

**Christian democratic
government
programmes
Ireland – Fine Gael**

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Abstract: *Christian democracy, like other political ideologies, has a solid value orientation. Naturally, values tend to change in the light of the dominant norms of the current society. Still, there is a general understanding that some core values are so significant that they should be more resistant to the alterations of times. One of the decent ways to analyse the stability and flexibility of these value orientations is to look at the government programmes of political parties. In the article below, the Irish Fine Gael will be investigated by looking at the “14-point programme” of Fine Gael and the Labour party for the 1973 elections and the “Programme for Government: Our Shared Future” of Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, and the Green Party from 2020 highlighting some central similarities and differences.*

Keywords: *Christian democracy, Fine Gael, government programme, political ideology, Irish politics*

Introduction

In our era, we are inclined to focus on great personalities, heroes, and anti-heroes of politics. Several political scientists emphasised the personalist trends of current politics; nowadays, symbolically speaking, we tend to vote on politicians, not on parties, and politicians attract attention, not party politics. Still, political parties are not dead, and they produce a more durable output than the politicians' ever-changing rhetoric, namely party programmes. These documents make it possible to find a relatively stable set of policy orientations, values, and norms the political party wishes to represent. Every political party has its values and norms, but in the case of Christian democratic parties, it might be even more crucial to focus on them as the “Christian”, in itself, points to a solid value orientation.

One of Ireland's main Christian democratic parties is the Fine Gael (Tribe of the Gaels), founded in 1933 after the fusion of three parties: Cumann na nGaedheal (Party of the Irish), the National Centre, and the National Guard. Traditionally, Fine Gael is a conservative party, one of the successors of the “pro-treaty parties” and – generally in the form of coalition governments – provides an opposition against its main rival, Fianna Fáil.¹ The past nearly hundred years brought several shifts in policies and value orientations (for instance, concerning abortion, marriage, drugs), resulting in criticism² towards the party. Yet, Fine Gael is still widely labelled as a Christian democratic party. It is a core member of the European People’s Party (EPP) that published its manifesto in 2019, which directly emphasises the representation of Christian democratic values.³

This article includes an analysis of an “old” and a “new” government programme of the Fine Gael. First, the “14-point programme” of the National Coalition Government from 1973, then the *Programme for Government: Our Shared Future* from 2020, will be examined. This article wishes to detect the similarities and differences of the programmes, for instance, in their length, structure, central values, main issues, and solutions. It is argued that this kind of comparison can lead us to exciting and novel conclusions regarding Christian democratic party politics. Although the article might contain some statements about the presence or lack of traditional Christian democratic values (e.g., personalism, popularism, subsidiarity) in the party programmes, it does not wish to morally evaluate either the changes or the non-changes, since several reasons (political, ethical, economic, etc.) can be behind the stability and the flexibility of these government programmes.

14-point programme

The general election on 28 February 1973 brought something radically new in the Republic of Ireland; after 16 years of rule, even though Fianna Fáil won the most seats (69), a coalition government was formed by the second Fine Gael (54 seats) and the third Labour (19 seats) parties. Liam Cosgrave from Fine Gael was elected Taoiseach (prime minister). Nevertheless, twenty days before the general elections, readers of the Irish Times could already look at the 14-point programme of the later so-called “National Coalition Government”. Altogether sixty-five former Dáil (the lower house of the parliament) deputies from the two parties signed their approval on the programme.

The article's title was *F.G-Labour draws up manifesto* with the subtitle "A clear democratic choice".⁴ The manifesto, altogether, would equal around one or two A4 pages, which is extremely short compared to government programmes nowadays. It begins with a brief historical introduction that clarifies the context and the significance of the election from the viewpoint of the coalition partners. Naturally, the sixteen years rule and the failures of the Fianna Fáil were highlighted, which necessitated the formulation of a new alternative, in the form of a National Coalition Government by the Fine Gael and the Labour on the forthcoming elections. Then, the 14 points were declared, which set the agreed priorities and policies. Shortly, these were the following:

- 1. Protecting the Individual:** The first emphasised priority of the new government was to protect the liberty and safety of citizens and preserve the democratic institutions of the state.
- 2. Peace through Justice:** The parties ambioned to find a peaceful solution in the North to end the violence and cruelties, as they put it: "bloodshed, injustice and sectarian divisions."
- 3. Stopping the Price Rise:** The document included the government's aim to "stabilise prices, halt redundancies, and reduce unemployment under a programme of planned economic development" immediately. In order to realise these economic objectives, the prices should have been controlled strictly by government measures. Additionally, the government planned to remove VAT from food products and suggested alternatives to negotiate between employers and workers.
- 4. Social Reform:** The manifesto contained the aspirations to eliminate poverty (it suggested that under the Fianna Fáil government, at least 25% of the population lived in poverty) and to end social injustice. It directly mentioned specific groups like "the aged, deprived children, the widowed, orphaned and deserted and the physically and mentally handicapped" who must be protected.
- 5. Housing Emergency:** The manifesto promised to increase housing output to 25,000 a year, the better utilisation of the available houses, and the termination of speculation in building lands. The National Coalition Government promised to declare a housing emergency immediately.
- 6. Rents, Rates and Taxes:** To eliminate injustice and unfair differences in rents, a national system was going to be introduced. It also aimed to reduce health

charges and housing subsidies in the form of a fair taxation. Estate duties on property passing on death were also set to change; in the case of close relations (children/widow), it would be abolished but replaced by the taxation of the really wealthy and those who are outside the immediate family.

- 7. Farmers and Fishermen:** They acknowledged that small farmers should be aided in several ways, including better loans, and by the intervention of speculations. Fishermen should also have felt general support better through the investments in harbours and fisheries.
- 8. Local Democracy:** The new government was going to prioritise vesting the power in the people and wanted truly democratic local governments. This was designed to help end socially harmful property speculations and planning frauds.
- 9. Education:** Three targets were set as new education priorities. Consultation between the education participants (teachers, authorities, students, parents) was encouraged, just like creating an independent educational body responsible for examinations and courses. Third, policies would start following the idea that the Irish language and culture should be respected and promoted.
- 10. Status of Women:** The manifesto declared that “Legislation will be introduced to end all forms of existing discrimination against women.”
- 11. Broadcasting:** The government wanted to provide a broader media spectrum (TV channel, local radio, etc.) to the Irish population.
- 12. Tourism:** The government promised to create and carry out a new dynamic tourism programme.
- 13. European Communities:** The parties aimed to represent Irish interests in the European Communities, especially in two ways. First, to help democratise its institutions, and second, to reach a regional development programme that would foster the growth of underdeveloped Irish regions.
- 14. A New Beginning:** The policy priorities mentioned above constituted the basis of the legislative process of the National Coalition Government. The parties recognised “the implementation of these proposals will transform Ireland into a modern progressive society based on social justice.”⁵

After taking a glance at the 14-points programme, it is clear that the Fine Gael-Labour coalition – beyond pointing out the failures of the governing Fianna Fáil – agreed on a

short but general programme that contained their central commitments, including the longing for social justice. Although emphasising the Christian democratic character of the Fine Gael became more frequent later, around the millennium – and the evaluation of “Christian democracy” is not the purpose of the article – it could be argued that some traditional values (e.g., subsidiarity, solidarism, cooperation) are present in the manifesto.

Programme for Government: Our Shared Future

Currently, at the beginning of the 2020s, Fine Gael treats itself as the “party of the progressive centre”, which, even though it emphasises that it acts “in a way that is right for Ireland, regardless of dogma or ideology”, wishes to base its policies and ideas for the future of Ireland on core beliefs. Based on the official website, these beliefs are equality of opportunity, enterprise and reward, security, integrity, hope, personal liberty, protecting the environment, and compassion.⁶

In the 2020 general elections, even though Sinn Féin gained most of the votes, the coalition government was set up between – the ancestral rivals – Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in addition to The Greens. The output of the bargaining process made by these three parties became the *Programme for Government: Our Shared Future*. Two additional notes must be made before summarising the document's most significant priorities and policies. First, the government programme – including some intentionally blank sheets – is 126 pages long. Consequently, only a summary can be provided on the primary emphases. Second, the economic and social context, or, in other words, the genesis of the programme, is the COVID-19 situation and climate change. Beyond trying to find specific answers for specific Irish problems, the coalition parties ambition to face these two global issues and their Irish consequences.

- 1. A Better Quality of Life for All:** One of the central ideas of the government programme – a notion which is present throughout the whole document – is that human well-being, or in other words, the quality of life, is not just an economic issue. It is a more complex phenomenon that includes – among others – housing, education, and health. Also, it should be measured in a new way and taken as a basis for debates and a starting point of policies. Some of the actions that could help foster a better quality of life include a National Clean-Air

Strategy, better work-life balance, and radical changes in transport like cycling policy, public transport, and decarbonisation. The emphasis on rural connections and town centre development for rural areas shows that the “for All” part of the sentence is a crucial one.

- 2. Reigniting and Renewing the Economy:** After the COVID-19 crisis, restarting the economy is imagined as an employment driven recovery that includes support for the small and medium-sized enterprises (for instance, in the form of tax exceptions, cooperation, and training). It is also argued that this situation can lead to more radical changes in the economy concerning digitalisation, the introduction of sustainability aspects, and green solutions. The document emphasises the importance of reskilling, investment, and the will to aid those sectors which suffered the most under the COVID-19, such as tourism. As a strategic issue for an island, aviation and ports are also mentioned.
- 3. A Green New Deal:** The government programme claims that the climate and biodiversity crisis threatens the future. To lessen the human impact on the Earth, carbon emissions should be halved in the next decade, which means a 7% reduction per year. The ultimate goal is to be net-zero by 2050. The Green New Deal is not just an initiative for several sporadic policy actions (like electrification, digitalisation, automatisisation, research, greener houses, preservation of water); it is rather a new system (with plans, strategies, know-how, boards, etc.) that aspires to face the climate change, which is called “the single greatest threat facing humanity”. As a socially sensitive argument, the documents underline that the transition must be just.
- 4. Universal Healthcare:** Again, universal healthcare is not just a catchword; in the chapter on the topic, numerous priorities and promises are set. Still, the genesis is again COVID-19 and its lessons. The healthcare system in Ireland should prepare for new waves and apply innovative e-Health solutions. Moreover, there is an ambition for an increased capacity and affordable, patient-centred healthcare. Women's health is strongly emphasised in the document. The state also has a significant role in promoting good health, which is another factor for a better quality of life. Vulnerable groups should be protected.

Regarding drugs misuse, a health-led approach should be followed; it should be treated as a public health issue rather than solely as a criminal issue.

- 5. Housing For All:** As housing is a significant factor in living a quality life, housing policies should be taken seriously. The document highlights the state's fundamental role in housing and calls the solution of homelessness a major priority. Inhabitants should be supported by affordable home ownership, state-funded housebuilding for social uses, and controlled rental policies.
- 6. Balanced Regional Development:** The economic output is not an end; it is a means to provide decent life, which should be available everywhere in the country from urban to rural areas – begins this chapter. Agriculture and food production are treated as crucial industries that the state should support in many forms, including CAP (Common Agricultural Policy of the EU) negotiations, increased farmers' income, support of young farmers (trained with new knowledge), and trade and market negotiations. Domestic food chains and the remaining export orientation of agriculture should be the focus of policies. In the second part of this chapter, traditional Irish national topics (like fishing industry, marine life, horse, and greyhound racing) and new, novel ideas (for instance, the aim to minimise food waste in school, the promotion of school gardening, the protection of soil health) are present.
- 7. A New Social Contract:** The government articulates the need for a new national social contract and the safety for all to have the possibility to fulfil everyone's potential. As it expresses, equality between all citizens is a core guiding principle of the Republic. This means that fundamental rights should be protected, just like marginalised groups and minorities. Concerning immigration and integration, regulations should be brought to fight against racism, smuggling, and trafficking migrants. LGBTI+ strategy needs to be implemented, male same-sex adoptive couple benefits should be introduced, and conversion therapy should be banned. Gender equality and gender recognition are objectives; correct pronouns should be promoted to assist non-binary people. The document directly highlights children's welfare, the elimination of children's poverty, and the importance of early childhood, which should be aided by

supporting parents, families, and flexible childcare solutions. It also promotes an examination of the possibility of a universal basic income.

- 8. Stronger and Safer Communities:** Order necessitates efficient and visible police, which can fight against white-collar crime, hate crimes, sexual and gender-based violence, and online violations effectively. Prison and penal reforms are also necessary. However, for a strong community, it is not enough; diverse, independent arts and culture should be widely accessible. This broad spectrum of arts and culture includes the whole media system, the built heritage, the Gaeilge language, sports, cultural and local institutions like libraries, schools, and charities.
- 9. Better Opportunities Through Education and Research:** The government's vision is to have a world-class education built on the ground of excellence, inclusion, and sustainability. Naturally, priorities differ based on whether the focus is on primary and post-primary schools or higher education. The first one is crucial for social equality, and this is a place for digitalisation and the learning of new skills (critical thinking, problem-solving). LGBTI+ issues should be handled age-appropriately, plurality and tolerance should be ensured, and all religions should have access to education. Irish language and history are priorities. Meanwhile, higher education is an investment in the future and has a vital role in the economy and research. More access should be given to higher education with a focus on students' material and psychological support. Still, lifelong learning and apprenticeship should be used as efficient measures for jobseekers.
- 10. Mission: A Shared Island:** The governing parties wish to keep themselves to the Good Friday Agreement and peaceful co-existence. Cooperation should be preserved both in North-South relations and with the United Kingdom. In the new situation caused by Brexit new arrangements should be introduced that follow the Irish interests (fishing, transport, trade/market).
- 11. At the Heart of Europe and Global Citizenship:** Ireland is a devoted participant of the European project, a part of the European home with all its founding ethos, including democracy, peace, solidarity, cooperation, the rule of law, and human rights. The governing parties are pro-enlargement and would

like to see a proactive EU that fosters peace in the Middle East and an EU-Africa deal. Causes of migration should be dealt with, and refugee camps' conditions need to be improved. Moreover, Ireland is also treated as an island in the centre of the world with solid values and a strong, connected economy. United Nations values and projects, humanitarian actions, and the promotion of human rights through business practices are encouraged by the government. Ireland is proud of its armed forces and would like to maintain a good relationship with other countries (like the US) and the Irish diaspora.

12. Reforming and Reimagining Our Public Life: Local governments should have more power; the direct election of mayors could facilitate this process, just like more services and plebiscites could be promoted on these lower levels. The document expresses several areas (electoral, Oireachtas/parliamentary, constitutional, public sector) where reforms are necessary; most aim to add a slight renewal to the institutions. Media here is understood as an essential public service for democracy and cultural development that needs to be diverse but controlled as well (like regulating influencers and taking care of data protection). The last part of the document is the system in which the coalition parties would work; it is called the “Functioning Government” part. The central arrangements are set, like the way of government formation, rotation of Taoiseach and Tánaiste (deputy prime minister), the establishment of committees, departments, and the implementation of the common programme.

In short, on the one hand, the document, in general, leaves political room for manoeuvre, but on the other, it is very specific. It is very policy-based; it mentions – among others – models (for instance, the Danish model for emissions, the Vienna model for rents), names specific commissions and boards, expects to have distinct plans, sets time frames. This, altogether, seems to be very professional, sometimes with creative and innovative solutions (like appointing bike officials or night mayors). Yet, it could be argued that values are more of a progressive centre than Christian democracy.

Conclusion

This article aimed to examine the similarities and differences of a “new” and an “old” government programme of a Christian democratic political party, the Irish Fine Gael. The most visible difference was the length; the “14-point programme” from 1973 was around 1-2 A4 pages, while the *Programme for Government: Our Shared Future* was 126 pages. Partly this, and the different economic, social, political, and cultural environment results in a conclusion that the new government programme contains numerous new topics (like climate change, inclusion in world politics, drugs, migration, LGBTI+). Third, the current government programme is much more specific. The reader might sometimes feel that this document is more like a professional company’s business plan than a political manifesto. Fourth, while the old programme’s central idea is social justice, the new one’s is quality of life. Fifth, while it could be argued that the old programme represents some Christian democratic values, the new one is closer to the progressive centre.

Naturally, there were similarities as well. Both programmes point out a wide range of areas where governmental politics should have a role; they are products of catch-all politics. Second, there are traditional issues that are present in both government programmes, among others: housing plans, rural development issues, fishermen’s cases, women’s rights, the promotion of local governments, the representation of Irish interests in Europe, the promotion of Irish language, history, and culture. Third, both programmes were the product of the arrangements with the coalition partners (though with different parties). Therefore, it would be false to think that only Fine Gael values appear in the programmes. Still, it is argued that the analysis and the conclusions above could lead to exciting and fruitful conclusions regarding Irish and Christian democratic party politics.

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