishing coherence and/or a common framework. Public opinion research was used by all parties except SF in 2007. The work on the manifesto is not especially conflict-laden; policy differences tend to appear at an earlier stage and most parties solve those by negotiation. There is also no evidence of a conflict line between the parliamentary party and the extraparliamentary party like the one that characterised British Labour in the past.

Irish manifestos are multi-purpose documents. The classic function as an outline of the party's policies to voters is still valued by its authors - even if they are well aware that few citizens read it. This view is reflected, among other things, in the common use of polls in its preparation, in the fact that constituency campaigners demand and use the manifesto as a preparatory document, and in the practice of having several policy launches based on the manifesto during the campaign. However, it is clear that Irish parties also use tools other than the manifesto in order to communicate policy issues in a more "bite-sized" fashion. Contacts with interest groups also affect Irish manifestos. With some variation across parties, organized interests may provide information, input or endorsements. Some parties send the final manifesto out to these groups, and parties are likely to receive queries. Unsurprisingly, the 2007 manifestos strongly guided coalition negotiations and were the basis for the programme of government. To some extent, they also serve as reference documents for policy-making and tools to define policy within the party. How the party interviewees see the relative importance of the four functions differs. If we assume that their views are representative for the party, then the function of addressing voters seems to be more significant in FF than in other parties. This classic function does not seem very important for FG, where the manifesto is strongly seen as an internal document. Internal uses are also dominant in SF and the Labour party, but the use as an electioneering tool matters to some extent. For the Greens the use in government and policy negotiations was most prominent, but it seems that the 2007 manifesto as such was overall not considered as important a document as in the other parties.

Comparing these findings to those from earlier studies (Mair, 1987b; Garry and Mansergh, 1999; Holmes, 1999), there is a pattern of considerable stability. The preparation of manifestos is by and large still a centralized exercise run by the party leadership. In terms of their functions, the documents continue to be used indirectly to inform voters on party policies and play an important role in government formation and subsequent policy formulation. However, the approach taken by the Green Party has clearly changed. Back in 1997, the manifesto was mainly written by Dan Boyle, then councillor in Cork, and "rubber-

stamped“ by the party's coordinating committee (Garry and Mansergh, 1999:87). Now, the inclusive National Council plays a major role in preparing and adopting the document. This degree of involvement by the membership in preparing the manifesto has so far not been found in other Irish parties and is an aspect that the party is proud of. Remarkably, there are developments suggesting that other parties are moving into the direction of a more inclusive process as well. Following changes in its organisational structure the next Labour manifesto will be approved by the Central Council, where grass-root members are strongly represented. Also, following positive experiences in preparing the local election manifesto, SF wants to grant party activists and candidates more input into the process of manifesto creation. Possibly, a general trend towards a more inclusive manifesto preparation process is emerging within Irish parties.

This finding is at odds with the conclusion of Scarrow, Webb and Farrell (2000) as well as the prediction of the prominent cartel party thesis (Katz and Mair, 1995, 2009). According to the cartel party model, one would expect parties to avoid the involvement of party congresses and activists. Instead, the party leadership is supposed to retain or expand control of policy-making, possibly with the addition of “plebiscitarian“ modes of intra-party decision-making. The development towards a more inclusive process in Ireland suggests that parties can benefit from activist involvement and input. While this study here did not directly observe policy-related behaviour of party activists, the „democratization“ of manifesto drafting in some Irish parties indirectly speaks against the idea that activists are troublesome radicals (May, 1973). This notion is implicit in the cartel party thesis, but theoretical reasons (Kitschelt, 1989; Carty, 2004) and the empirical record (see Scarrow and Gezgor, 2010:835-836 for a review) suggest that it does not characterize most parties. If party activists are not radicals, then a more open manifesto preparation process should also improve the representation of societal interests by parties, in addition to other positive effects (e.g. promoting membership involvement, improving deliberation) it may have.

Given the general lack of knowledge about manifesto preparation as well as their use, the findings of this study suggest a number of avenues for further research. First of all, it is currently extremely difficult to assess how typical (or atypical) the findings for Ireland are in comparison to other democracies. Other work by the author (Däubler, 2011) suggests that patterns of manifesto preparation and use in the German state of Baden-Württemberg are similar to those in Ireland, with the main difference being that party conventions discuss and ratify the document in all parties in this German state. In order to test how such and other differences in the preparation process across parties (and/or countries) affect the content of

election manifestos, systematic cross-national data collection efforts are highly desirable. Such data will allow both the mapping of different methods of preparation and the various uses of manifestos and an examination of their consequences.

For instance, empirical studies of party competition following the ground-breaking work of Adams et al. (2004) could benefit from investigating how the nature of the manifesto preparation process affects the positions taken (Schumacher, Vis and De Vries, 2010). Also, the party-positioning literature departs from the notion that parties change their positions for electoral motivations. The results that were found here for the Irish case (but which should hold more generally), however, show that manifestos are written for more than one use, and at least in some parties even the indirect use in campaigning is not the main purpose of the document. Therefore, the positions expressed in manifestos supposedly also reflect considerations arising from intra-party politics, the interaction with interest groups, and coalition formation strategies. This should be taken into account when party positions are analyzed. Finally, the results presented here also point out a caveat. Since manifesto creation uses to a great extent the stock of existing policies, one must not equate manifesto preparation with policy development. Therefore, analyses of policy formulation within parties should ideally go beyond looking at manifesto preparation.

The findings also have implications for political practice in Ireland. First of all, the fact that manifesto creation is overall more inclusive to party members than a decade ago shows that the absence of fixed-term elections in Ireland and the resulting uncertainty in election timing may make it harder, but not impossible to use a more inclusive approach. In larger parties, however, implementing a more participatory approach may pose more logistic difficulties, as mentioned by one interviewee and argued by Weeks (2010:161). While it needs to be repeated that manifesto creation is not the same as policy development and the latter may be more or less inclusive than the former, overall the trend in some parties towards a more inclusive manifesto preparation process appears to be welcome. Second, a lack of policy discussion during Irish election campaigns - if there is such a thing - can hardly be attributed to the lack of policy material by parties. It is clear that Irish manifestos are extensive. Attempts to improve campaign discourse may therefore better be targeted at fostering the demand for policy information in the public, possibly by reducing the personalization of politics, or at increasing the supply of policy information by the media.

In 1997, an Irish director of elections argued that the manifesto was “a pretty old-fashioned vehicle now“ (reported by Holmes, 1999:35). This might be true when referring to a “golden age“ of the manifesto when it was used as direct communication tool in the

campaign. As with other “golden ages“, however, such a time may possibly have never existed. Be this as it may, there are no signs that manifestos may die out in Ireland. To the contrary, they have strongly increased in size, which would hardly happen if they were irrelevant. The documents serve a number of functions, and it is obvious that Irish parties and the people in charge of preparation invest a considerable amount of resources in creating them. Based on existing work and the original research presented here, it can therefore be safely concluded that manifestos continue to play a role in Irish politics.

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