

**An Exploration of the Political Brand
Image of Fine Gael from the Perspective
of Irish Voters Through the Use of
Qualitative Projective Techniques**

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Submitted to the National College of Ireland,

September, 2019.

Abstract

Since the 2011 Irish General Election, Fine Gael has been the governing party of Ireland and, in terms of members of the Oireachtas and European Parliament, has been the largest party. During this time, the Irish political landscape has experienced a number of socially-progressive milestones, indicative of the changing demographics and political beliefs in post-recession Ireland. Through the use of qualitative projective techniques, this research seeks to explore the current political brand image of Fine Gael from the perspective of Irish voters. Projective techniques can be used to provide an in-depth understanding deep-seated feelings and underlying attitudes of voters towards political brands. This understanding is important, as political brands can offer an inherent strength electorally due to their ability to produce simple, credible, salient and long-standing voter signals, and to encourage consistency in voting decisions. This research takes a holistic viewpoint of the political brand that encompasses the three elements of the party leader, political party, and party policies. Firstly, this research interprets existing branding theory, and its implications towards the study of branding in political contexts. This is followed by a review of existing political branding literature. This is followed by an outline of the research approach, which includes a review of projective techniques and their applicability to this research. Key findings are then presented, followed by a discussion on the political brand image of Fine Gael. The conclusion lays out the implications and limitations of this research, and potential areas for further research.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to extend my sincerest gratitude to my dissertation supervisor, Robert MacDonald. Your guidance and assistance throughout this process was greatly valued.

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1. Introduction

The marketing effects of a brand can be defined as the unique set of outcomes that result from the marketing of a product or service due to its brand, in comparison to the results that would occur were the brand not associated with the product or service (Keller, 1993). Through branding, symbolic meaning is added to goods and services. According to Keller (2002, p151), branding principles have been applied in practically every situation in which a type of consumer choice is involved, spanning from goods and services to organisations and ideas. A brand acts as a heuristic device, symbolising a series of mental associations and values that allow a consumer to process a multitude of choices more efficiently. Recently, the brand concept has seen increasing application within a political context, due in large part to the need for political parties to differentiate themselves (Pich and Dean, 2015), and this growing need for differentiation has led to an increased interest in political branding research (French and Smith, 2010; Pich, Dean, and Punjaisri, 2014).

While there has been some discussion on the similarities between the marketing of political and commercial contexts (Kotler, 1999), there is also a wider acknowledgement of the many differences that exist between them (Henneberg, 2006; Pich and Dean, 2015), such as the impact of media and press agendas and their significant influence on public opinion (O'Shaughnessy, 2001). Indeed, there are a number of other relevant factors that must be accounted for when conceptualising the core components of a political party brand, such as the leader, its

representatives, and the policies it seeks to enact legislatively (Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy, 2007; Davies and Mian, 2010). The Irish political landscape is noteworthy in that it has been seen by some to be lacking an overarching conventional class cleavage divide between parties of the left and the right (MacDonald, Sherlock, and Hogan, 2015). Indeed, party support has been impacted by the class dimensions of voter turnout patterns, particularly in urban areas where there have been stark differences between socially deprived areas and more affluent areas (Kavanagh, 2015). However, recent developments in the Irish political landscape, such as the continued effects on the electorate of the 2008 financial crisis, and 2014's large-scale demonstrations in opposition to the proposed introduction of water charges, "may have fundamentally shifted the political equilibrium of the Irish political system," (Kavanagh, 2015) towards a system that is more aligned with the traditional European class cleavage style of party politics.

Research into political brand image remains somewhat limited (Smith and French, 2011), and there is a particular paucity of research that is focused solely on the brand image of Irish political parties. This paper intends to shed light on the interpretations of the political brand image of Fine Gael by the Irish electorate through the use of qualitative projective techniques. Fine Gael presents an interesting subject for this research due to the significant role played by the party in Irish politics since 2011, as the largest party in the state, governing the country during a period of particular economic and political volatility (Kavanagh, 2015). Fine Gael

has never been successful in mirroring the “catch-all” nature of Fianna Fáil support from different class groupings (Kavanagh, 2015). Formed in 1933, Fine Gael has traditionally been seen as a centre-right, socially conservative party (Marsh, 2008). Generally, support levels for Fine Gael among lower-income groupings have been lower when compared to support from middle to high-income groups, even during the post-recession 2011 Irish General Election (Kavanagh, 2015). The research that follows will replicate the work of Pich, Armannsdottir, and Dean (2015), who refined the use of qualitative projective techniques in the context of political brand image research. Projective techniques can uncover the underlying feelings and internal beliefs of voters towards political brand images, and can allow for a thorough assessment of how the Irish political brands are understood by the electorate. Initially, the paper will look at the prevailing theories around branding, brand image, and their relationship to political branding and political brand image. The proposed qualitative methodology will seek to explore voter understanding of the political brand image of Fine Gael.

1.1 Aims and Objectives

The central aim of this research is to explore the current political brand image of Fine Gael from the perspective of Irish voters through the use of qualitative projective techniques. There has been increasing interest in the topic of political brands in recent years. This research has been conducted in a number of different ways, ranging from cognitive mapping, the applicability of Kapferer’s (2008) brand identity prism, the use of

election case studies and qualitative projective techniques. Only some of this research has studied the political brand from the perspective of its three constituent parts, namely the political party, party leader, and party policy. In addition to this, there is limited research relating to the brand image of Irish political parties. This research seeks to address a gap in the research of Irish political branding.

1.2 Research Structure

Firstly, this research will discuss and interpret existing branding theory, and its implications towards the study of branding in political contexts. This will be followed by a review of existing political branding literature. Next the research aims and objectives are clarified, and following this the research approach is outlined, which includes a review of projective techniques and their applicability to this research. Key findings are then presented, followed by a discussion on the political brand image of Fine Gael. The conclusion lays out the implications and limitations of this research, and potential areas for further research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Increasingly, commercial branding concepts and frameworks are being applied in a political context (Lees-Marshment 2009; French & Smith 2010; Pich et al., 2015). The central belief is that consumers in the commercial context, and voters in the political context, share similarities in their affective, cognitive and behavioural responses to commercial and political brands (Peng and Hackley, 2009). This section will examine existing brand theory and research in the commercial context, and will seek to explore the use of brand theory in the political context. In particular, we will examine research relating to political brand image, and the relationship between political brand image and voter consumption of political brands.

2.2 Branding

The concept of branding has expanded far beyond the realm of the commercial enterprises for which it was initially used (Phipps, Brace-Govan, and Jevons, 2010). The American Marketing Association (2014) defines a brand as a “name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers.” Brands can simplify choice, assure the consumer of a particular level of quality, reduce associated risks for buyers, and they can inspire trust (Keller and Lehmann, 2006). Brands also play a critical role for consumers by creating a perception of differentiation between competing

offerings (Aaker, 1991). It is widely acknowledged that consumers will not just focus on rational considerations when making a purchase decision, but will also take into account their own subjective impressions and associations with regard to the relevant brands (Hofstede, Van Hoof, Walenberg and De Jong, 2007). The concept of brand positioning - developing a firm's offering and creating a brand image with the intention of occupying a distinctive place within the target market - is a key component for the implementation of a brand in competitive markets (Kotler, 2000). Cravens (2012), defines positioning as the concept of formulating the essence of a firm's offering, and communicating to consumers the ability of the organisation to meet their needs and preferences. There are numerous benefits that can be achieved through the creation of a strong brand (Hoeffler and Keller, 2003), for example **(Figure 1)**:

- Greater customer loyalty
- Strong, favourable and unique brand associations
- More favourable product or service attribute and benefit perceptions
- More favourable consumer responses to marketing efforts
- Less vulnerability to competitive forces.

However, it must also be noted that once a brand is firmly established in memory, it is difficult to change consumer associations and perceptions of the brand (Hoeffler and Keller, 2003). This means that negative

associations and perceptions may be persistent despite efforts by the brand to realign itself in consumer memory.

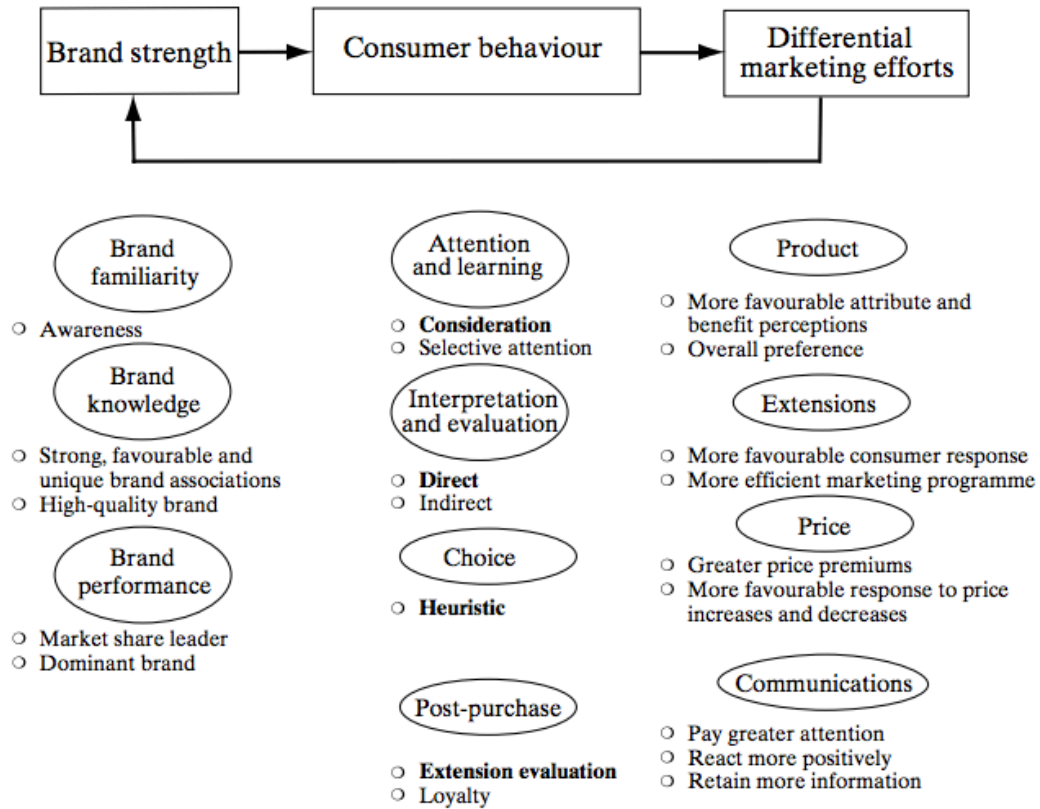


Figure 1: Brand Strength Summary (Hoeffler and Keller, 2003, p437)

2.3 Brand Image

The brand is created from the inside out, however, it is ultimately the customer that interprets the brand and determines the significance of the brand's meaning to them. Brand equity, and the intangible value that brand equity can offer, is one of the most important features of marketing for an organisation. Brand equity can be viewed as the combined marketing antecedents that are uniquely attributable to a brand, resulting in divergent outcomes in the marketing of a product or service due to its

associated brand, relative to the same product or service without the brand association attached (Keller, 1993). These perceived differences arise due to the 'value' that has been added to a product or service as a result of past investments in marketing the brand (Keller, 2009). Brand equity is comprised of both the reputation of the brand, which refers to the long-term overall impressions of the brand by consumers, and the brand image, which refers to the brand's perceived personality and the associations that are elicited by the brand in the minds of consumers (Hofstede et al., 2007).

Nandan (2005) described brand image as the perceptions, associations, and imagery ascribed to a brand by the external stakeholder. Presenting a concise and consistent brand image to a target market is fundamental to the marketing of a brand (Park, Jaworski and MacInnis, 1986).

According to Keller (1993), a positive brand image is developed by creating unique and strong brand associations in consumer memory. This is achieved through mechanisms such as advertising, marketing campaigns and other communications. Brand image is of key importance in understanding the present feelings and most-recent impressions of consumers towards a brand (de Chernatony, 1999, p173; Pich et al., 2015). In contrast to the internally created brand identity, brand image focuses on the external consumer-centric perceptions and associations of the brand. Further to this, Lassar, Mittal and Sharma (1995) argued that the social image that is associated with buying or using a particular brand was an important consideration for consumers. In order to attract

consumer preference in a saturated market, it is important that consumers can identify with the brand. This can be achieved through providing a sense of consistency for consumers in relation to the brand image and their own self-identity (Graeff, 1997). These perceptions and associations, however, are often outside of the control of the organization. Therefore, gaining an understanding of the construction of a brand's image will allow for a comparison with the aspired-to brand identity, offering greater clarity and insight into the brand.

2.4 The Political Brand

The use of the word 'brand' is becoming more frequent in discussions around politics and political marketing. Nielsen (2017), defines a political brand as "political representations that are located in a pattern, which can be identified and differentiated from other political representations." There exists debate, however, as to the appropriateness of the identification of political parties as brands. Ultimately, voters attach meaning to political parties and their symbols over time, and this offers them a heuristic device in order to differentiate between the different parties who are campaigning during an election. Within the construct of a political brand, political entities and politicians can create an authentic and credible mixture of both tangible and intangible elements in order to project an ideal image to stakeholders (Nielsen, 2017; Scammell, 2015). Successful brands offer, for example, an intangible emotional connection with consumers that goes beyond aspects of product or service functionality (Scammell, 2015). Aside from the economic and functional performance

of a brand, emotional associations are also determinants of consumer choice. These intertwined aspects of the political brand are important to understand as they represent the substantive factors that drive rational voting, such as policy proposals and record of achievement, and also the more intangible factors that drive subjective perceptions, such as credibility and leadership qualities (Scammel, 2015). For example, Peng and Hackley (2009) observed that voters placed a significant emphasis on the politician's appearance when consuming political communications. Tony Blair, they discovered, was considered to be "above average looking," and his image and persona expressed through advertising communications acted as a heuristic device for voters to positively reevaluate the credibility of the UK Labour Party (Peng and Hackley, 2009).

Through an understanding of the construction of the political brand, we can ascertain fresh insight into the party's political communication (Scammel, 2015). This can be achieved by separating the internally-created brand identity from the externally-experienced brand image (Gronroos, 2000). This distinction between the two allows us to compare the political brand's communications with voter perceptions of the brand. Political brands, however, are also subject to external forces such as representations in the media, the preferences of citizens, and cultural factors, which must be navigated by political actors through channels of brand communication. Due to the effects of these external forces, customer perceptions of a brand may be different from the intended

projections by the brand (De Chernatony, 2007, p47). Therefore, research into the associations and perceptions of the political brand held by voters should provide for greater insight and clarity into the political brand. The political brand is comprised of three distinct but interconnected components, namely the political party, party policy and party leadership (O'Shaughnessy and Henneberg, 2007; Smith and French, 2009; Davies and Mian, 2010). We must examine each of these components and their relationship to the overarching party brand if we are to understand voter perspectives of the political brand.

2.4 The Political Party

Many of the world's most successful companies such as Apple, Google and IBM are perceived as corporate brands that are valued for their intangible brand attributes rather than their individual products or services (Schroeder, 2017). In a similar manner, individual politicians and policies are viewed through the prism of the overarching corporate brands of their political parties (Phipps et al., 2010). Harrop (1990) noted the similarities between the nature of government and that of a service provider – in that it is intangible, complex, and hugely dependent on people. Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy (2007) delved further into this perspective of a political party as a service provider by defining the three components of the political service brand: the service offering is party policy; the tangible aspect of the service is the politician; and the party itself is the brand offering. Therefore, political brands can be thought of as an umbrella, under which there is a collection of connected constituent components

that must be communicated effectively. The cohesion of these separate elements is an important aspect of the political party brand offering. For example, if a party becomes disunited, or sends conflicting messages to voters, voter perceptions of party cohesion become negative and credibility is lost (Smith and French, 2009).

2.5 Party Policy

In an election, voters are selecting the political party, or service provider, that they believe to be most capable of providing these governmental services. However, the inherent complexity of political parties means that voters will heuristically determine their preference based on an overall packaged concept or message (Lock and Harris, 1996). Political parties position themselves by developing policies, and associated messaging strategies for these policies, that will resonate with target-segments of the electorate (Lees-Marshment, 2009). These party positions can evolve and change, however, based on environmental circumstances and public opinion. Here the political brand is useful in that it provides a framework through which the electorate can interpret the values, vision, and strategy for achieving the vision, of the political party (Pich et al., 2016). There is, however, a policy battle for the middle ground between large 'catch-all' parties. This has the effect of producing a general consensus among political parties pertaining to key policies (Clarke, Sanders, Stewart and Whiteley, 2011). For example, voters generally agree on policy issues relating to sustainable economic growth, and affordable and accessible health care. This means that it is not necessarily the policy that is a key

factor in voter decisions, but rather the ‘who’ and the ‘how’ in relation to the policy that matters (Clarke et al., 2011).

2.6 Party Leadership

Political parties are hierarchical structures, comprised of the leadership, elected representatives and party members. The nature of this hierarchical structure creates pressures on the development of a consistent political brand. Davies and Mian (2010) identified a close causal relationship between the party leader and the party itself, and that reputation is transferred between the two. The reputation of a leader will depend somewhat on that of the party, and conversely, as a leader’s public image oscillates, so to does the public’s perception of the organisation that is being led. Indeed, the political offering is a mixture of “personality and policy, of ideological heritage and expected competence” (O’Shaughnessy and Henneberg, 2007). The actions or words of a leader of any organisation are important both symbolically and operationally, therefore, the perception of the party leader is an important component of overall party image, and evidence suggests that the public perception of the party leader plays an integral role in electoral success (Clark et al., 2011). The party leader will often have some of the strongest, most vivid and most impactful associative meaning for a political brand, as their image and personality are more easily identifiable for voters (Schneider, 2004). This means that a change in party leadership may be a particularly effective way of affecting a political party’s brand image. However, in order for the political brand to be perceived as authentic, credible and

trustworthy, these separate, yet interconnected, components of party policy, party leader and political party should holistically provide for a clear and consistent message to voters, while avoiding ambiguity and inconsistency that will lead to feelings of detachment (Smith and French, 2009).

2.7 Political Brand Image

There has been some research into the perceptions of political brands from the perspective of voters (Smith and French, 2009; French and Smith, 2010; Davies and Mian, 2010; Phipps et al., 2010; Smith and French, 2011; Pich et al., 2015; MacDonald, Sherlock and Hogan, 2015; Pich et al., 2018). According to Smith and French (2009), it is the interaction between the party leadership, the party policies, and the party itself through which the political brand image forms in the memories of voters. This political brand image is comprised of the sum total of perceptions, imagery and associations that are perceived from the perspective of external parties to the brand (Nandan, 2005). French and Smith (2010) define the concept of the political brand from a consumer learning perspective as “an associative network of interconnected political information, held in memory and accessible when stimulated from the memory of a voter.” These individual pieces of information are known as ‘nodes’, for example, the political party may be considered as an information node to which other nodes are associated, such as party leader, and exposure to a node will act as a stimulus, which in turn will activate other political brand associations in the memories of voters

(French and Smith, 2010). Therefore, all three elements of the political brand trifecta must be taken into account in order to fully understand political brand image.

Understanding the three components of the political brand is also an important factor in maintaining a consistent and coherent political brand image in the minds of voters, managing longer-term reputation and credibility, and protecting the brand from negative associations and perceptions (Pich et al., 2018). Research into political brand image remains somewhat limited (Smith and French, 2011; Pich and Dean, 2015), in particular research that is focused solely on the brand image of Irish political parties. Smith (2001) noted that “image in politics is of critical importance,” and that research that explored, rather than measured, political brand image should be conducted going forward. Much of this existing research into political brand image, however, has been quantitative in nature and has sought to identify measurable data. Mortimore, Baines, Crawford, Worcester and Zelin (2014) observed that all voters do not evaluate political choices within the same dimensions, and that “different factors might affect different candidates differently.” This complexity and unpredictability that is inherent in voter consumption of political brands, and the contrasting meanings that are derived by voters from political brands, suggests that an in-depth exploration of perceptions, associations and imagery should be examined in future political brand image research (Mortimore et al., 2014).

3. Research Question

The central aim of this research is to explore the current political brand image of Fine Gael from the perspective of Irish voters through the use of qualitative projective techniques.

3.1 Research Objectives

Q1: What associations and perceptions do Irish voters hold in relation to the Fine Gael political brand?

Q2: What is the relationship between the perceptions and associations of the Fine Gael party, the Fine Gael leadership, and Fine Gael policy?

Q3: Does Fine Gael's brand image align with their brand identity to form a consistent and coherent brand experience?

4. Methodology

4.1 Introduction

Research relating to understanding the political brand has been conducted in a number of different ways, ranging from cognitive mapping (French and Smith, 2010; MacDonald et al., 2015; MacDonald, Sherlock and Hogan, 2018), the applicability of Kapferer's (2008) brand identity prism (Pich and Dean, 2016), the use of election case studies (Phipps et al., 2010) and projective techniques (Pich et al., 2015; Pich, Armannsdottir and Spry, 2018). Understanding political entities in terms of brands allows for the conceptualisation of political parties and politicians as cognitive structures¹ (Smith, 2001; Lees-Marshment, 2009). Only some of the existing research into political brands, however, has taken a holistic viewpoint of the political brand that encompasses all three elements of the party leader, political party, and party policies (Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy, 2007; Butler et al., 2011; Pich et al., 2015). Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy (2007) described the three components of the political offering as "a melding of personality and policy, of ideological heritage and expected competence." As this research seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the political brand image of Fine Gael, as understood by voters, all three elements of the political brand must be considered. Understanding the nature of political brands is important, as political brands have been seen to have an inherent strength due to their ability to produce simple, credible, salient

¹ Basic mental processes used to organise and understand information.

and long-standing voter signals, and to encourage consistency in voting decisions (Tomz and Sniderman, 2005). As there is limited research on the subject of Irish political brands, and less so on the subject of Irish political brand image, this research seeks provide a template for the elicitation of a unique and functional perspective of political brand image for practitioners. It also seeks to demonstrate the applicability of qualitative projective techniques for the further study of Irish political brands by academia.

4.2 Fine Gael

Fine Gael has been chosen for this study due to the significant role played by the party in Irish politics since 2011, as the largest party in the state, governing the country during a period of particular economic and political volatility (Kavanagh, 2015). Having previously spent the prior 14 years in opposition, the party also has deep links to Irish political history, dating back to the formation of the Irish State in 1922. The Irish political landscape has been described as lacking a conventional class cleavage divide between parties of the left and the right (MacDonald et al., 2015). However, following the 2011 Irish General Election, there is evidence that a defined social base of support for Fine Gael was emerging, concentrated amongst older, richer and better-educated Irish voters (Madden, 2018). Furthermore, the shifting political landscape of post-crash Ireland has seen Irish voters use electoral means to express their anger at perceived government mismanagement and policies of austerity. This has potentially further destabilized the traditional equilibrium of the

Irish political system, moving from a cleavage system dominated by Civil War politics, towards one that is more reflective of traditional European class cleavage politics (Kavanagh, 2015). It is hypothesised that these factors will contribute to the elicitation of rich imagery, associations and perceptions from research participants, expressed through the use of qualitative projective techniques. Therefore, the exploration of the Fine Gael political brand image should also contribute to the understanding of the external orientation of Irish political brands within the Irish political landscape. The successful application of qualitative projective techniques to interpret the political brand image of Fine Gael will provide scope to utilise these methods to analyse political brands in the Irish context going forward. If we are to view the political brand as encompassing the three elements of the party leader, political party, and party policies (Davies and Mian, 2010), this research should seek to explore each of these facets and their inter-relationship in the formation of a voter's perspective of the Fine Gael political brand image.

4.3 Understanding Brand Image

As we have ascertained, brands play a critical role in the marketing of products and services. The value added to a product or service by its brand is known as 'brand equity', which is comprised of its current brand image (the perceptions of, and subsequent associations held by, consumers towards a brand) and its longer-term brand reputation (consumer impressions of the brand over time). Brand image refers to the perceptions and associations that make up the external understanding of

the brand, and this concept is important, as this external understanding may be different from intended brand projections (de Chernatony, 2007, p. 47). Christodoulides and de Chernatony (2010), in their literature review of consumer based brand equity (CBBE), noted that a majority of conceptual brand research identified brand image as a core component of overall CBBE research. Much of the existing research into consumer perspectives of political brands has sought to identify accessible 'surface' interpretations of political brand image and so has often struggled to uncover some of the deep-rooted brand associations that make up the political brand image (French and Smith, 2010; Davies and Mian, 2010; Smith and French, 2011; MacDonald et al., 2015).

When researching a highly subjective concept such as brand image, open and qualitative techniques can offer greater scope to capture all of the relevant associations that consumers hold towards a particular brand, in comparison to quantitative methods such as pre-structured questionnaires (Hofstede et al., 2007). In this vein, quantitative research methods are limited in their ability to fully explore and understand the subjective nature of political brand image, suggesting that a qualitative approach, such as through the use of interviews or focus groups, may provide an opportunity to probe deeper into the underlying feelings, perceptions and beliefs of voters, in order to capture richer data, which is missing from much of the existing political branding research (Smith, 2001; Davies and Mian, 2010; French and Smith, 2010; MacDonald et al., 2015). A complication that may arise from the use of these qualitative

methods, however, is that participants may lack the necessary vocabulary or confidence in their subject knowledge to extensively articulate their views in relation to their perceptions of the brand image of a political party. Projective techniques can help to facilitate the articulation of these thoughts and feelings by encouraging participants to 'project' these internal thoughts and feelings onto external objects or people (Boddy, 2005).

4.4 Projective Techniques

Boddy (2005) defines projective techniques as a tool for facilitating "the articulation of otherwise repressed or withheld thoughts by allowing the research participant or subject to 'project' their own thoughts onto someone or something other than themselves." Projective techniques have been used in market research in a number of different situations, in addition to social and educational research (Catterall and Ibbotson, 2000). Through encouraging participants to project their thoughts and feelings onto objects, imagery or people, projective research approaches allow the researcher greater scope to explore feelings, perceptions and associations that the participant might otherwise have difficulty articulating (Boddy, 2005). They also allow participants greater scope to express themselves and overcome emotional and social barriers when compared with other methods, such as direct questioning (Branthwaite, 2002). Projective techniques are suitable for political brand image research due to their usefulness in the exploration of complex or sensitive subjects (Ramsey et al., 2004; Hofstede et al., 2007).

Projective techniques can be subdivided into five categories (Hofstede et al., 2007):

- **Association** – making connections between the research object and words, images or thoughts and feelings.
- **Completion** – completing partial sentences, stories or arguments.
- **Construction** – constructing stories, pictures, collages etc. to harness connections with the research object.
- **Choice ordering** – the ranking of product benefits.
- **Expressive** – creative activities such as role-playing, story-telling etc.

Pich et al. (2015) found that qualitative projective techniques can offer a greater understanding of deep-seated feelings and underlying attitudes of voters towards political brands. Notably, the research looked at each of the aforementioned constituent components of the political brand of the UK Conservative Party: the political party, the party leader, and party policy. The results of this research provided rich insights into the complexity, multi-faceted and sometimes contentious nature of the party, with participants revealing “in-depth and detailed imagery and perceptions” that were often unbeknownst to the participants themselves (Pich et al., 2015). Pich et al. (2015) concluded that projective techniques should be considered going forward to explore the perceptions and associations of political brand images in different settings and contexts. This paper will employ the qualitative projective techniques that were

utilised by Pich et al. (2015) with the aim of replicating the success of their results through revealing detailed insight into the brand image of the Fine Gael political brand.

Boddy (2005) argued that the reliability of projective techniques can be seen as a critical limitation in their use, and that researchers must take into consideration the impact of their own biases on the understandings generated through projective techniques. In order to ensure that participant expressions are reflective of the participant's beliefs, feelings and perceptions, and not the researcher's, triangulation, in the form of **cross-checking**, can be utilized to strengthen the reliability of findings (Boddy, 2005). Cross-checking involves the study of the entirety of a participant's expressions to ensure the consistency of themes and interpretations uncovered through the research findings. The use of cross-checking can serve to strengthen the reliability of findings and improve researcher understanding of participant's projected expressions (Branthwaite, 2002).

The validity of findings uncovered through the use of projective techniques can also be problematic for researchers (Ramsey et al., 2004; Boddy, 2005). However, the purpose of qualitative research such as projective techniques is to gain a deeper understanding of a subject rather than forming conclusive positivist generalisations (Ramsey et al., 2004). **Echoic probing**, also known as laddering, is a useful tool to further probe the "symbolism and associations" of imagery as expressed

by the individual (Branthwaite, 2002). Echoic probing is a process that involves introducing a chain of probing questions into the discussion in order to prompt the participant to elaborate further on their projected expressions (Branthwaite, 2002). The use of echoic probing can reveal strong links between imagery and feelings, and participant motivations and values (Branthwaite, 2002). Therefore, echoic probing provides further clarity on participant expressions, meaning there is less reliance on the researcher's understanding and interpretation of the participant's point of view.

4.5 Research Method

This research was undertaken with a qualitative projective approach, using a projective exercise booklet (**Appendix A**) in conjunction with in-depth one on one semi-structured interviews. This approach was chosen in order to retrieve rich and detailed information pertaining to the key brand associations that are held by voters in regards to Irish political brand images. Qualitative market research is utilised when an "in depth" understanding of consumer attitudes, behaviour and motivations is required (Barnham, 2015). A semi-structured interview format was chosen due to the subjective, private and often subconscious nature of political opinions, allowing for a flexible and interpretive approach to data collection. The use of focus groups was also considered, as utilized by Pich et al. (2015), however the availability of participants, in conjunction with time restraints relating to this research, rendered their use prohibitive.

When undertaking brand image or personality research, it is important to capture all relevant associations that consumers have with a particular brand (Hofstede et al., 2007). This can be difficult to achieve when using pre-structured questionnaires. Projective techniques allow for the uncovering and exploration of inner-thoughts, attitudes, associations and perceptions through the use of objects, imagery or associations (Hofstede et al., 2007). This method allows for subjects to express their views on the image of a particular brand in a way that may not be achievable through dialogue alone. Projective techniques can be categorised under five typologies: association, completion, construction, expressive, and choice ordering (Hofstede et al., 2007). Prior projective technique research on political brand image (Pich et al., 2015), through the use of pilot research, identified that choice ordering and expressive typologies were either irrelevant or similar to other typologies and were removed from this list, leaving the remaining typologies of association, construction and completion to be used within the projective technique exercise booklet and interview process.

4.6 Research Instrument

As previously noted, much of the existing research of political brands has been limited in its ability to fully explore the underlying perceptions and feelings of voters towards political brands (Davies & Mian, 2010; French & Smith, 2010; Smith and French 2011; MacDonald et al., 2015). This research replicated the qualitative projective techniques developed by

Pich et al. (2015) for their study of the political brand image of the UK Conservative Party. Through the use of a qualitative projective interview-based approach, there were opportunities to probe deeper into the subject of voter perceptions of Irish political brands and capture richer data, which is missing from much of the existing political branding research (Davis & Mian, 2010, MacDonald et al., 2015; Pich et al., 2018). In doing so, this research will attempt to build on the findings of previous political branding research in an Irish context (MacDonald et al., 2015; MacDonald et al., 2018).

Each interview was conducted in a quiet setting that allowed for confidential discussion. Firstly, an overview of the research project was presented to the participant, along with ethical considerations. Each participant was then presented with a projective technique exercise booklet (**Appendix A**) containing a standard set of eleven projective exercises, to complete on the instructions of the interviewer. The participant was then prompted by the interviewer to complete the booklet one activity at a time in order to capture their responses for the three aforementioned projective technique categories: association, construction, and completion (Hofstede et al., 2007; Pich et al., 2015). The projective exercises examined each of the three of the central political brand components of party leader, political party, and party policy as outlined in **Figure 2**. Participants were encouraged to annotate their projections in order to provide further clarity to their associations and illustrations. There were three periods of discussion during each interview

process, following projective exercises '2', '7' and '11', in which participants were instructed by the interviewer to reflect on and discuss their expressions for each completed exercise.

Echoic probing was employed during these discussions in order to encourage further elaboration and elicitation from participants on their projected expressions (Branthwaite, 2002). Interviews varied in length from 35 minutes to one hour and 40 minutes, depending on the time spent by the participant on their illustrated expressions, and also on the level of detail considered during each discussion period. Differing levels of participant subject knowledge and opinions relating to each topic were also reflected in differing interview lengths.

Typology	Outline	Desired Outcome
Association	<p>‘Word association’ – participants were instructed to reveal top-of-mind words associated with the Fine Gael party.</p> <p>‘Word association’: participants were instructed to reveal positive and negative top-of-mind words associated with the Fine Gael party leader, Leo Varadkar.</p>	<p>The aim was to gain an understanding of participant associations relating to the Fine Gael party.</p> <p>The aim was to gain an understanding of participant associations relating to the perceived positives and negatives of Leo Varadkar.</p>
Construction	<p>Participants were instructed to illustrate the Fine Gael party as if it were a drink, a person, a sport or a holiday destination.</p> <p>Participants were instructed to illustrate Ireland under a Fine Gael government, and Ireland if Fine Gael were not in government.</p>	<p>The aim was to explore the imagery and perceptions of voters relating to the Fine Gael party.</p> <p>The aim was to explore comparative perceptions relating to Fine Gael in terms of policy.</p>

Completion	<p>Participants were instructed to fill out a cartoon containing two stick figures, one with blank speech and thought bubbles connected; Participants were instructed to imagine that they have just been informed that Fine Gael has won/lost the next Irish General Election, and to express what they would think and/or say on hearing this news.</p>	<p>The aim was to understand the expectations and experiences of participants of the Fine Gael political brand.</p>
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Figure 2: Outline of projective techniques used (Pich et al., 2015)

4.7 Sampling Approach

This research adopted a purposive sampling approach, with a convenience sample selected. Convenience sampling, or haphazard sampling, was chosen due to practicalities of the research, such as limited resources and available time. Therefore subjects were chosen due to criteria such as ease of accessibility, availability, and willingness to participate (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2016). As these are non-probability sampling techniques, there are a number of limitations present due to the subjective nature of choosing participants, meaning that the

sample will be non-representative of the population at large (Etikan et al., 2016). In addition to this, all research participants were known to the researcher. This factor has been acknowledged during the analytical process, and care has been taken to minimise any instances of bias that may arise, such as through the use of cross-checking participant expressions and discussions for thematic consistency. In order to satisfy the central research aim of exploring the political brand image of Fine Gael, and the associated research objectives of this study, eligible Irish voters were selected as the target population and this was the key criterion of eligibility to participate. A purposive sampling effort was incorporated to select candidates from a broad generational age range, in order to capture perspectives from participants representing a cross section of age groups within the Irish electorate. It must also be noted that all participants were currently residing in Dublin, meaning there is a distinct lack of representation of perspectives from outside of Dublin. Due to the aforementioned limitations to the chosen sample, we can assume that the findings will not be representative of the population as a whole.

Participant	Political Affiliation	Gender	Age
P1	Green Party	Female	66+
P2	Green Party	Male	35-50
P3	None	Female	35-50
P4	Fine Gael	Male	66+
P5	Fine Gael	Male	18-34
P6	Fine Gael	Female	35-50
P7	Fianna Fail	Male	35-50
P8	Social Democrats	Male	35-50
P9	Green Party	Female	35-50
P10	None	Female	18-34

Figure 3: Overview of Participants

4.8 Qualitative Data Analysis

The audio of each interview was digitally recorded and then transcribed. In addition to this, the interviewer made handwritten notes during each interview to record key themes and particular points of interest. Following the transcription of all interviews, they were uploaded to the online qualitative analysis platform 'dedoose' (dedoose.com) for thematic analysis. Thematic analysis involves the systematic identification of, and organisation into themes, or patterns of meaning, across the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Each projective technique booklet was also summarised and thematically analysed in conjunction with the relevant

transcriptions. The thematic analysis of the qualitative data followed a recursive process as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), namely: familiarisation with the data; coding; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; writing up. The key themes were then defined into categories reflecting the three components of the political brand, i.e. party, leader and policy. In addition to this, findings were cross-checked to ensure consistency of themes, and to strengthen their reliability and to minimise instances of researcher bias (Boddy, 2005).

4.9 Research Timeline

Interviews were conducted during the period of July 20th to August 1st, 2019.

4.10 Research Limitations

There were a number of limitations to this research. Firstly, the proposed sample size was relatively small, so statistical outliers may add undue significance to the data collected. In addition to this, the nature of the convenience sample utilised for this research offers the challenge of inherent social stratification, therefore data cannot be seen to be representative. Also, the Dublin-centric nature of participants may provide a skewed interpretation of certain topics. Researcher bias is also a consideration, and care has been taken to be critically reflective of this and to avoid leading questions during discussions. Efforts have also been

made during the thematic analysis to ensure the utmost validity of findings. Time and participant availability were also limitations to this research, and so the use of focus groups was prohibitive. The use of an interview format is a divergence from the original research (Pich et al., 2015) from which this research strategy is derived from. Efforts have been made, as detailed in the section above, to account for these limitations. However, as the nature of this research is to examine voter understanding of political brand image, it is hypothesised that issues such as statistical relevance, while important, are not overly detrimental to the relevance of the research to both practitioners and academia.

4.11 Ethical Concerns

Participants were initially briefed on the purpose and objectives of this research, and ethical procedures were outlined prior to the beginning of each interview. Participants were then offered an opportunity to ask questions relating to the research, and informed of their data protection rights. A consent form was presented to each participant that outlined ethical considerations, and was signed by both the participant and the researcher. Interviewees will remain anonymous throughout this research process. Transcriptions were anonymised and will be retained until a date of two years from the confirmation by the exam board of results. Audio recordings will be retained until the confirmation of results by the exam board.

5. Findings

5.1 Introduction

This research aimed to explore the political brand image of Fine Gael through the use of qualitative projective techniques (Hofstede et al., 2007; Pich et al., 2015). Brand image can be defined as the perceptions, associations, and imagery that are ascribed to a brand by the consumer (Nandan, 2005). An understanding of brand image provides clarity into the present feelings and most-recent impressions of consumers towards a brand (de Chernatony, 1999, p173; Pich et al., 2015). Further to this, political brand image is defined by the interaction between the party leadership, the party policies, and the wider political party (Smith and French, 2009). This section contains the findings of this research that have been generated through the use of qualitative projective techniques, reflecting the political brand image of Fine Gael from the perspective of Irish voters. Participants completed a number of projective technique exercises within an answer booklet, as detailed in the Methodology section of this research, and these exercises were accompanied by a discussion of each projected expression. Echoic probing was utilised to prompt participants to expand further on their projected expressions to encourage discussion (Branthwaite, 2002), and interviews and questionnaires were then thematically analysed and coded (Clarke et al., 2006; Boddy, 2005). In line with the understanding that political brands are comprised of the trinity of the political party, party leader and party policy, the subsequent findings and discussion sections are separated

into these categories to reflect the conceptualised structure of the political brand (Davies and Mian, 2010; Smith and French, 2011; Pich et al., 2015).

5.2 The Fine Gael Party

In order to determine the initial perceptions and associations of voters towards the brand image of the Fine Gael party, participants were presented with the following query: “What comes to mind when you think of the Fine Gael political party?” Participants were instructed to write down any associated words that came to mind. **Figure 4** displays a representation of the common themes that arose from participants’ top-of-mind associations of the Fine Gael political party. A number of common themes were uncovered, with respondents revealing the presence of a number of strong associations with the Fine Gael party, such as conservative, Ireland’s national finances, pro-business, an increasing liberalism towards social issues, class and elitism, the farming community, and Fianna Fáil. These associations were presented with positive, neutral and negative connotations, and were further probed in order to uncover deeper meaning around the construction of these perceptions.

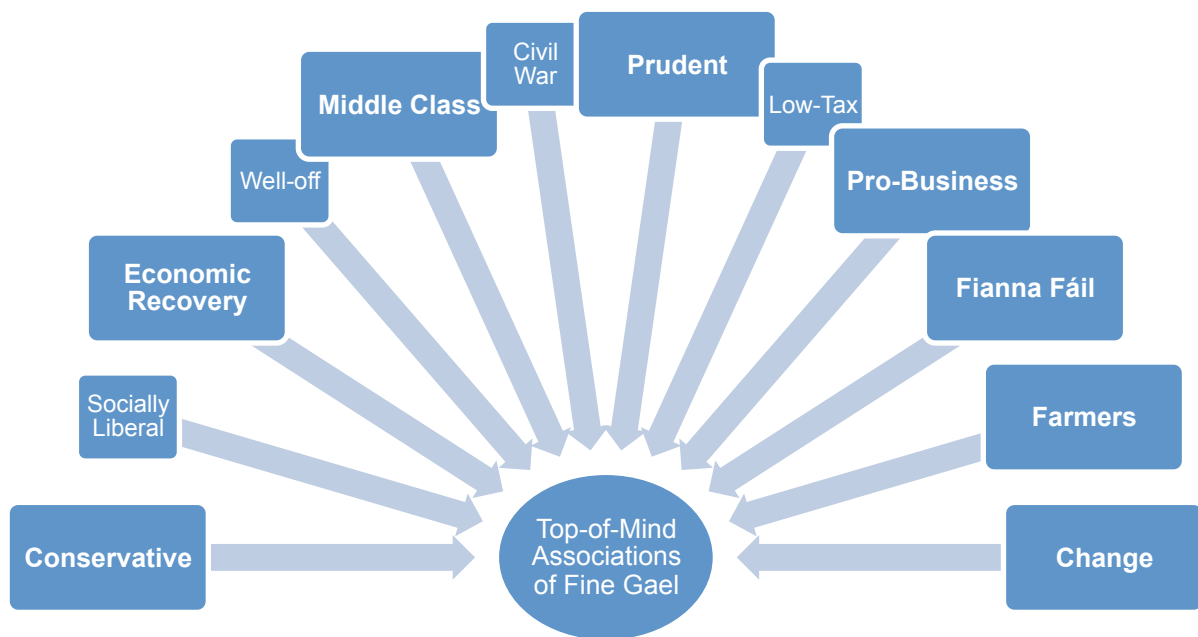


Figure 4: Top-of-Mind Associations of the Fine Gael Party

A conservative party. The word ‘conservative’ directly appeared in half of the responses – “I would always associate Fine Gael with being a fairly conservative party, and I think they are conservative in their approach” (P1) and “...they wouldn’t be the most liberal...party. I kind of think that they are conservative, or dependable” (P6). However, when probed, this associated conservatism was found to be mostly economic in its nature. When considering recent legislative acts and referenda, the conservative label became less applicable - “I suppose they’re not conservative socially because they’ve brought in things that wouldn’t be - they brought in abortion and the gay [marriage equality] referendum” (P1). “I feel like the original Fine Gael set were very traditional and conservative but...with the recent changes in legislation like gay marriage, abortion, divorce. I don’t think that any of those would have been on the cards, 10 or 15

years ago for the Fine Gael party” (P10). However, this contrast between economic conservatism and social liberalism was in many cases attributed to a changing Ireland, rather than an Ireland that is being changed by Fine Gael - “I think that there’s social change, but...they are probably just reflecting back Ireland onto itself, in that Fine Gael is changing with Ireland, and people are becoming more open minded. I don’t think they are leading the change, but they are changing with the times” (P10). Fine Gael has traditionally been seen as a centre-right, socially conservative party (Marsh et al., 2008). However during the second half of the 20th century, the traditional attitudes associated with pre-industrial Irish society, and the austere and authoritarian influence of the Catholic church, began to be eroded (Chubb, 2014). In addition to this, membership of the European Union, formerly the European Economic Community, has had a considerable ‘Europeanisation’ effect on Ireland, in particular relating to social issues such as discrimination and equality (Chubb, 2014). It is clear from participant responses that despite recent socially progressive legislative changes that have occurred in Ireland under the past two Fine Gael governments, the conservative association remains persistent in the memories of voters (Hoeffler and Keller, 2003).

Economic recovery. Top of mind associations relating to Ireland’s national finances were largely positive. In particular when these associations were juxtaposed to the past performances, or expected performances, of other political parties. Prudence was a recurring theme

in relation to this topic, with many non-Fine Gael-aligned participants revealing a degree of support towards Fine Gael's economic performance. One Fine Gael-aligned participant explained, "Fine Gael have come in...into office, after the country was in financial difficulty, most recently, after the most recent international downturn, and turned the economy around in a few years, including reducing unemployment from 16% down to about 5, which is almost 0% unemployment [in real terms] (P4). This point was reiterated by another Fine Gael-aligned participant, "They got us out of the recession [that] they inherited...they came into power at a very difficult time, and...they guided us through the toughest time in our financial history" (P5). These positive financial associations were also shared by participants aligned with other parties, "You know, it's a low bar, but they're the most work-friendly and taxpayer-friendly. They're the most pro-business, pro-entrepreneurial – I would trust them more to manage the economy than I would trust Fianna Fáil or certainly the likes of Labour, or the Greens" (P2). This points to a clear differentiation between Fine Gael and opposition parties, where associations relating to economic competence and stability denote clear differentiation between voter perceptions of the parties. Pro-business associations were also shared by a number of participants, "...they're progressive and proactive in terms of the IDA – you know when you think of the big tech companies coming in, data centers, pharmaceuticals, the big industries" (P5). Contrastingly, these strong pro-business associations with Fine Gael were also viewed in a negative light by some participants, "They tend to put business ahead of people. They tend to think and

believe that the market can solve the problems of a population if you just allow them the chance to earn money for themselves” (P7). These contrasting views reflect the complexity and unpredictability of voter perceptions of political brand (Mortimore et al., 2014). For some participants, Fine Gael’s perceived willingness to accommodate businesses, in particular large multinational businesses, created feelings of an inherent unfairness towards working people. These perceptions are consistent with Fine Gael support levels among the less-well off, which have generally been relatively poor (Kavanagh, 2015).

Class and elitism. Class was also a significant theme within participant associations, with two participants associating the words ‘middle class’ and one associating the words ‘upper-middle class’ with the Fine Gael party. The strength of these associations is an interesting finding, as class has been seen to be relatively muted in the political context for much of Ireland’s history (Kavanagh, 2015). More recently, however, opposition parties such as Sinn Fein, and high-profile left-leaning independent TDs such as Mick Wallace and Clare Daly, have shifted the class composition of support patterns in Irish politics (Kavanagh, 2015). One participant described Fine Gael as, “...very middle class, cause, almost all, certainly people I know in it are middle class – well-heeled middle class, in fact” (P1). The concept of class also presented itself in terms of elitism, with a number of participants indicating that they felt that Fine Gael were out of touch and were failing to resonate with ‘the people’. One participant explained, “...they come across as not being down with

the people or one of the people. They seem to be like a different breed” (P9). Differences between levels of support between Irish political parties have historically been observable in terms of the educational and income levels of their support base (Madden, 2018). There is generally a correlation between income, education and social class, however the relative absence of explicitly class-based politics in the Irish context (Madden, 2018) points to negative perceptions of elitism and disconnectedness being a relatively new and intangible construct that is being associated by voters with Fine Gael. There was also an element of urban versus rural in terms of perceptions of the Fine Gael party. Many participants associated the party with farmers, “I think I’d probably also associate farmers with them, again, you know they do have a strong rural base, obviously in this country” (P2). This perception aligns with the traditionally high levels of support received by Fine Gael in rural areas, in particular areas with higher numbers of large farmers (Kavanagh, 2015).

Fianna Fáil. Fianna Fáil was another recurring association, with participants viewing Fine Gael in some ways as the “anti-Fianna Fáil” (P3), while also viewing the two parties as being “inextricably linked...It’s yin and yang. A lot of the time I think their policies are fairly hard to distinguish” (P2). One Fianna Fáil-aligned participant explained that while following the post-2008 Irish economic downturn “it was very much seen at the time that they [Fine Gael] were very, very different to Fianna Fail”, however, “in reality...they’re not too much different than what I imagine Fianna Fail would have been [like in government over] the last 10

years...” (P7). This is reflective of a failure by Fine Gael to effectively differentiate itself in terms of policy, and this means that voter preference will rely on more intangible factors instead, such as perceptions relating to personality and perceived competence (Clarke et al., 2011).

Following on from the word association component, ‘construction’ projective techniques were used to uncover participants’ associations in terms of their current imagery and perceptions of the Fine Gael party (Pich et al., 2015). Participants were instructed to illustrate the Fine Gael party as if it were a person, food, drink, sport, and holiday destination, expressing each illustration and providing annotations, if required, within the appropriate section of the booklet. Following on from this activity, participants were encouraged to discuss each of their illustrations, and were then further probed to uncover the underlying feelings and perceptions that formed the basis of their illustrations. This exercise involved participants linking Fine Gael with an object or other external stimuli, in order to gather metaphorical expressions relating to party associations and perceptions. A number of common themes were identified across the five illustration categories, with a majority of these themes consistently crossing the boundaries of participants’ political alignments.

Middle class men. Participants were asked to “illustrate the Fine Gael party as if it were a person.” Interestingly, all participants illustrated the Fine Gael party as a man, “I would be more aware of the men of Fine

Gael that I hear from. And there just seems to be more of a ‘type’...And there’s certainly a commonality to the men” (P9). In many ways this results is reflective of the gender balance of the oireachtas, where there are 35 female TDs, out of 158 TDs in the Dáil, and 18 female Senators, out of 60 Senators in the Seanad (KildareStreet.com, 2019). The majority of participants also depicted this man as being “middle-aged.” Another common theme expressed by the vast majority of participants was the economic and social status of this man, being middle to upper-middle class, educated, and “well-dressed,” “...polished, smart, and presentable looking, wearing high-end tailoring” (P9 – **Figure 6**). Half of participants depicted a man in a business suit.

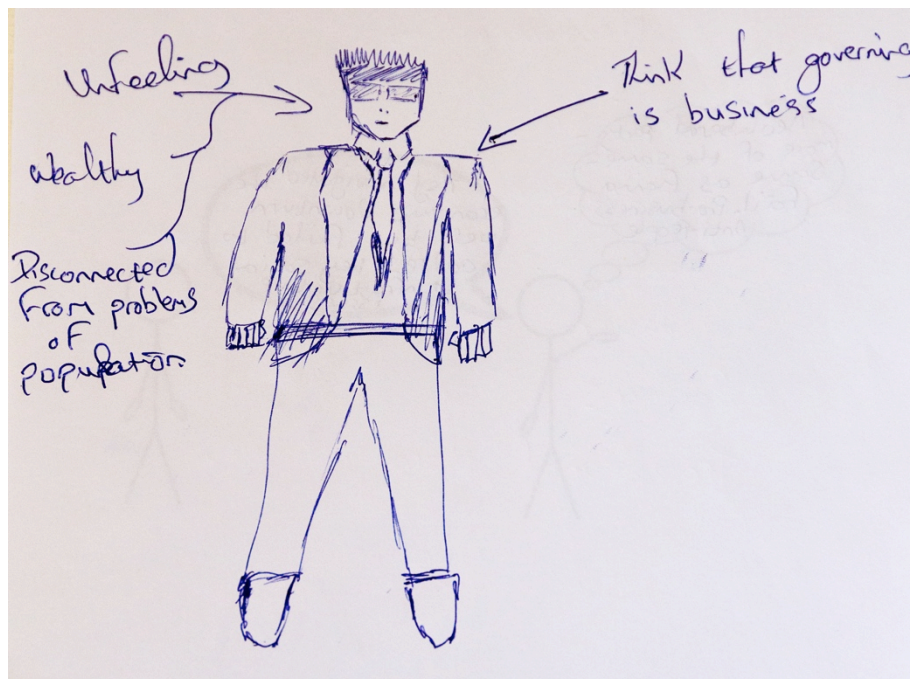


Figure 5: “Think that governing is business” - Representation of Fine Gael as a Person (P8)

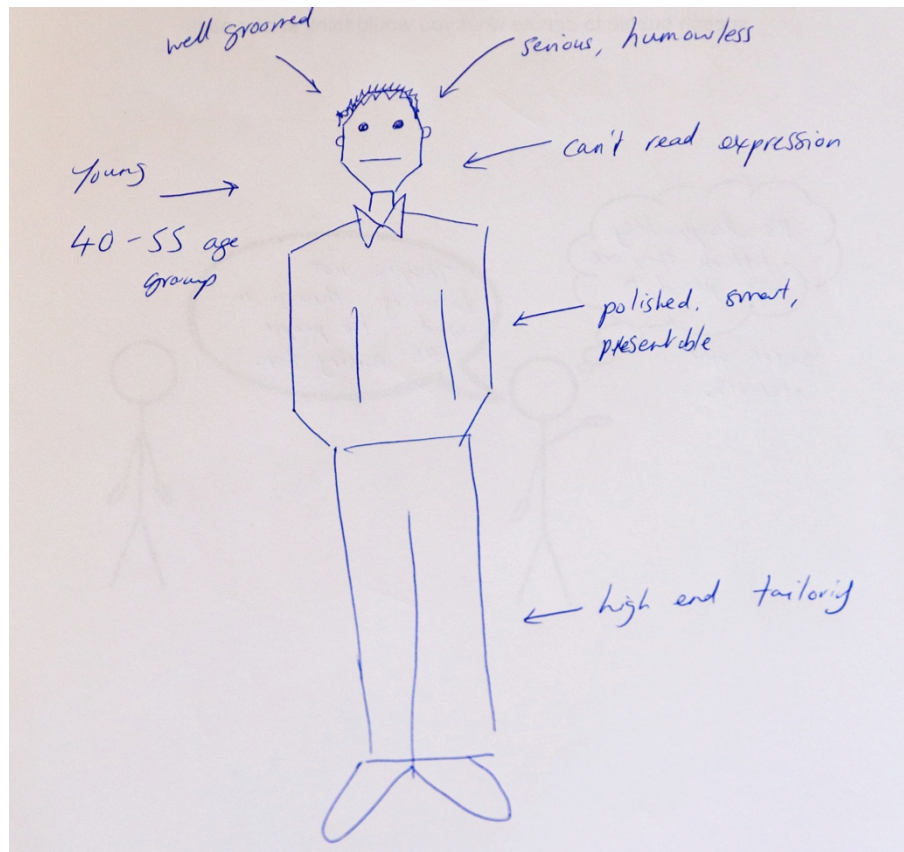


Figure 6: “Well groomed” - Representation of Fine Gael as a Person (P9)

A Fine Gael aligned participant explained, “...when I think of a typical Fine Gael person, I think of a middle aged man, who is probably middle class, medium to high earner, well educated, probably works in business” (P6). A non-Fine Gael-aligned participant offered this explanation of their illustration, “I guess Fine Gael has probably traditionally been the party of the professional classes...They’re people who...are trying to get their head down and get ahead” (P2). A number of rural and urban associations were also present, with one participant describing the person as having, “a farm tool in their hand. It tends to promote country, even though it’s based in the city – there is that kind of country element” (P5). When pressed about the origin of the person depicted, another

participant offered the following insight, “years ago I would have said he was from the farming community. But now, I would say that he’s...more a city person than a farming person. So that’s changed, because Ireland is changing from a farming to an urban society” (P4). This perception is reflective of the changing face of Irish agriculture since accession into the European Economic Community in 1973, with farm numbers dropping by 40% between 1985 and 2005 (McDonagh, Farrell, Mahon and Ryan, 2011). Fine Gael, however, still draw high levels of support in rural areas (Kavanagh, 2015). In many ways, participant associations of rural imagery with Fine Gael are still relevant, however it was clear that urban associations were more prevalent.

Inequality. These pro-business perceptions were not consistently positive, however, with one non-Fine Gael-aligned participant expressing their perception that Fine Gael, to the detriment of small to medium-sized enterprises, focuses on creating conditions “...for certain types of businesses to work. Unusually big, huge international corporate businesses” (P8). A number of participants also pointed to a lack of feeling or an inherent lack of approachability of this person. One participant explained, “...this person is serious, and humourless, and we can’t read their expression” (P9). Another described him as, “...very much like an Agent Smith [character from the film ‘The Matrix’, 1999] kind of business man, unapproachable feel to Fine Gael. They are inaccessible” (P8). There was also a perception of an inherent elitism, with one participant including a speech bubble that exclaimed, “let them eat cake.”

The participant elaborated further, “in other words, [they] don’t care about the poor people, really. Not having any empathy with people who are poor” (P1 – **Figure 7**).

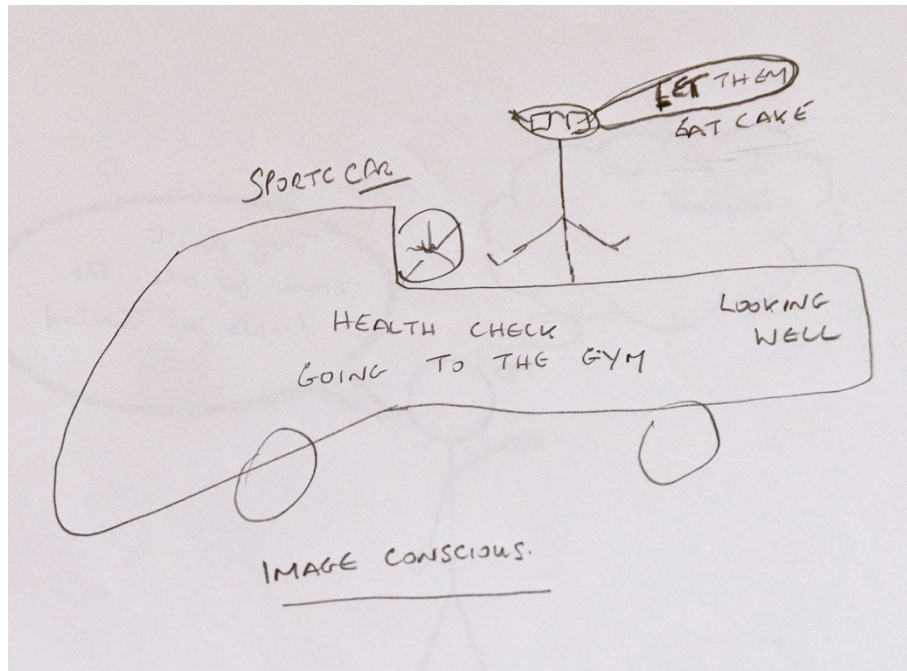


Figure 7: “Let them eat cake” – Representation of Fine Gael as a Person (P1)

Another participant pointed to a sense of inequality, describing this person’s background and identifying it as being a key factor in his economic and social success, “...he has had opportunities in life...I don’t think he’s coming from extreme poverty...I think he had a good start, and he continued on with it himself. He pursued his education and he has worked and he has acquired more things since then, but he’s coming from a good place” (P10 – **Figure 8**).

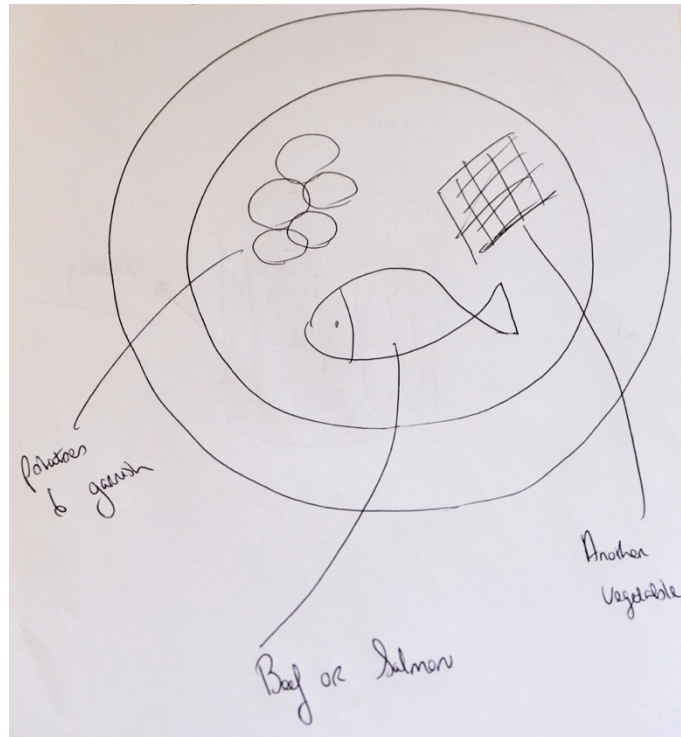


Figure 8: “He’s coming from a good place” – Representation of Fine Gael as a Person (P10)

Again, key themes of class and unfairness are present here, lending further credence to the idea of the development of class cleavage divide in politics in Ireland following the post-2008 economic downturn (Kavanagh, 2015). Furthermore, the strength and frequency of these associations points towards Fine Gael themselves as playing a key role in reinforcing these perceptions in the minds of voters. Despite some attempts to fix socially problematic issues, such as the housing crisis, this perceived lack of empathy with poorer sections of Irish society is becoming further engrained in Fine Gael’s political brand image. A recent Irish Times headline criticised “[Eoghan] Murphy’s ‘posh boy’ image,” writing – “The posh boy characterisation is self-evidently true; Murphy is

the product of a well-off, middle class household in Dublin 4, with a tradition in the law” (Leahy, 2018).

Affluent, but bland. Participants were then instructed to “illustrate the Fine Gael party as if it were a food.” A number of different foods were presented, including “meat and two veg.”, steak and chips, a side of beef, a potato, lobster and sea bass. Common themes were present across participant expressions, such as tradition and affluence, however, there was also a strong recurring theme of blandness expressed from a majority of participants. Variations of a “meat and two veg.” were illustrated by three participants, “the type of dinner you would get at a traditional Irish wedding...it’s for everyone, it’s catering to everyone’s tastes. It’s not exotic, it’s not adventurous, but a lot of people like it and it’s just a little bit more fancy...” (P10 – **Figure 9**).



**Figure 9: “The type of dinner you would get at a traditional Irish wedding”
– Representation of Fine Gael as a Food (P10)**

This was juxtaposed with three participants who pointed towards more expensive types of food, for example, one participant who illustrated a lobster elaborated on their expression, “...I do feel that they kind of represent a wealthy caste of people, kind of entitled, kind of distant...they are kind of aloof, and difficult to obtain, like a lobster” (P8 – **Figure 10**).

The word “bland” was used by a number of participants, with one participant explaining “I’d see them as quite bland, I suppose...something that’s been consistent in Ireland, like a sandwich - been there forever, different variations through time, at the end of the day it’s the same thing...” (P7).

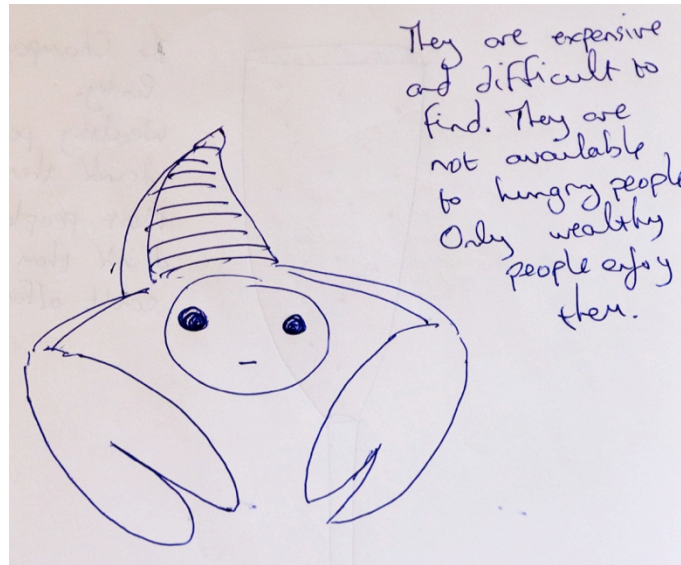


Figure 10: “Difficult to obtain, like a lobster” – Representation of Fine Gael as a Food (P8)

For some participants, this blandness stemmed from Fine Gael’s attempts to court universal appeal. One participant, who illustrated Fine Gael as a potato, provided the following insight, “I guess what I was thinking, was that in many ways Fine Gael is trying to be all things to all people. It is a centre-right party, but they do try to appeal to everybody...” (P3).

The establishment. Participants were next instructed to “illustrate the Fine Gael party as if it were a drink.” Of the drinks chosen by participants, wine, whisky and milk appeared more than once, representing common themes of affluence, tradition, and universality. When probed, half of the participants, all of whom were non-Fine Gael-aligned, made reference to the links between their choice of drink and the status of the person who it would represent. For example, one participant, who chose a gin and tonic, expressed that, “they would be in the affluent section of the

community” (P1). Another participant, offered this explanation, “...it has to be red wine...red wine generally tends to symbolise the establishment. It tends to symbolise people who are probably financially comfortable...And I think that’s kind of the natural constituency of Fine Gael” (P2 – **Figure 11**).

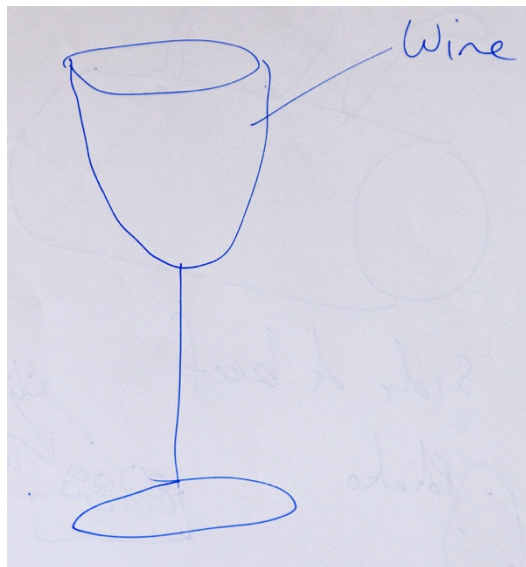


Figure 11: “Red wine generally tends to symbolise the establishment” – Representation of Fine Gael as a Drink (P2)

A participant who chose “an expensive” white wine detailed the following characteristics of the person drinking it, who they perceived to be “...sophisticated, maybe a bit pretentious or poser-ish” (P9). One participant chose champagne, because, “it’s something that wealthy people enjoy. I think they are a wealthy person’s party” (P8 – **Figure 12**). Connotations towards class were also present alongside perceptions of “tradition,” with one participant illustrating Fine Gael as “a glass of whiskey, because it’s an old traditional drink, often enjoyed by men of an upper-middle or upper-class” (P10).

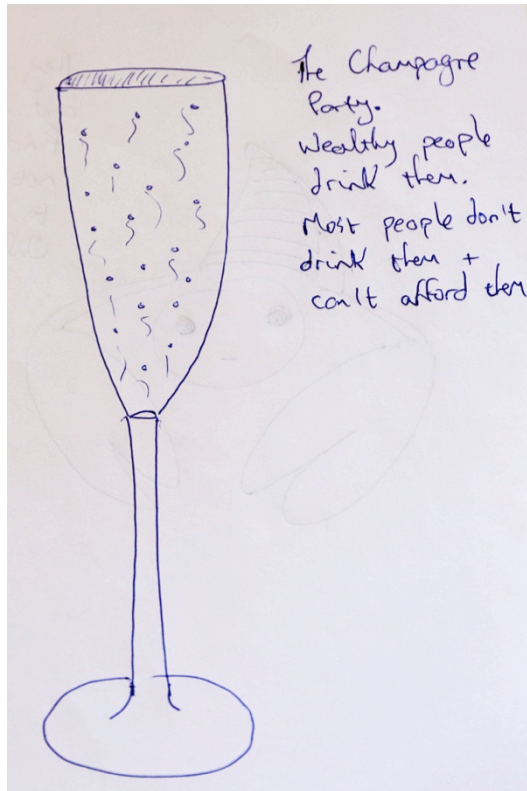


Figure 12: “Something that wealthy people enjoy” – Representation of Fine Gael as a Drink (P8)

Participants also pointed towards perceptions of universality and consistency, illustrating milk, water and “generic beer” (P6). A Fianna Fáil-aligned participant chose milk because, “it’s a solid drink, everybody needs it. It’s consistent...it doesn’t excite you too much, but at the same time you always know its there and reliable...” (P7). Another non-Fine Gael-aligned participant chose milk because it’s, “kind of the more universal. I don’t think Fine Gael is very fancy. I think it’s just plain” (P3). One Fine Gael-aligned participant chose water, because, “...it’s available everywhere...should be appealing to all...it’s life saving in certain circumstances, in other words, Fine Gael could come in a save the economy like they did after...2011” (P4). This participant elaborated further, reflecting on the recent public backlash towards the introduction

of water charges, explaining that water is, "...emotive...when water charges were introduced, it became a rallying cry against the government..." (P4).

Inclusivity and exclusivity. For the next exercise, participants were instructed to "illustrate the Fine Gael party as if it were a sport." Interestingly, of the ten participants, four chose rugby and four chose Gaelic football. Again, strong themes relating to class and affluence were present, with a majority of participants expressing projections relating to status and affluence. However, sub themes relating to perceptions of an "all-Ireland," and "more inclusive" brand image were also present. One non-Fine Gael-aligned participant chose Gaelic football as it, "...was always known as the rural sport of Ireland, [it] kind of has a foothold in every county. I see Fine Gael like that, it's popular in every pocket of the country...Fine Gael are undoubtedly Irish...The name is very symbolically Irish as well" (P7). A Fine Gael-aligned participant chose Gaelic football for similar reasons, explaining that it is "very Irish, it's an indigenous sport...I do see it as kind of an all-country party..." (P5 – **Figure 13**).

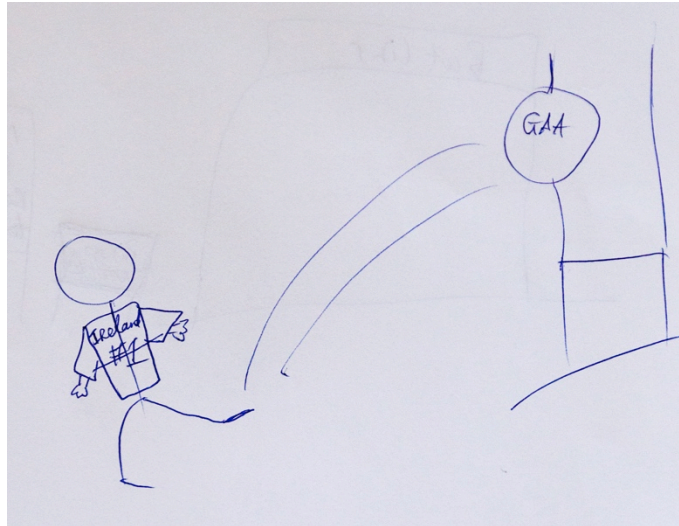


Figure 13: “Very Irish” – A Representation of Fine Gael as a Sport (P5)

One non-Fine Gael-aligned participant illustrated a rugby ball, choosing rugby due to its “inclusivity,” explaining, “I would always see Fine Gael as being a much broader church than Fianna Fáil. Of not being afraid of “English sports” – not being afraid to embrace other religions, other creeds, other beliefs. I think rugby symbolises that better than GAA definitely, or soccer, or anything like that” (P2). However, the participant also juxtaposed this inclusivity with a perception of class exclusivity, elaborating further, “there is also the element of...rugby is a niche sport, and it tends to be a niche sport of a particular socio-economic class” (P2). Each of the four participant expressions of rugby included a perception of, or reference to, class or elitism, with one participant explaining the perceived connection between Fine Gael, private education, and rugby as a sport, “...a lot of the Fine Gael party would have gone to ‘Dublin 4’ schools or the equivalent...they would be in a different social strata to poorer sections of the community” (P1). Squash and polo were also illustrated in response to the question of illustrating the Fine Gael party as

if it were a sport. Again, the perceptions were of elitism, exclusivity and wealth, for example, polo was considered to be, "...a very difficult sport for most people to play because most people don't own horses" (P8), and squash being, "associated with the higher echelons and higher earners, professional types" (P9 – **Figure 14**).

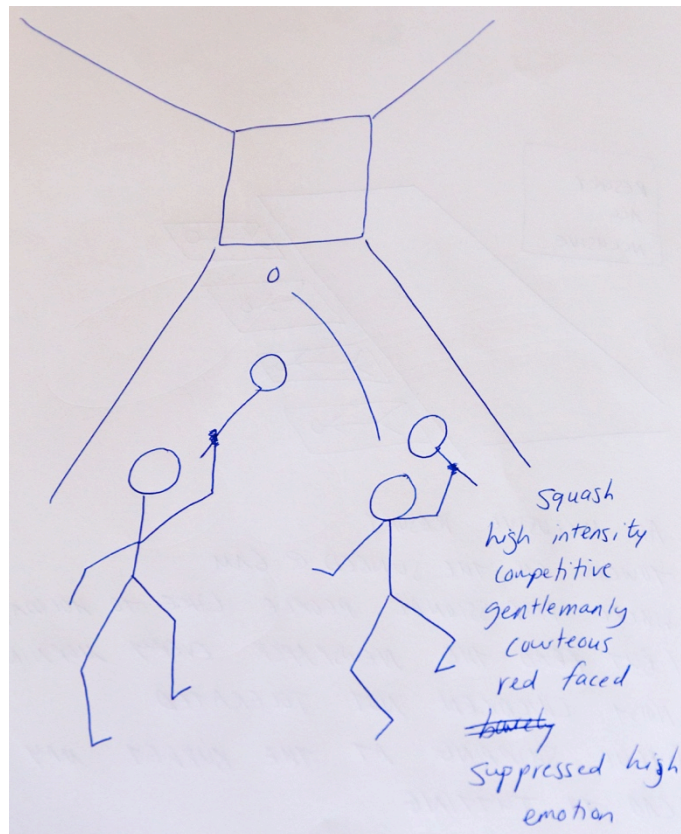


Figure 14: "Associated with the higher echelons and higher earners" – Representation of Fine Gael as a Sport (P9)

Irishness and class. Finally, participants were asked to "illustrate the Fine Gael party as if it were a holiday destination." Of the ten participants, three chose a more traditional rural Irish destination, three chose parts of France, and also chosen were Italy, Spain, Butlins, and New York. There were consistent themes of tradition, ordinariness, Irishness, social class,

and elitism. For example, one Fine Gael-aligned participant illustrated the Irish countryside, explaining its appeal, “it’s not anything out of the ordinary. It’s nice to visit, it’s nice to have a look at. It’s a safe holiday, you know what you’re going to get” (P6 – **Figure 15**).

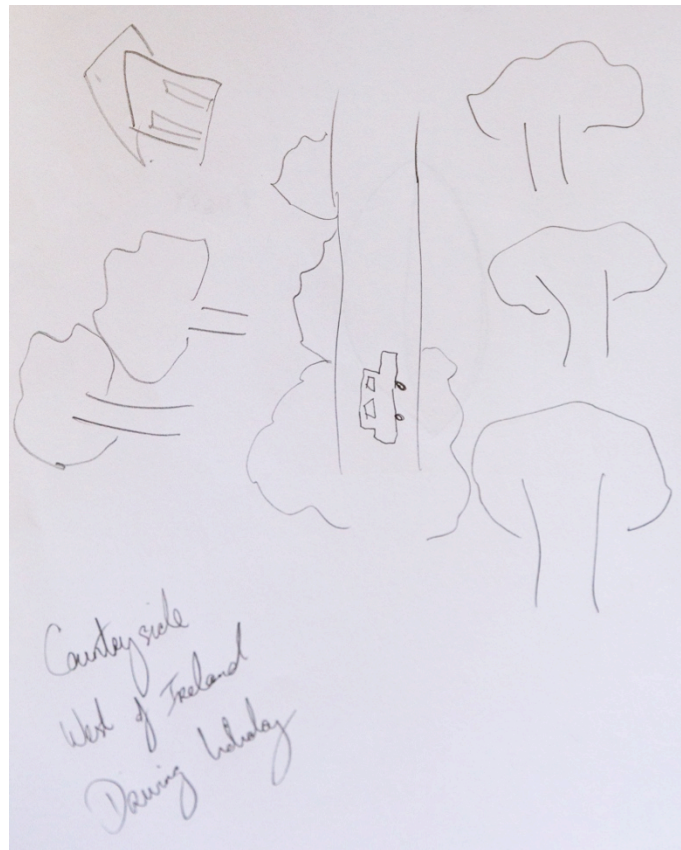


Figure 15: “It’s a safe holiday, you know what you’re going to get” – Representation of Fine Gael as a Holiday Destination (P6)

A non-Fine Gael-aligned participant elaborated on their perceptions of class, Irishness and its relationship to Fine Gael, “I think it would be...Roundwood in Galway, or somewhere like that. Where it would be effectively their kind of people transported to Galway... there’s a lot of expensive houses down there...there’s a certain type of Fine Gael person, who’s into the gaelscoileanna and all the rest of it, and I think

they're probably into the holidaying in Ireland" (P2). Similar class associations appeared in other destinations, with one person describing Italy as, "...where professional people like to go on their holidays but they'll read the newspaper every morning" (P9 – **Figure 16**).

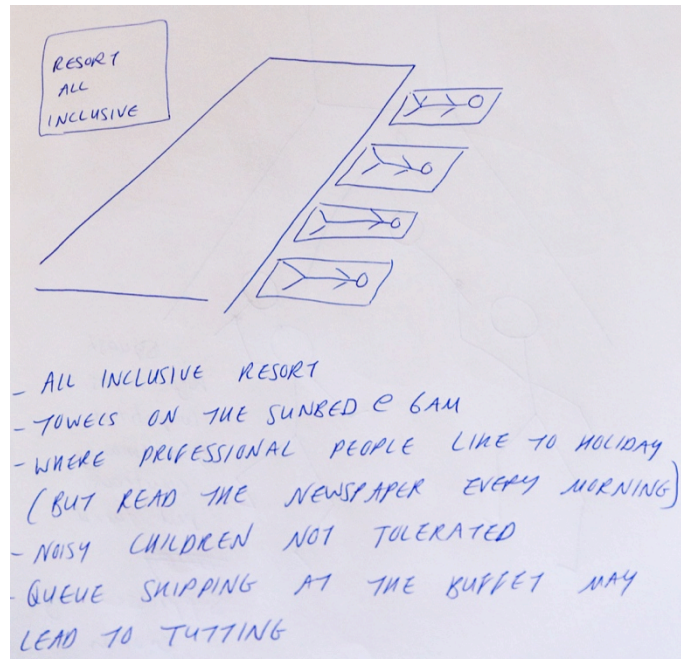


Figure 16: "Where professional people like to go on their holidays" – Representation of Fine Gael as a Holiday Destination (P9)

Perceptions of elitism were present in a number of participants' projected expressions, with one participant conveying a perception of French people as being "very image conscious...elitist" (P1). Another participant associated the south of France with class and exclusivity, and perceptions of "casino"-style international finance with Fine Gael, explaining that, "most working class Irish people, or most middle class Irish people, go to Spain on their holidays...but France is a little bit more upmarket, and Monte Carlo in particular and anywhere in the south of

France is quite exclusive...there's loads of Casinos there and it kind of reminds me of international finance and all of that sort of stuff..." (P8).

5.3 Party Leader: Leo Varadkar

In order to gain insight into the key perceptions and associations of participants towards Leo Varadkar, leader of Fine Gael, a 'word association' projective technique was employed. Participants were presented to the question, "what comes to mind when you think of Fine Gael party leader, Leo Varadkar?" They were then instructed to write down any associated words they could think of, and to categorise the associated words into columns labeled "positives" and "negatives." Participants were also instructed to provide annotations, if required. Participants were then invited to discuss their associated words with the interviewer, and responses were further probed to gain further insight into the underlying feelings, perceptions and attitudes that formed the basis of these associations. It is worth noting that there were more positive associations with Leo Varadkar than negative associations. Positive associations were also more consistently occurring than negative associations. **Figure 17** details the key positives and negatives of Leo Varadkar as identified by participants, listed from most to least frequently occurring.

Party Leader - Leo Varadkar	
<p><u>Positives</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intelligent Educated Young Good image Good looking Progressive Gay Indian (immigrant background) Good Speaker Well regarded abroad A good ambassador for Ireland Confident Honest 	<p><u>Negatives</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inexperienced Arrogant Young Lacking political judgement Poor speaker Image focused Disconnected Dismissive Poor record in government

Figure 17: Positives and negatives presented in reference to Leo Varadkar

Intelligent, good looking and progressive. There were a number of consistent themes expressed by participants of varying political alignments, across both positive and negative categories. In terms of positive associations, seven participants believed Leo Varadkar to be ‘intelligent’, ‘smart’ or ‘clever’, with a number of participants also referring to his education and status as a medical doctor. One participant explained, “he’s intelligent, like a medical doctor, somebody you can respect” (P9). Half of participants believed his relative youth to be a

positive characteristic, and half of participants also believed that his image was positive, “he has a good image, in other words he’s well known for being a young dynamic leader” (P4). Within the theme of image, a number of participants felt that he is “good looking” (P1), that he “looks well” (P4) and that he is “good on camera” (P8). A number of participants also perceived Leo Varadkar to be “progressive” (P9), “modern, forward-thinking” (P5) and “up for change” with “new ideas” (P6). These image-based perceptions are a key heuristic device for voters to positively evaluate the political party in political communications (Peng and Hackley, 2009).

A representative for modern Ireland. Another strong recurring theme was participants’ perceptions relating to Leo Varadkar’s sexuality and his family background, with many participants believing his status as an openly gay Taoiseach, who is also the son of an immigrant, was a positive representation of modern Ireland. One participant explained, “he’s different...it’s the same with the respect abroad, he’s Irish president [Taoiseach], of Indian heritage, that’s openly gay, and there’s something kind of cool about that. It’s something you’re proud of in Ireland, that you have elected somebody of that diverse of a background...really represents modern Ireland” (P7). A number of participants also felt that these characteristics made Leo Varadkar a good ambassador for Ireland, internationally. One participant elaborated on this perception, “he’s worldly, seems to have a good rapport with other world leaders like Trudeau, and other European leaders as well. There’s...comfort in that he

is representing Ireland on an international scale, and I suppose in a sense he does represent Irish people and where Irish people are at...that we're educated, we're progressive, we're not bogged down with, you know, Catholicism and the ways of the past, and outdated traditions...it's helping to break down stereotypes about what it means to be Irish and what Irish people look like and sound like and what they do" (P9). These characteristics represent key factors for developing positive subjective perceptions with voters, with participants linking Leo Varadkar's perceived likability and minority background with characteristics such as credibility and leadership abilities (Scammel, 2015).

A changing Fine Gael. There was a recurring perception expressed by participants that Leo Varadkar was representative of a changing Fine Gael, "I think there's two parts of the Fine Gael party the way I see it. There's a younger cohort...who are a bit more kind of urban maybe a little more liberal...and then I think there's the kind of traditional part of the party, which is...much more conservative, and they like the old way of doing things, like the Enda Kenny way of doing things" (P6). Another participant detailed the impact that Leo Varadkar's sexuality had on their perception of Fine Gael as a party, "it is a positive that he's a gay man, actually. He came out...I was really happy about that, because it also is indicating that Ireland is changing a lot. Fine Gael being what I would have always thought of a traditional, conservative type of party, and this young man who's a gay guy and who's doing really well in the party actually came out, and I thought this was a very very good look for Fine

Gael, I thought it was brilliant” (P8). While it was felt that Leo Varadkar was a “break from the past” (P8), there remained a lack of certainty for some participants as to how impactful this change has been to the traditional foundations of the wider Fine Gael party. As the party leader is representative of some of the strongest and most impactful brand associations (Schneider, 2004), it is clear that the leadership of Leo Varadkar has in some ways repositioned the Fine Gael political brand.

Inexperienced and arrogant. A number of these positive perceptions were also categorised as negatives by participants. For example, Leo Varadkar’s youth was also seen by participants to be a negative characteristic, in terms of his level of experience. One Fine Gael-aligned participant explained, “I think he’s immature...I think behind it all he’s lacking in, I suppose, political experience...he comes across as somebody who’s not very mature politically...I say sometimes that he acts like a transition year schoolboy. In other words, impulsive and childish. But you need more than that” (P4). A number of participants felt that Leo Varadkar was a “good speaker,” however half of participants felt that he was “gaffe-prone” (P2), “ineloquent, on occasion” (P9), prone to making “stupid statements in [the] Dáil without thinking” (P1), and subject to bouts of “verbal diarrhea” (P7). Participant’s also felt that positive perceptions of Leo Varadkar’s confidence and combative nature often crossed the line into negative perceptions. One participant elaborated on this phenomenon thusly, “I absolutely love, and I know he does, when he has a go at the Shinnars or the loopers on the left. He lives for that. That

can tip over though into his negatives, which are he can be incredibly arrogant and convinced of Leo's intelligence and superiority. He loves winding people up for no reason than to wind them up. Which is great fun, obviously, but probably not exactly leadership material" (P2).

Disengaged and disconnected. Participants also perceived Leo Varadkar to be "disengaged" (P3), or "disconnected" (P8), from the social issues that are affecting the country. One participant felt that, "we have long standing problems here, serious problems that are affecting an entire generation and...nothing. It feels like they don't care" (P8). Another participant was in agreement, describing Leo Varadkar to be, "...a bit disengaged from social issues. I think there's still a lot of urban poverty and I just don't see that registering" (P3). While many participants felt that Leo Varadkar's image was a positive, a number of participants felt that this went too far and that he was "image-obsessed" (P4) with a "PR-heavy focus" (P5). One Fine Gael-aligned participant elaborated on this perception, "he's obsessed with his own public image and that he himself is important over and above everyone else. He has a thing about his image and about how other people perceive him. So I think that's a negative, he doesn't have to be obsessed with it" (P4). There were also a number of sub-themes present in the negative associations category, for example, a number of participants briefly mentioned negative perceptions of Leo Varadkar's handling of recent scandals, such as Maria Bailey T.D. and 'Swing-gate', and a number of participants also described his past

political performance, prior to becoming Taoiseach, as being generally underwhelming.

5.4 Party Policy

In order to gain insight into participant understanding and perceptions of Fine Gael policy, 'completion' and construction projective techniques were utilised. For the 'completion' projective technique, participants were presented two "stick figures," one of which was an illustrated representation of themselves with connected thought and speech bubbles. Firstly, participants were instructed to "imagine Fine Gael has just lost the next Irish General Election," and to express their opinion, belief or feeling by filling out the thought and/or speech bubble to reflect what they might think and/or say on hearing this news. Participants were invited to discuss their expressions, and were further probed to uncover the underlying beliefs and feelings that formed the basis of these perceptions. These projected opinions, beliefs or feelings could be broadly categorised into positive, neutral and negative, and questionable expressions. It was apparent throughout the analysis of participant expressions and discussions that Fine Gael has in many ways failed to differentiate itself effectively. In addition to this, Fine Gael has in many cases failed to build positive associations on the back of hugely popular policies. This points to a particular failure for the Fine Gael political brand in the communication of their messaging strategies (Lees-Marshment, 2009).

Indifference. For example, one Fine Gael-aligned and two non-Fine Gael-aligned participants revealed a neutral expression at the prospect of Fine Gael losing the next election, expressing that they would not be surprised by such a result. A common theme throughout this exercise was participants' indifference, due to the belief that if Fine Gael were not in government, that Fianna Fáil would be, instead: "...it's probably just Fine Gael versus Fianna Fail, and it's swings and roundabouts" (P10); "more of the same, same as Fianna Fail, pro-business, anti-people" (P8 – **Figure 18**).

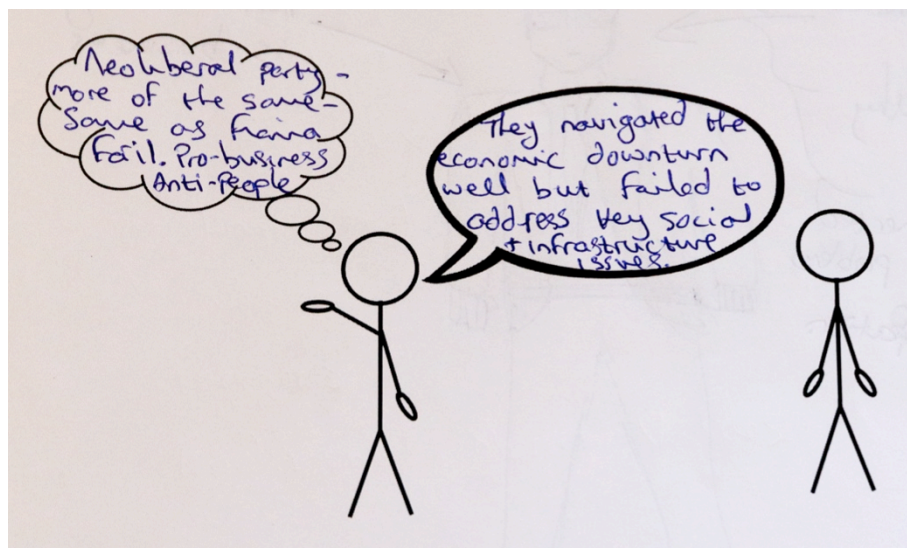


Figure 18: "More of the same, same as Fianna Fail, pro-business, anti-people" (P8)

There were also a number of questionable expressions, where participants were unsure of what future government policy would look like if Fine Gael were to lose the next Irish General Election, or what impact such a change of government would have. For example, one Fine Gael-aligned participant expressed a "hope" that the "economy is safe in new

hands and Brexit results [are] not detrimental to our interests,” and that they “hope the recovery continues and that revenue is stable” (P4 – **Figure 19**). The participant elaborated on this point when probed, reiterating the belief that, “if there’s a change of government, it would probably Fianna Fáil in some similar position with Fine Gael supporting them...in that scenario, we would hope that Fine Gael would do what Fianna Fáil are doing at the moment – support a minority FF government” (P4).

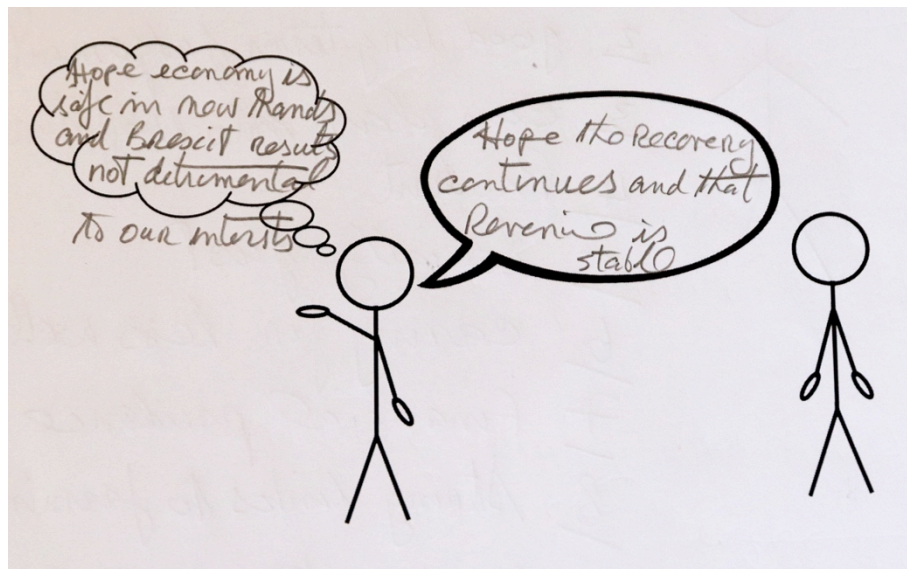


Figure 19: “Hope the recovery continues and that revenue is stable” (P4)

No credible alternative. However, a number of participants revealed negative expressions at the thought of Fine Gael losing the next election and the prospect of Fianna Fáil returning to government. These perceptions largely related to beliefs based around the national financial stability offered by a continuance of Fine Gael’s economic policy. For example, one non-Fine Gael-aligned participant expressed the following

thought, “I can’t believe people voted FF back in. People are so easily fooled and bought by what they want to hear” (P2 – **Figure 20**).

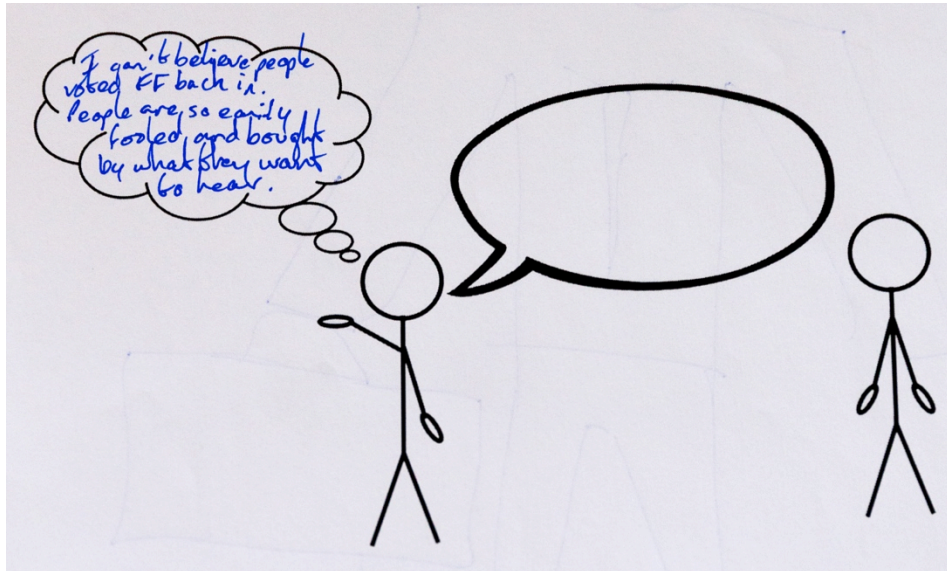


Figure 20: “I can’t believe people voted FF back in. People are so easily fooled and bought by what they want to hear” (P2)

The participant elaborated on this expression when probed, “Fine Gael are a safer pair of hands in government than Fianna Fáil are. You know, with Fianna Fáil in government, it means public finances are going to get wrecked, and they don’t give a crap about the environment, all that kind of stuff” (P2). The participant continued, saying that Fine Gael, “also then have a distinct message, which is albeit it’s hard in Ireland at the moment because of the lurch to the left and the populism...it’s hard in the current political environment, but I think they [Fine Gael] definitely have a respect for and an understanding of entrepreneurship and business that Fianna Fáil don’t have” (P2). Other non-Fine Gael-aligned participants revealed similar expressions, for example in reference to the previous Fianna Fáil government, one participant asked, “did anyone remember 2009?” (P7)

and another participant expressed the belief that a Fine Gael loss would be, "...disappointing. I think they are best placed to serve our interests" (P9).

Ineffective. Another common theme expressed by a number of participants was the perception that Fine Gael, despite perceived economic success, had not done enough to tackle key issues while in power, homelessness in particular, and that they were largely ineffective. For example, one participant expressed the view that "they're not following through on what people are asking for" (P9). A non-Fine Gael-aligned participant revealed neutral and positive expressions that they were "not devastated", and that "change can be a good thing" (P3). They further explained, "...I wouldn't be devastated because I think they are doing an okay job in government...I think some things they did like the gay marriage thing was great, the abortion thing was great..getting rid of the baptism barrier is great, but I think the...homeless crisis...they have no idea what to do with that. None. I don't think there's a huge amount of money in public services" (P3). This point was re-iterated by another non-Fine Gael-aligned participant, who expressed their belief that, "they navigated the economic downturn well, but failed to address key social and infrastructure issues" (P8). The participant further elaborated on this point when probed, articulating their belief that, "there's nearly a decade now of housing shortages, slowdowns and crises. They don't seem to have taken effective action on that at all" (P8).

For the next 'completion' technique, participants were instructed to "imagine Fine Gael has just won the next Irish General Election," and to express their opinion, belief or feeling on hearing this news. Projected expressions that were elicited from this exercise followed similar themes to the previous exercise, for example, the belief that Fine Gael are best positioned to continue to provide a stable national economy, feelings of indifference, the perceived lack of a credible alternative, and a sense of hope that they might be more effective going forward on key issues, such as homelessness, the environment and investing in infrastructure.

An economic divide. Regarding the economy, there was a clear divide between those who felt that they had directly benefited from Fine Gael's policies, with a number of non-Fine Gael-aligned participants expressing the belief that a continuance of Fine Gael's economic policies would be good for them. For example, one Fianna Fáil-aligned participant revealed the following expression, "more of the same? Good for me," explaining that the, "last four years have been good, so why would I want to change it[?]" (P7 – **Figure 21**).

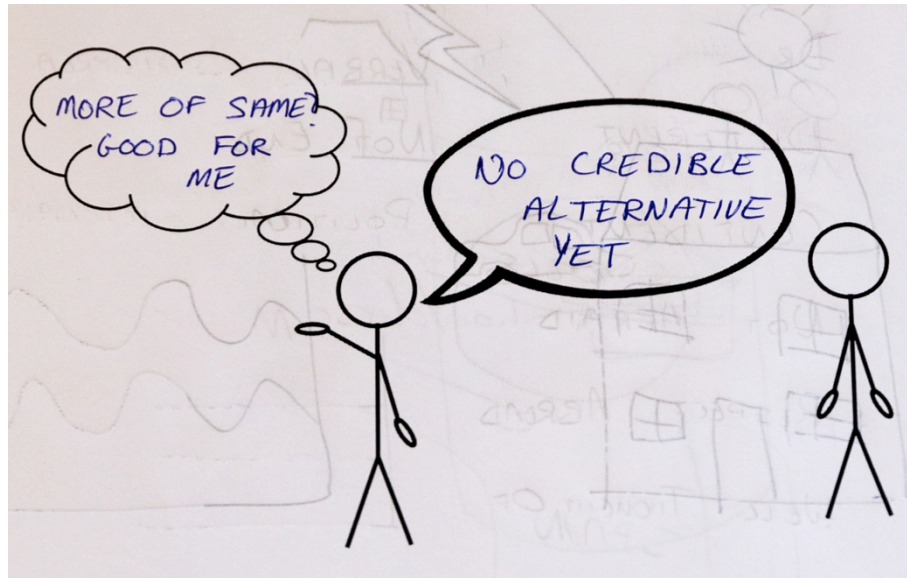


Figure 21: “more of the same? Good for me” (P7)

After further probing, this participant expressed their belief that there was “no credible alternative” to Fine Gael at this point in time. Another participant revealed, “cool. No tax rises. I already pay way too much” (P2). This participant elaborated further on this point when probed, revealing that a key contributor to this belief was a sense of distrust towards Fianna Fáil, and a perception that they would be more willing to enter into a populist, left-wing coalition, “I think the other side then would be that I’m glad Fianna Fáil weren’t in. Not so much for Fianna Fáil, but because of who they would go into power with” (P2). These economic policy perceptions were contrasted with a number of participants who felt that Fine Gael policy did not serve the interests of the of working or middle class sections of Irish society. One participant expressed that they felt that, “Ireland never changes much. Fianna Fáil & Fine Gael are the same,” and that a Fine Gael victory would lead to, “more of the same squeezed middle class. No action on key points” (P8). Another participant

expressed that they would hope that Fine Gael would, "...tackle some of the big issues like homelessness" (P1 – **Figure 22**).

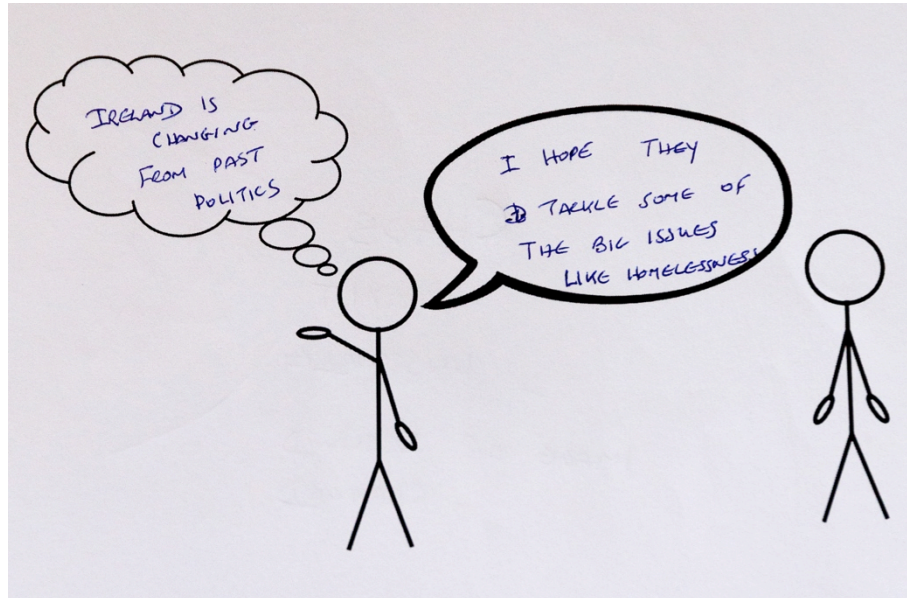


Figure 22: "I hope they tackle some of the big issues like homelessness" (P1)

However, on further probing the participant revealed that, despite their negative impression of Fine Gael policy, they perceived Fine Gael to be, "...the best of a bad lot" (P1). As well as perceptions relating to Fine Gael's economic performance, perceptions of stability and consistency were also factors when it came to Brexit. One participant expressed the belief that, "...we need that safer pair of hands. That kind of solemn, firm, consistent voice. That zero tolerance voice that we're hearing around the backstop and that kind of thing" (P9).

Further participant perceptions and expectations of Fine Gael policy were uncovered through the final 'construction' projective technique, in which

participants were instructed to illustrate Ireland as it currently looks like under a Fine Gael government, and what Ireland might look like if Fine Gael were not in government. Again, there were common themes present in the findings, such as varying economic and political stability, inequality, urban-centricity and homelessness. A number of participants expressed the belief that there would be no, or very little, difference between Ireland as it is now under a Fine Gael government and Ireland as it might be under a different government. This is reflective of the policy battle for the middle ground, and may be detrimental to the Fine Gael brand when juxtaposed with participant perceptions of an uncaring and ineffective party (Clarke et al., 2011).

Economic and political stability. Key themes for a number of participants related to perceptions of economic and political stability resulting from Fine Gael policy. Generally these perceptions were comparative, with the stability of Ireland under Fine Gael juxtaposed with perceptions of potential instability based on past experiences of Fianna Fáil and the post-2008 economic downturn. A Fianna Fail-aligned participant contrasted two illustrations of economic indicators (P7 – **Figures 23 & 24**).

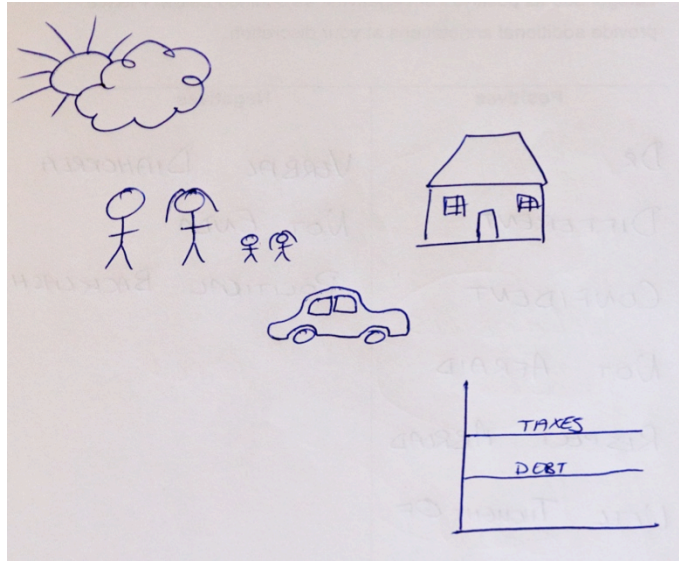


Figure 23: Stability - Ireland Under a Fine Gael Government (P7)

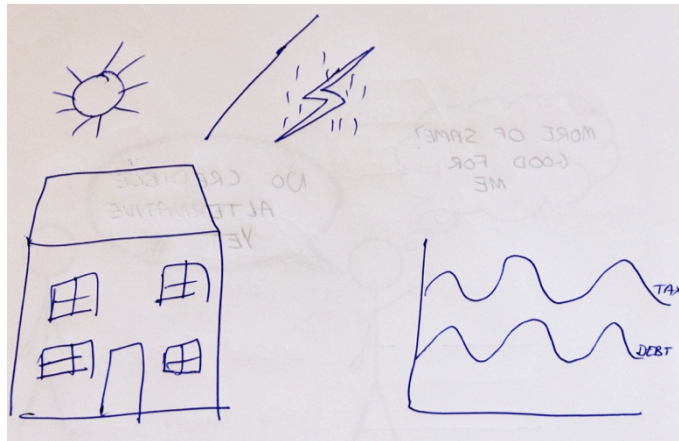


Figure 24: Instability - Ireland if Fine Gael were not in Government (P7)

Ireland under a Fine Gael government was presented as straight, consistent lines, whereas Ireland if Fine Gael were out of government was illustrated as waves of ups and downs. The participant explained, “...we know full well that...Fianna Fail...last time promised us the sun and the stars, and ended up being 15% unemployment, or whatever it was” (P7). Comparative governments were consistently projected by participants to be led by Fianna Fáil. One participant explained, “...the logical extension of Fine Gael not being in government is that Fianna Fáil

would be in government” (P2). Again, this participant expressed associations with Fianna of economic instability, explaining, “I think there would be quite a rapid deterioration in the public finances...I think FF will buy votes, and the way they buy votes is by spending money” (P2). These recurring themes demonstrate that Fine Gael policy has led to strong voter associations of economic stability, and that this is a key differentiator between Fine Gael and opposition parties, in particular Fianna Fáil, who possess overwhelmingly negative economic associations. Brexit was also referenced by a number of participants, with the cohesion presented by Fine Gael in relation to the issue defining positive participant perceptions of credibility with the brand (Smith and French, 2009). One participant expressed the perception that, “...comparatively they would be more...robust or in-charge. Competent, I suppose” (P1).

Inequality. Inequality was a recurring theme in participant expressions. For example, one participant illustrated Ireland under a Fine Gael government as a “top table up on a platform...that’s full of food and it’s opulent. There’s loads of stuff to go around and then there is a tonne of people who are just...kind of not going anywhere, not invited to the party, not living the same sort of life, not being able to get themselves a home” (P8 – **Figure 25**). However, when illustrating Ireland if Fine Gael were out of government, the exact same illustration was expressed by the participant.



Figure 25 “Most people don’t have enough to live comfortably” – Ireland Under a Fine Gael Government/Ireland if Fine Gael were not in Government (P8)

Another participant illustrated a sliding scale of happiness, with younger and poorer people being the least happy, contrasted with older and richer people being the happiest (P10 – **Figure 26**). Again, this participant expressed the same illustration for both exercises.

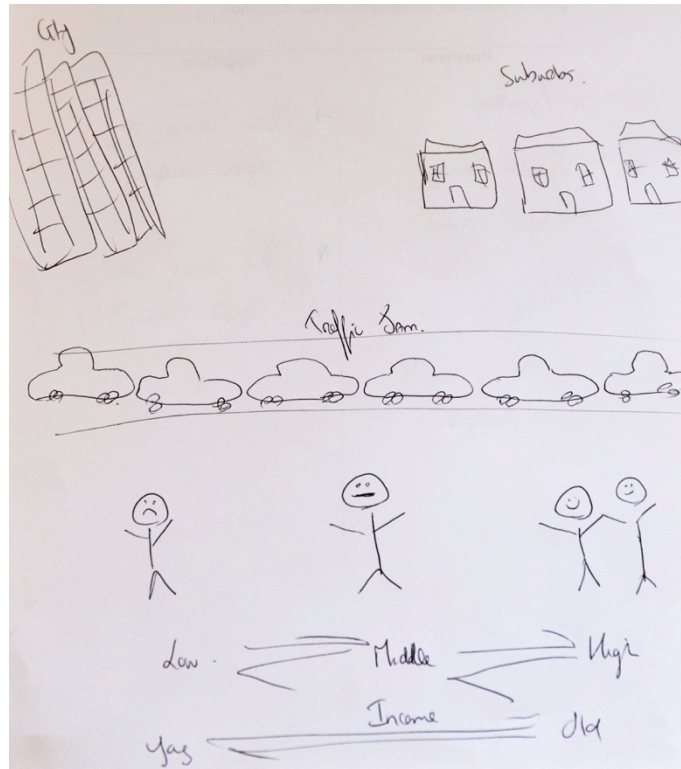


Figure 26: A sliding scale of happiness - Ireland Under a Fine Gael Government/Ireland if Fine Gael were not in Government (P10)

This sense of embedded inequality within the Irish political centre of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil was a recurring theme among participants. While this does present Fine Gael with a clear opportunity for differentiation, it shows that they have been unsuccessful, thus far, in presenting an inclusive image with regard to perceptions of their policy and its effect on people of different ages and levels of income. This lack of differentiation was also present for participants who expressed positive expressions of Ireland under a Fine Gael government. For example, one Fine Gael-aligned participant positively described Ireland under a Fine Gael government as “...progressive, liberal and open,” however saw “...very little difference” when imagining Ireland if Fine Gael were out of government (P4). According to the participant, these positive attributes

were reflective of Fine Gael “reflecting” a liberal society as opposed to “leading it” (P4). Again, this presents a challenge for Fine Gael around voter perceptions of policy effectiveness in government, and also a detrimental disconnect between positive policy associations and the Fine Gael brand.

6. Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This research aimed to explore the political brand image of Fine Gael through the use of qualitative projective techniques. On the outset of this research, a number of participants expressed the belief that they lacked inherent knowledge of Irish politics, Fine Gael or its policies. The use of projective techniques assisted in facilitating the articulation of deep-seated thoughts and feelings by encouraging participants to ‘project’ these internal thoughts and feelings onto external objects or people (Boddy, 2005). Following the exercises, in-depth perceptions and themes were revealed through echoic probing, which may not have been uncovered had a more direct research format been adopted. The findings outlined in the previous section provide detailed insight into voter perceptions of the political brand image of Fine Gael, divided into political party, party leader, and party policy (Pich et al., 2015). Butler et al. (2011) noted that tension exists between these three components of the “political product,” and that voter preferences are a result of trade-offs between them. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate the usefulness of these projective techniques to provide a thorough examination of political brand image, and their ability to uncover participants’ deep-seated opinions, beliefs and feelings (Boddy, 2005; Hofstede et al., 2007; Pich et al., 2015). The different typologies used in this study, namely ‘association’, ‘construction’ and ‘completion’, each revealed a number of strong recurring themes, perceptions and imagery. In conjunction with the use of

cross-checking during the thematic analysis (Boddy, 2005), and echoic probing (Branthwaite, 2002), the validity and reliability of the findings relating to the political brand image of Fine Gael were reinforced.

The political brand is important as it provides a framework through which the electorate can interpret the values, vision, and strategy for achieving the vision, of the political party (Pich et al., 2016). Fine Gael describes itself as “a party of the progressive centre” and presents the following as its core brand Identity (Fine Gael - ‘Our Values’, 2019):

- Equality of opportunity – to create a fair and caring society with equality of opportunity; health and education as rights
- Enterprise and reward – that government policy should reward hard work to encourage “initiative, innovation, investment and self-reliance;” to drive economic activity and create jobs
- Security – protecting citizens through law and order; strengthening families
- Integrity – promoting and upholding rights and responsibilities; ensuring Irish people live up to their responsibilities and enjoy their rights
- Hope – enhancing Ireland’s international reputation in order to “build an Ireland of excellence and ambition”; safeguarding the environment.

6.2 The Fine Gael Party

Through the use of projective techniques, this research revealed that, despite a number of participant perceptions and associations being in line with Fine Gael's espoused values, Fine Gael in many ways still failed to communicate a coherent and consistent political brand image to Irish voters. For example, Fine Gael has traditionally been seen as a centre-right, socially conservative party (Marsh, 2008). Fine Gael, however, describes itself as "a party of the progressive centre" (Fine Gael - 'Our Values', 2019). Participant expressions that were elicited by this research suggest that Fine Gael has failed to reposition itself as a progressive party in the minds of Irish voters, with many participants strongly associating the label of "conservative" with the party. While many participants were able to differentiate Fine Gael's perceived economic conservatism with the socially progressive changes that have taken place in Ireland since 2011, such as the legalisation of gay marriage in the Marriage Equality Act 2015, the removal of the "baptism barrier" for entry to Church-controlled schools in the Education Act 2018, and the removal of the constitutional ban on abortion in the Health Act 2018, it was clear that Fine Gael had failed to capitalise sufficiently, with regard to voter associations, on their progressive achievements while in government. This also reinforced the notion that historic brand perceptions and imagery can become deep-seated and difficult to change in the minds of voters (Bale, 2008)

Top of mind associations were particularly useful in revealing and understanding brand imagery, and voter feelings and attitudes (Gordon and Langmaid, 2008). Strong associations were generated with regard to the Irish economy, in particular the recovery of national finances following the 2008 global recession. These associations indicated that Fine Gael has succeeded in positively positioning the image of the party with key voter perceptions such as stability, consistency and prudence. “Pro-business” was another key component of Fine Gaels’ political brand image, however this association was somewhat controversial in that it produced both positive and negative expressions from participants. These differing perceptions of common associations reinforced the inherent complexity that is present in the measurement of political brands (Phipps et al., 2010; Pich et al., 2014). There were also recurring negative associations relating to the themes of class and elitism, which were some of the strongest and most frequently occurring associations in relation to the party. It is clear that not only has Fine Gael failed to convince voters of its core values of “equality of opportunity” and “enterprise and reward” (Fine Gael - ‘Our Values’, 2019), it has also generated significant negative associations in the minds of voters that will be difficult to change (Hoeffler and Keller, 2003).

Fine Gael was consistently represented as a middle class man in participant expressions, projecting numerous perceptions relating to the above average economic and social status that voters associate with Fine Gael, and an underlying sense of unfairness and inequality. These

participant perceptions align with past voting behaviour of the Irish electorate, with Fine Gael support concentrated among voters of higher income and higher levels of education between 2005-2015 (Madden, 2018). Many participants projected associations that Fine Gael were representative of “wealth” and “affluence,” and were perceived to be largely disconnected from the wider population. The strength of these perceptions provide an interesting assessment of the development of a class cleavage divide in Irish politics. This research found numerous recurring class related themes throughout, and there is evidence that a defined social base of support for Fine Gael is emerging, concentrated amongst older, richer and better-educated Irish voters, as noted by Madden (2018). These perceptions were juxtaposed, however, with a strong associations of ordinariness and blandness, where Fine Gael were perceived to be attempting to court universal appeal by being “all things to all people.” The recurring presence of these divergent themes revealed to a distinct lack of clarity of the Fine Gael political brand image, in particular its positioning, or lack thereof, relative to competitors, such as Fianna Fáil.

6.3 Party Leader – Leo Varadkar

The ‘word association projective’ technique highlighted a number of consistent participant associations with Leo Varadkar, which were categorised as perceived positives and negatives, and thematically analysed. Similar to the findings of French and Smith (2010), the importance of the party leader to the political brand was clear from this

research. To participants, Leo Varadkar represented a distinct, dynamic and youthful Fine Gael, and he was closely associated with growing progressive perceptions of the Fine Gael party (Rawson, 2007). In particular, his sexuality and immigrant heritage were revealed as key positive attributes, with participants from all political alignments expressing a sense of identification between perceptions of Leo Varadkar's personal characteristics and participant perceptions of contemporary Ireland. These associations are in sync with Fine Gael's espoused core value of "hope," which seeks to enhance Ireland's international reputation in order to "build an Ireland of excellence and ambition" (Fine Gael - 'Our Values', 2019). In addition to this, participants expressed positive associations relating to Leo Varadkar as a representative of Ireland, internationally. Key to this was his perceived positive relationships with, and relative status to, other world leaders, such as Justin Trudeau and Emmanuel Macron. In comparison to the previous leadership of Enda Kenny, Leo Varadkar represented a changing Fine Gael for participants. It is clear that Leo Varadkar possesses a number of unique attributes and is sufficiently differentiated in the minds of voters (Needham, 2005), which offers a distinct contrast to participant perceptions of the Fine Gael party and policy.

However, Leo Varadkar's youthfulness is also seen by participants as a negative attribute, and he is perceived by voters to be inexperienced, arrogant and disconnected. There remains a close causal relationship between perceptions of the party leadership and the political party

(Davies and Mian, 2019), and as such, many of the associations relating to elitism and inequality are attributed to both party and leader. These competing associations illustrate a lack of clarity in terms of the beliefs and direction of the Fine Gael political brand, and participants were unclear as to the relationship between perceptions of the traditional, conservative Fine Gael, and progressive, modern and dynamic perceptions of Leo Varadkar. This research uncovered that Fine Gael has come some way in repositioning its traditional conservative political brand towards one that is modern and progressive, in particular due to the youth, image and personal characteristics of Leo Varadkar. However, it is clear that these core associations relating to personality, policy, ideological heritage and expected competence are not yet fully realised in the minds of Irish voters (O'Shaughnessy and Henneberg, 2007), although this could be attributed to the relatively short length of Leo Varadkar's premiership, thus far.

6.4 Party Policy

Fine Gael party policy in many ways suffers from a lack of understanding and clarity, with participants experiencing difficulty in differentiating Fine Gael policy with competitor policy, such as that of Fianna Fáil. For many participants, it made little difference whether Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil were leading the government. As policies, and messaging strategies that are based around these policies, are key to the positioning of a political brand (Lees-Marshment, 2009), this presents a significant challenge for Fine Gael in the communication of a distinct political brand. In addition to

this, a number of participant expressions reflected key issues, such as homelessness, corporate preferential treatment, and the emergence of 'vulture funds.' This perceived failure to tackle long-standing social problems has led to strong perceptions of policy ineffectiveness, or perceptions of disengagement, signaling that many voters are dissatisfied with Fine Gael's current 'service offering' (Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy, 2007).

For many participants of varying political alignments, however, Fine Gael has cemented its reputation for economic competence, in particular when compared to competitor parties, such as Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin. Much of this was a result of retrospective perceptions and expectations of party policy (Lees-Marshment, 2009), particularly relating to Fianna Fáil and the effects on Ireland of the global recession of 2008. Fine Gael policy was also closely associated with political stability, in terms of Brexit and an increasingly volatile international political environment. For many participants, Fine Gael policy was closely associated with economic stability, however a clear divide was also apparent between those who perceived to have benefited economically over the past two Fine Gael governments, and those who perceived themselves, or others, to have suffered economically. Again, this is somewhat expected due to the higher concentration of Fine Gael voters amongst those with higher incomes (Madden, 2018). However, this is another failure of Fine Gael to convince voters of their core value of "equality of opportunity" and its espoused fairness (Fine Gael - 'Our Values', 2019). Failing to provide a

consistently clear and understandable message to voters can lead to ambiguity for a political brand, reducing its authenticity and credibility (Smith and French, 2009). This research has highlighted a number of key points where this is the case for the Fine Gael political brand.

7.0 Conclusion

This research was undertaken to explore the current brand image of Fine Gael from the perspective of Irish voters through the use of qualitative projective techniques (Pich et al., 2015). The the findings of this research revealed in-depth and detailed insight into the perceptions, beliefs and feelings of participants towards the Fine Gael political brand. In many cases, participants expressed the belief that they lacked sufficient knowledge of Fine Gael and the Irish political landscape, however the use of projective techniques enabled the researcher to uncover hidden knowledge and insight, and delve deeper into the subject matter (Ramsey et al., 2004; Boddy, 2005). This insight may have remained hidden without the use of projective techniques for this research, or if other methods of research had been employed in their absence.

This study reflected on the three components of the political brand, namely political party, party leader, and party policy (O'Shaughnessy and Henneberg, 2007; Smith and French, 2009; Davies and Mian, 2010). A number of key synergies and interactions between the three components of the Fine Gael political brand were observed, with perceptions and associations being largely transferable and complementary. However, it is also clear that there are distinct tensions that exist between each of the constituent parts of the political brand and that voter perspectives of the political brand are a result of trade-offs between them (Butler et al., 2011). The participant expressions gathered through this research served

to highlight the diverse nature and inherent complexity of political brands (Phipps et al., 2010; Pich et al., 2014).

This research also looked at the relationship between Fine Gael's internally created brand identity and the externally consumed brand image. Here a distinct lack of coherency and consistency between the two was observed in a number of areas. While some largely positive brand associations and perceptions were uncovered, such as those relating to economic and political stability, there were also a number of largely negative associations and perceptions, such as those relating to affluence and inequality. It is clear that Fine Gael policy since coming to power in 2011 has reinforced many of these brand image perceptions, both positive and negative. These factors may be detrimental to the party going forward, in particular when competing with Fianna Fáil, as both parties occupy a similar space in the centre-ground of Irish politics. It is clear that Fine Gael has also failed in a number of areas to adequately differentiate themselves during their time in power.

There are a number of limitations within this research that could be improved upon. The use of interviews instead of focus groups meant that a smaller sample size was employed than in the original research of Pich et al. (2015). Also, the nature of the convenience population sample means that elements of social stratification may be present in the results of this research. The geographic proximity of all participants to Dublin must also be taken into account when considering the findings presented.

This study, however, adds to the limited research on Irish political brands, in particular to the understanding of the three constituent components of Irish political brands. For practitioners, it presents a template for the elicitation of a unique and functional perspective of political brand image in an Irish context. For academia, it presents a demonstration of the applicability of qualitative projective techniques for the further research of Irish political brands. Political branding represents an exciting area of political marketing theory development, and further research in this area could be conducted on alternative Irish political brands to provide comparison and context to the findings of this research. In addition to this, there is scope to repeat this research in the future to compare the political brand image results of Fine Gael and generate an understanding of the longer-term Fine Gael brand reputation, i.e. brand image over time (Pich et al., 2018).

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9.0 Appendices

Appendix A: Projective Technique Exercise Booklet

Gender: Male

Female

Age: 18-34

35-50

50-65

66+

From the list below, please select the party for which you have the greatest affinity:

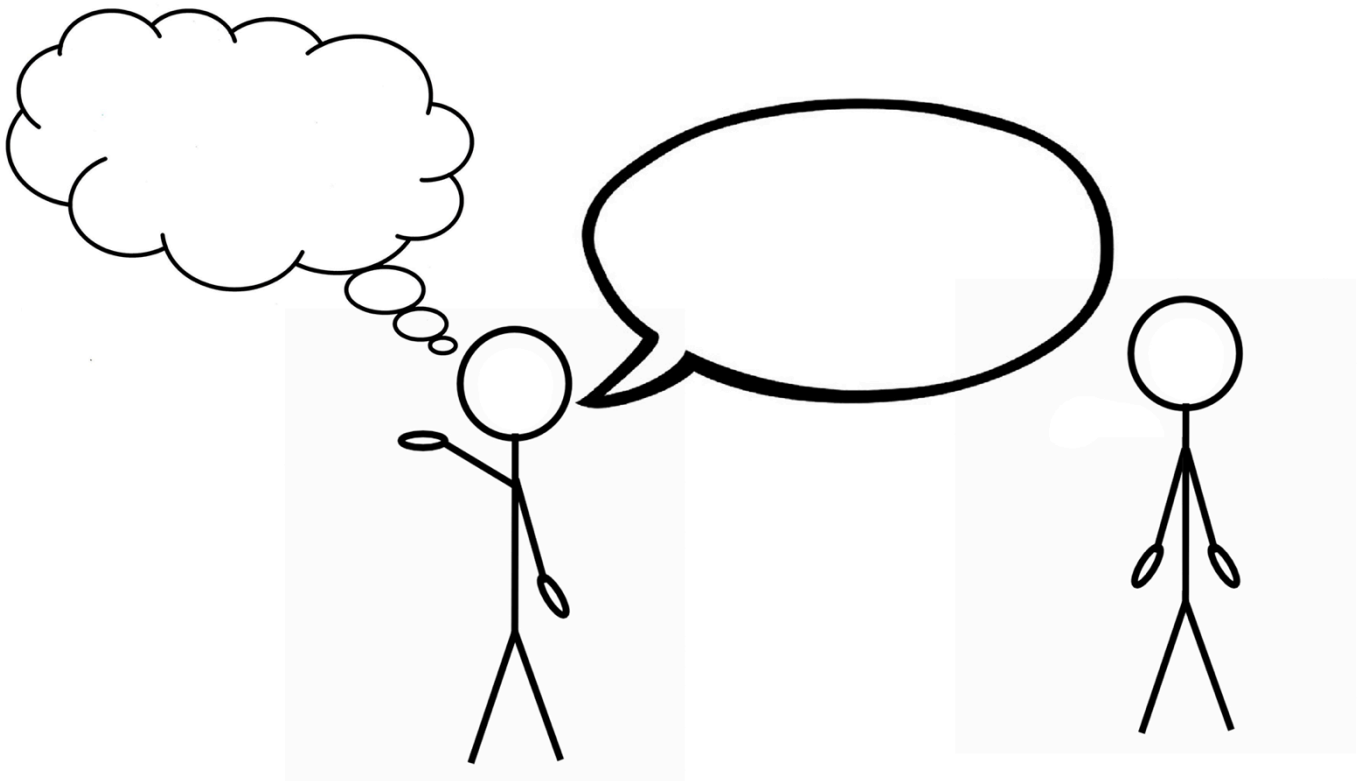
- Fine Gael
- Fianna Fáil
- Sinn Féin
- Labour
- Green Party
- Social Democrats
- Renua
- Solidarity-PBP
- Other

(Please Specify) _____

- None of the above

1. **What comes to mind when you think of the Fine Gael party?** Please write down any associated words that you think of:

2. **Imagine Fine Gael has just lost the next Irish General Election.** Please express your opinion, belief or feeling on hearing this news by filling out the thought bubble and/or the speech bubble to denote what you would think and/or say:



3. Please illustrate the Fine Gael party as if it were a **person**.
Please annotate your illustration, as required, to provide further clarity:

4. Please illustrate the Fine Gael party as if it were a **food**.
Please annotate your illustration, as required, to provide further clarity:

5. Please illustrate the Fine Gael party as if it were a **drink**. Please annotate your illustration, as required, to provide further clarity:

6. Please illustrate the Fine Gael party as if it were a **sport**.
Please annotate your illustration, as required, to provide further clarity:

7. Please illustrate the Fine Gael party as if it were a **holiday destination**. Please annotate your illustration, as required, to provide further clarity:

8. **What comes to mind when you think of Fine Gael party leader, Leo Varadkar?** Please write down any associated words you can think of. These associations should be categorised as positives or negatives, as outlined below. Please provide additional annotations at your discretion:

Positives	Negatives

9. Please illustrate Ireland under a Fine Gael government.

Please annotate your illustration as required to provide further clarity.

10. **Please illustrate what Ireland might be like if Fine Gael were out of government.** Please annotate your illustration, as required, to provide further clarity.

11. **Imagine Fine Gael has just won the next Irish General Election.** Please express your opinion, belief or feeling on hearing this news by filling out the thought bubble and/or the speech bubble to denote what you would think and/or say:

