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UNDERSTANDING IRISH ATTITUDES TO POVERTY & WEALTH

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Introduction

Inequalities in the distribution of income and wealth are a feature of all market societies. But the extent of inequality varies. Comparative studies suggest that, among the developed economies, income inequality is most pronounced in the USA and Switzerland. The distribution of income is a good deal less unequal, whether we consider market or pre-tax income on the one hand, or post-tax-and-transfer income on the other, in the Scandinavian countries, and in Japan. Ireland appears to be located among those countries with a more marked profile of inequality in the distribution of income and wealth (Atkinson, 1995; Nolan and Maitre, 2000). Moreover, income inequality in Ireland increased during the 1990s. This happened in a context of extremely rapid growth, when living standards rose for those at all income levels.

Ireland's economy recently experienced an exceptional level of economic growth and it is forecast to resume a relatively high level of growth between 2004 and 2007 (Nolan *et al*, 2002; Fitzgerald, Kearney *et al*, 2003). This has brought Ireland to a qualitatively different stage of development. However, Irish people benefited unequally from this growth. Three key indicators capture the reality of persistent inequality in this context of recently acquired prosperity. Firstly, the distribution of income between wages and profits shifted markedly towards profits; in Lane's (1998:225) succinct summary there was 'a radical factor income shift away from labour and towards capital'. The share of profits in the non-government sector of the economy rose from a quarter to one third from the late 1980s to the mid 1990s and the corresponding share of wages fell from 75 per cent to 65 per cent. Secondly, among employees there was a marked rise in earnings dispersion: the ratio of the pay of the highest paid employees to the lowest paid rose significantly from 1987 to 1997 (Barrett *et al*, 1999). Finally, relative income poverty (defined as half of average disposable income) rose during the 1990s: just under 19 per cent of households were

under the poverty line in 1994 and almost 26 per cent under the line in 2001 (Nolan *et al*, 2002:19).

Inequality is only one aspect of the Celtic Tiger story, however. While inequality rose, people at all income levels were better off in absolute terms too. Employment grew at an unprecedented rate and full employment was achieved by the end of the 1990s. Earned income also rose, and this growth in earnings, when compounded by reduced taxation, resulted in a substantial rise in disposable incomes at all levels in the income distribution. The growth in employment was not confined to part-time, atypical or unskilled work: on the contrary, a substantial element of occupational upgrading took place with an expansion in professional, managerial and ancillary employments (O'Connell, 2000). One aspect of the labour market boom was that many long-term unemployed found work, and as a result entire households in which no adults had been in work during the late 1980s and early 1990s now found employment. Women increased their participation in paid work. Over the period 1992 to 2002 the real value of the non-contributory old age pension increased by 39 per cent and of unemployment payments by 33 per cent (McCashin, 2004 forthcoming). If poverty is measured on the basis of a fixed real poverty line, then it fell very substantially from 17 per cent in 1994 to 3 per cent in 2000 (Nolan *et al*, 2002)

This paper is concerned with the attitudes of Irish people to poverty and inequality. Few members of large modern societies apart from expert analysts tend to have any clear understanding of the overall patterns of income distribution that characterize the society they live in. Notwithstanding this, the attitudes of citizens to inequalities of income and wealth may well be of considerable political interest. Citizens as voters can choose among competing policy positions and opt for those that best match their own prior perceptions, values and attitudes. But these values and attitudes are themselves shaped by features of the society around them. Comparative research evidence suggests that there are some systematic differences between countries in the preferences people evince for state intervention, which can be related to their experience of the state's role in reducing inequalities and improving social services. For example, Svalforss (1997) found that attitudes toward the politics of redistribution are patterned according to the type of welfare system they live in – attitudes are more favourable in countries in which people already experience greater

redistribution. Similarly, Rothstein (1998) found widespread support for state intervention policies among all social classes in Sweden, on a more extensive scale than in other European countries, which he attributes to widely shared positive evaluations of the Swedish welfare state. Van Oorschot and Halman (2000), analysing a wider range of countries, post-communist as well as developed market societies, found that in the market-oriented US, with its small welfare state, individualistic assessments of inequality tended to predominate. They also found differences in the association between people's attitudes to inequality and their assessment of the state's role, with higher levels of support for the welfare state in the Nordic countries where it was already generous, and lower levels in the 'Latin countries' with their less well developed welfare states.

Irish Attitudes to Poverty and Wealth

The most commonly applied framework in analysing attitudes to poverty is one that distinguishes between 'individualist' and 'societal' interpretations. Poverty, according to an individualist point of view, is caused by people's own actions and behaviour - their lack of motivation or hard work, for example. Societal perceptions attribute poverty to broad structural factors such as lack of opportunity, discrimination against particular groups, and so on. Likewise, an individualist understanding of wealth will see it as the outcome of effort and talent and hard work, while a societal attitude will ascribe it to inherited advantage or unequal access to money and influence. This individualist-societal distinction can be understood as a continuum or scale, with strongly individualist attitudes at one end of the scale and strongly societal attitudes at the other.

General features of Irish political culture might not be much help in anticipating what patterns of attitudes Irish people are likely to have. The distinction between individualist and societal interpretations tends to be associated with a left-right continuum in other countries: the left will tend to blame society for people's poverty and the right will blame poor people themselves. But attitude studies find that Irish people, when asked to place themselves on a left-right scale, cluster disproportionately toward the centre-right (Laver, 1992; Hardiman and Whelan, 1994, 1998). Support for the political left is uniquely weak in European terms (Mair, 1992; Laver, 1992, 2001). This might lead us to expect low levels of support for societal

interpretations of poverty. On the other hand, Ireland's weak left may be a poor guide to underlying social attitudes, because the two main parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, are not easy to place in left-right terms, and both tend to draw electoral support from across the social spectrum. People with societal interpretations of poverty and wealth may well be voting for parties that are not 'left' in the conventional sense.

Attachment to Catholicism has been another longstanding feature of Irish political culture. But as Tony Fahey has pointed out, Catholicism might engender quite diverse interpretations (Fahey, 1992). A traditional view grounded in notions of charity is still widely expressed in the social practice and activities of Catholic charitable organisations such as the St. Vincent de Paul. But some Catholic organisations advance distinctly radical and structural analyses of poverty. We are therefore unlikely to deduce any single *a priori* link between Catholicism and attitudes to poverty and wealth. Besides, adherence to religious practice has been in rapid decline in Ireland in recent times.

Joseph Lee (1989) identified begrudging as a central element in Irish people's sense of the social world, that is, a resentment of anyone who has achieved success and a tendency to belittle them. While based in no small measure on envy, begrudging denies the legitimacy of public approbation to successful people. This analysis clearly had a resonance in earlier decades when Ireland had a closed economy and a demographically small, culturally uniform society. This was a context in which the absolute number of opportunities for employment, social advancement and business success was small. Success for one person would mean failure for another. But the burgeoning of economic opportunity in the 1990s clearly altered the context that Lee described.

We might expect that people's attitudes would be affected to some degree not only by their objective circumstances but also by public and political discourses. Once again, we find that there is no single dominant trend in recent political debates. On the one hand, the US model of individual enterprise, low taxes, and an individualist, work-oriented philosophy was strongly supported by successive governments. On the other hand, distributive issues were kept on the policy agenda, and all governments have been committed to anti-poverty targets. More generally, revelations about political

corruption are likely to have increased scepticism about how the system works and what it takes to get ahead.

But we might well expect nevertheless that individualist and societal value-orientations could be identified in Irish society as they have been in other economically developed societies. With regard to poverty, we might distinguish between attitudes that would blame the individual on the one hand, holding that lack of enterprise or personal responsibility is at the base of their condition, and attitudes that would blame social conditions on the other, that is, blaming structural impediments for the inability of poor people to improve their situation. Similarly, with regard to people's attitudes toward wealth, we might distinguish between an individualistic and a societal explanation. People might attribute success to individuals' own hard work, initiative, and merit. Or they might consider that wealth was based on the ability to manipulate a system that was unfairly rigged or that required prior possession of social advantages and connections.

Of course, people might adopt *both* individualist and societal perspectives simultaneously. It is entirely possible to think that individual responsibility is vitally important to bettering one's circumstances, but that poor people start with significant disadvantages and that the playing field is far from equal. It is possible to think that individual wealth is deserved on grounds of talent, effort, and even luck, but that some find it easier to attain than others by virtue of the social advantages with which they start. People's attitudes, in short, may be complex and not easily amenable to classification along the left-right/ individualist-societal scales preferred by the social scientist.

Furthermore, we would expect people's attitudes to poverty, wealth and inequality to be formed not only by their general values and beliefs but also by their lived, everyday experiences. Sociological studies of class (Goldthorpe *et al* 1969, Sennett and Cobb, 1973) show, for example, how people can internalise one set of beliefs and also support attitudes that seem at variance with these beliefs. The actual circumstances that people encounter, and the contrasts that people may experience between general beliefs and daily life, can give rise to what have been variously described as 'compartmentalised beliefs' or 'divided selves'. People may actively

accommodate a range of beliefs by forming composite explanations of poverty and wealth.

Ireland's recent economic transformation presents an intriguing context in which to analyse people's attitudes, and poses a range of questions about how it has affected public attitudes. One line of reasoning might suggest that general economic success has brought widespread adherence to a culture of entrepreneurship, a belief that individual effort and talent will bring success and that in today's Ireland poverty can only be due to a lack of effort. For young people in particular this set of views might accord more closely with the recent reality of full employment and rising living standards: full employment and general prosperity has been the uninterrupted experience of younger cohorts in the population - those who embarked on work and business in the last decade or so.

Alternatively, the recent prosperity may have disturbed established points of comparison and created higher expectations, and the newfound and very visible wealth could arguably have sharpened people's sense of grievance. It is plausible that rising living standards lead the population as a whole - including those on lower incomes who also experienced significant increases in income - to discount structural forces and to see poverty and wealth in individualist terms. But will the persistent inequality that we noted earlier also shape people's views? One of the issues here, presumably, is that the analytical measures of poverty and inequality that we cited may be utterly invisible to the ordinary citizen and may not influence their attitudes. In contrast, the direct experience of business success, of moving from unemployment to work, of rising property values for one's home, of memories and experiences of past unemployment and poverty, may be more likely to affect attitudes.

Survey data

Existing studies of attitudes toward poverty and wealth may suggest the kinds of patterns that might be found in the Irish case. Our approach was informed by the work of the International Social Justice Project (ISJP) (Kluegel et al, 1995; Marshall et al, 1997; see also van Oorschot, 2000). The comparative analysis emanating from this work indicates that attitudes to poverty and wealth are actually structured along *two* dimensions: separate sets of individualist and societal interpretations co-exist in the

population, and these form separate and independent sets of beliefs. This is consistent with the intuition outlined above, that people may value personal responsibility and initiative, but also recognize that they live in unequal societies. However, there are important variations in these perceptions. People in all social classes attach importance to individualist explanations of both poverty and wealth: there is very wide agreement that poverty is due to lack of effort and wealth to hard work, talent and so on. However, comparative studies find variation in the importance attached to societal factors in accounting for either poverty or wealth, according to the class position of their respondents. People in lower social classes are significantly more inclined to attach importance to social factors in explaining poverty or wealth, and more likely to record negative individualist accounts of wealth (wealth is due to dishonesty, for example).

The items in our Irish survey that are specifically about attitudes to poverty and wealth are listed in Tables 2.1 and 2.2. For convenience in the tables, we list the items for poverty and wealth separately and also sub-divide them according to their orientation, individualist or societal. Table 2.1 shows the items used to indicate an individualist interpretation of poverty and wealth.

Table 2.1 Individualist Survey items for perceptions of poverty and wealth

Perceptions of Poverty and Wealth at the *individual level*

Perceptions of Poverty:

1. The people who are badly off just waste the money they have
2. Some people just don't make the effort to help themselves
3. There is no real poverty left now
4. Hard work is what makes the difference between making a lot of money and making very little

Perceptions of Wealth:

5. Everybody has an equal chance to get on
 6. People with talent or ability will always make money
 7. Everybody gets rewarded for their effort and hard work
 8. Everybody in Ireland is much better off now than 5 years ago
 9. If a child from a low income family gets a good education, he or she will get on as well as other children
-

Each of the items in the survey is worded in the form of a statement. For example, in relation to the statement 'people who are badly off just waste the money they have',

respondents were first reminded that some people in Ireland are ‘very well off’ and that other people are ‘very badly off’, and then they were invited to record their level of agreement or disagreement with the statement on a 7-point Likert scale (1= Strongly disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree).

In Table 2.2, we present the list of statements used in the ISPAS survey to examine perceptions of income distribution at the societal level.

Table 2.2 *Societal items for perceptions of poverty and wealth*

Perceptions of income distribution at the societal level

Perceptions of Poverty:

1. The Government does not give enough money to people on Social Welfare
2. Great differences in wealth and income are unfair
3. There is one law for the rich and one for the poor
4. The poor are getting left behind
5. The ordinary person’s income is not much better now than 5 years ago.
6. Ordinary workers and their families don’t have the same opportunities as well-off people.

Perceptions of Wealth:

7. The incomes of well-off people are rising faster than anyone else’s
 8. The only people who can make a lot of money are the people with the right connections
 9. To become really well-off you have to start off with some money to begin with
 10. You have to be dishonest to make a lot of money
 11. You can’t really have equal opportunities because in the end it all comes down to what social class you are from.
-

A large number of these items reflect closely the content or wording of items tested in earlier international studies of attitudes to poverty and wealth. The items include a range of statements that blame the poor for lack of effort and judge them to be wasteful, as well as statements that attribute poverty to societal factors such as ‘lack of opportunities’ or ‘the government’. The items about wealth include some that are positive about wealthy people (‘effort and hard work’, for example) and others that are distinctly negative (‘people with connections’ or ‘you have to be dishonest’).

Attitudes to Poverty and Wealth

Table 2.3 below records the level of agreement with each of the individualist items, distributed across three categories, ranging from disagreement to agreement with the item statement. The mid-point refers to those respondents who choose to neither agree nor disagree with the statement. The average (mean) percentage support for the item is also indicated, as well as the standard deviation, which gives a measure of the variation in the range of responses across the five categories.

Turning to the items on poverty, all of the statements offer quite negative interpretations of poverty. Agreement with these statements broadly suggests agreement with an underlying argument that individuals are responsible for their own impoverished circumstances. Disagreement with the statements seems to suggest a kind of fatalistic view, where the individuals are poor because they are unlucky. The results for items 2 and 4 are particularly interesting, showing a high level of agreement on the role of effort and hard work. These results suggest a strongly individualist perception of the poor and their predicament.

Equally significantly however, there is substantial disagreement with the statement that the poor ‘just waste the money they have’. Likewise there is also strong disagreement with the statement that ‘there is no real poverty left now’. Taken together, the results for the latter two items suggest that there is limited evidence of a judgmental, moralising attitude to people who are badly off. Approximately a quarter of the population agrees with these statements. Therefore, while the population at large emphasises the role of effort and work, it does not seem to view the lifestyle of the poor in a harsh, judgmental way.

Table 2.3 Frequency Distribution (%) for the Individual level items

| Survey Item | | | | Disagree | Mid-point | Agree | Mean/ Std |
|----------------------------|--|------|------|----------|-----------|-------|--------------|
| | Row % | | | | | | |
| <i>Poverty Items (1-4)</i> | 1. Badly off people just waste their money | 62.3 | 10.8 | 26.9 | 2.3/1.5 | | |
| | 2. Some people don't make the effort to help themselves | 16.5 | 6.7 | 76.8 | 4.0/1.3 | | |
| | 3. There is no real poverty left now | 75.7 | 5.6 | 18.7 | 1.9/1.4 | | |
| | 4. Hard work makes the difference between a lot of money and a little. | 24.6 | 6.5 | 68.9 | 3.9/1.5 | | |
| <i>Wealth Items (5-9)</i> | 5. Everybody has an equal chance to get on | 44.2 | 4.6 | 51.2 | 3.2/1.8 | | |
| | 6. People with talent or ability always make money | 26.8 | 7.1 | 66.1 | 3.7/1.6 | | |
| | 7. Everybody gets rewarded for their effort and hard work | 53.8 | 6.0 | 40.2 | 2.7/1.7 | | |
| | 8. Everybody in Ireland is much better off now than 5 years ago | 17.9 | 6.2 | 75.9 | 4.0/1.4 | | |
| | 9. If a child from a low income family gets a good education, he or she will get on as well as any other child | 13.1 | 3.7 | 83.2 | 4.3/1.2 | | |

Three of the five statements on wealth (items 5-9) elicit high levels of agreement - the items on talent/ability, everyone being better off, and education. However, there is much more limited support for the statement that 'everybody gets rewarded for their effort and hard work', with only 40 per cent agreeing with this statement, and there is an almost even split as to whether 'everybody has an equal chance to get on'.

Overall, there is a belief that people will not find themselves living in poverty if they work hard, or have talents or education. At the same time, the poor are not judged harshly and this also suggests that there may be some sympathy for the alternative idea, particularly in regard to explanations of poverty, which is that people are poor because sometimes people are just unlucky.

Table 2.4 presents the results for societal explanations of wealth and poverty. The results suggest that there is moderate to strong agreement with this kind of explanation. Three of the items command agreement levels in excess of 70 per cent, with the statement that the ‘incomes of well-off people are rising faster than anyone else’s’ securing over 80 per cent support. However, while people seem to differentiate between well-off people, poor people and ordinary people, they do not express agreement with items that explicitly point to class distinctions in society as the mechanisms creating poverty and wealth. There was clearly a divided view, for example, on the item suggesting that ‘it all comes down to class’, with 43 percent indicating agreement. There is weak support for statements such as ‘great differences in wealth and income are unfair’ and ‘the ordinary person’s income is not much better than 5 years ago’. This suggests that people clearly distinguish between those living in real poverty and the ‘ordinary person’ whose income is perceived to have improved during the ‘Celtic Tiger’ period.

Table 2.4 Frequency Distribution (%) for the societal level items

| Survey Item | Disagree | Mid-point | Agree | Mean/ Std |
|---|----------|-----------|-------|--------------|
| Row % | | | | |
| 1. The Government does not give enough money to people on Social Welfare | 34.8 | 16.3 | 48.9 | 3.2/1.6 |
| 2. Great differences in wealth and income are unfair | 31.9 | 15.6 | 52.5 | 4.3/1.6 |
| <i>Poverty Items (I-6)</i> | | | | |
| 3. There is one law for the rich and one for the poor | 22.8 | 5.5 | 71.7 | 5.0/1.8 |
| 4. The poor are getting left behind | 24.8 | 8.1 | 67.1 | 4.8/1.5 |
| 5. The ordinary person's income is not much better than 5 years ago | 51.3 | 8.3 | 40.4 | 3.8/1.7 |
| 6. You can't really have equal opportunities because in the end it all comes down to what social class you are from | 48.6 | 8.9 | 42.5 | 3.8/1.7 |
| <i>Wealth Items (7-11)</i> | | | | |
| 7. The incomes of well-off people are rising faster than anyone else's | 7.1 | 9.4 | 83.5 | 5.5/1.2 |
| 8. The only people who can make a lot of money are the people with the right connections | 43.1 | 6.9 | 50 | 3.0/1.7 |
| 9. To become really well-off you have to have to start off with some money to begin with | 33.8 | 6.1 | 60.1 | 3.4/1.7 |
| 10. You have to be dishonest to make a lot of money | 75.2 | 6.0 | 18.8 | 1.9/1.4 |
| 11. Ordinary workers and their families don't have the same opportunities as well-off people | 22.3 | 6.5 | 71.2 | 4.9/1.6 |

Just as the individualist items did not invoke moralistic judgements of the poor, the societal items do not suggest there is a generally negative perception of wealthy people. Fewer than 20 per cent agree that dishonesty is a pre-condition for making ‘a lot of money’ Likewise, there is only mixed support for the argument that ‘the only people who can make a lot of money are the people with the right connections’. This suggests that while people may perceive inequalities in income distribution as a

societal or systemic phenomenon, they also reject the idea that this is the result of actions by any particular group of dishonest individuals.

Taking all the items in Table 2.4 together, they suggest that while there is broad agreement about the inequitable nature of the system of income distribution in Ireland, people also understand the real losers in this system as those in living in poverty in Irish society. For example, over two thirds of respondents agree that ‘the poor are getting left behind’. In contrast, everyone else’s income is perceived to have risen, including that of the ‘ordinary person’, whose income has improved but not at the same pace as ‘well-off people’ (item 7). This may suggest some support for a kind of fatalistic view of poverty in Irish society where people remain poor because they are unlucky enough to be living under this particular system of income distribution.

Before turning to the underlying dimensions of people’s attitudes, one point should be noted about the link between the items reported above and socio-economic status. We cross-tabulated the items by socio-economic status (data not given here) and the results are somewhat similar to the ‘split consciousness’ pattern reported by Kluegel (1995) and his colleagues. On the one hand, support for individualist items is very widespread; on the other, those in lower socio-economic groups, while supporting an individualist stance, were more likely to adopt social interpretations of poverty and negative interpretations of wealth. These differences between socio-economic groups were statistically significant although the actual magnitude of the differences between socio-economic groups was modest.

Dimensions of Attitudes to Poverty and Wealth

In the previous section, we reported the responses across two different sets of items on wealth and poverty. We suggested earlier that beliefs about poverty may be multi-dimensional, specifically that beliefs may reflect both individualist and societal components.

In order to establish whether each set of items is indeed identifying an underlying attitudinal dimension, we used factor analysis to examine all the 20 items listed in Tables 2.1 and 2.2 above. We expected to find that the individualist items would load on one factor, while the societal items would load on a separate factor. And indeed,

the results of factor analysis (see Figure A and Tables A and B in the Appendix to this chapter) confirm the presence of the two underlying dimensions, a societal explanation factor and individualist explanation factor.¹ Having established the existence of two dimensions underlying our attitudinal data, we then aggregated each set of items to create two new summated scales. A key step in creating scales is estimating the reliability, that is, the consistency of the individual scale items and the instrument as a whole. The underlying details of scale construction are presented in Tables C and D in the Appendix to this chapter (the Cronbach Alpha measure for each scale exceeds 0.7). Finally, we transformed the two new summated scales and collapsed each into two categories to indicate a tendency towards either weak or strong agreement with the underlying explanation.

¹ Before proceeding to analyse the scaled data there are two points that should be noted. First, although we have identified two separate dimensions, it is also not unreasonable to expect that these dimensions may be conceptually linked. The Pearson correlation between the two non-transformed scales (-0.137, significant at 0.01 level) suggests that there is some evidence of weak correlation between the underlying dimensions. Second, we need to confront the possibility that the factors we identified (and the scales we constructed) are an artefact of the data. In particular we were concerned that the results of our factor analysis were a function of the question direction. However, we suspect that if this was indeed a problem, then we should find a much higher level of correlation of the items, as well as similar levels of agreement/disagreement across items, which was not the case in our results (see Tables 2.3 and 2.4 above). We also wondered whether we could observe a single underlying dimension which could combine people's perceptions of the causes of poverty and wealth, so that at one end we might expect agreement around individualistic causes of poverty and wealth and at the other, agreement around societal causes for wealth and poverty. In our factor analysis (and tests for reliability) we examined a range of different combinations of items (including small subsets of items). However there was no evidence to support a single underlying dimension solution.

Table 2.5 Respondent Characteristics by Type of Explanation

| Respondent characteristics | Respondent Categories | Individualistic Explanation | Societal Explanation |
|---|---|--|---|
| Ascribed | | | |
| -Age | 16-34 35-54 55plus | ns | -0.631 (0.215) |
| -Gender | Male Female | ns | ns |
| -Location | Urban Rural | ns | ns |
| Socio-economic | | | |
| -Social Class | Low Middle High | 0.595 (0.199) 0.406 (0.193) 0.407 (0.186) | |
| -Education | Third level Second level or less | 0.611 (0.176) | ns |
| -Tenure | Home owner Rental accommodation/other | ns | ns |
| -Able to make ends meet (subjective view of own economic position) | With great difficulty With some difficulty Fairly easily Very easily | -1.856 (0.486) -0.611 (0.27) 0.999 (0.253) | 1.316 (0.484) 1.28 (0.27) 0.999 (0.253) |
| Work Participation | | | |
| -Unemployed experience | Yes No | ns | 0.561 (0.245) |
| -Supervisory role | Yes No | ns | -0.587 (0.18) |
| -Worried about the security of job (subjective view) | Very worried Somewhat worried A little worried Not at all worried | ns | ns |
| -Trade union membership | Yes No | ns | ns |
| Model Statistics | | | |
| | -Log Likelihood -Percent of variance which model predicts correctly | 1038 61.5 | 998.26 65.3 |

Profiling Respondents

Having established that there are in fact two dimensions to the value orientations we are interested in, individualist and societal, the next step in our discussion is to see if there is whether there is any pattern to holding these view, particularly in the light of demographic characteristics such as age, social class, and gender. In Table 2.5 we present the results of a logistic regression analysis. Only those variables which are selected by this modeling approach are listed for each type of explanation, and the term *ns* is given to those other variables in the list which the modeling approach suggested were not relevant.

Table 2.5 indicates that there is in fact a class-based division among respondents who are likely to strongly agree and those likely to strongly disagree with the societal explanation of the distribution of wealth and poverty in Ireland. Looking first at the respondents' socio-economic characteristics, people from lower and middle classes tend to support a societal explanation, as do those respondents who have greater difficulty 'making ends meet'. Moreover, those who have recent experience of unemployment are also more likely to agree with the societal explanation. On the other hand the results show that those respondents who have a supervisory role in the workplace are more likely to disagree with a societal explanation.

Alongside these results we also see that respondents are divided on the basis of age, so that the younger the respondents, the more likely it is that they will disagree with the societal explanation of distribution in Irish society. This distinction between respondents in terms of their age seems unusual – we might have expected no real distinction to emerge. Perhaps we should remember that these data are based on a survey conducted in 2002 at the height of the economic boom. It is very likely that the majority of the younger respondents had no personal experience of unemployment or no personal memory of the mass unemployment and widespread emigration of earlier decades.

Looking at the results for the second scale, three key socio-economic characteristics are clearly associated with the individualistic explanation. At first glance, the results suggest another class-based division between the types of respondent agreeing with an individualistic explanation, but in fact the results are a little more complex.

Respondents with higher levels of education are more likely to agree with the individualistic explanation, and this accords to some degree with a class-based distinction. Those who are experiencing difficulty with making ends meet (that is, they assess their own economic position as poor) are more likely to disagree with the individualistic explanation. However, we also see that those from lower social classes are also somewhat likely to agree with the individualistic explanation. Again this may be reflecting the impact of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ economy, which generated a huge growth in job opportunities, including buoyant demand for semi-skilled and skilled workers (and self-employed tradesmen) in industry and construction, and a corresponding rise in their earnings.

Finally, let us turn our attention to the results presented in Tables 2.6 and 2.7. These tables provide a more detailed profile of respondents in each of our categories. Let us look first at Table 2.6 and at the first variable listed, the age of the respondent. As we expect from our earlier discussion, there are higher proportions of those in the youngest age category who demonstrate only weak agreement with the societal explanation, while in the oldest age category, the majority of the respondents (67.9 per cent) agree with the societal level of explanation. A substantial proportion of these older respondents will already be at or close to retirement age and likely to be increasingly dependent of the provision of various state provided welfare, including health and social services provision for older people.

Table 2.6 Respondent Support for the Societal Level of explanation by respondent characteristics

| Respondent Characteristics | | Societal Level Explanation | | |
|--|---|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| | % of respondents per category (row %) | Weak Agreement | Strong Agreement | |
| Ascribed | | | | |
| Age | 16-34 | 45.3 | 54.7 | |
| | 35-54 | 38.7 | 61.3 | |
| | 55 plus | 32.1 | 67.9 | |
| Socio-economic | | | | |
| Social class | low | 31 | 69 | |
| | middle | 35 | 65 | |
| | high | 51 | 49 | |
| Able to make ends meet difficulty | with great difficulty | 19.7 31.6 | 80.3 68.4 | |
| (Subjective view of own difficulty | with some difficulty | 41.3 57.4 | 58.7 42.6 | |
| economic position) | fairly easily very easily | | | |
| Work participation | | | | |
| Supervisory role | yes | 50.8 | 49.2 | |
| | no | 34.4 | 65.6 | |
| Unemployment experience in last 5 years | yes | 27.4 | 72.6 | |
| | no | 40.3 | 59.7 | |

Note: All of the results in this table are statistically significant at the .05 level or higher.

Looking the breakdown in terms of the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents, about two-thirds of the respondents in the lower and middle classes strongly support the societal explanation, compared with a much more mixed pattern and overall weaker level of support for this type of explanation in the higher social classes. Four fifths (80.3 per cent) of those who have great difficulty making ends meet strongly agree with the societal explanation. Two-thirds of employees who normally have no supervisory role in the workplace support the societal explanation of inequality, as do nearly three-quarters (72.6 per cent) of those who have had recent experience of unemployment. The results for the unemployment experience and subjective economic position variables confirm the importance of quite specific, situational factors in shaping people's attitudes.

Table 2.7 Respondent support for the Individualist level explanation by respondent characteristics

| Respondent Characteristics | Individual Level Explanation | | |
|---|---|-------------------|---------------------|
| | % of respondents per category (row %) | Weak Agreement | Strong Agreement |
| <i>Socio-economic</i> | | | |
| Social class | low | 36.9 | 63.1 |
| | middle | 42.3 | 57.7 |
| | high | 52.6 | 47.4 |
| Able to make ends meet (Subjective view of own economic position) | with great difficulty | 60.6 | 39.4 |
| | with some difficulty | 43.4 | 56.6 |
| | fairly easily | 42.8 | 57.2 |
| | very easily | 36.4 | 63.6 |
| Education level or less | Third level | 38.8 | 61.2 |
| | Secondary level | 55.4 | 44.6 |

Table 2.7 shows support for the individualistic explanation in terms of the same socio-economic characteristics. One finding that stands out is the significance of education: two-thirds of the respondents with a third level qualification strongly support the individualistic explanation, compared with fewer than half of those respondents with a secondary level of education or below.

A strongly differentiated result is also seen in support for the individualistic explanation when we look at respondents' own assessment of their economic position. Almost two thirds (63.6 per cent) of those who experience no financial difficulty (i.e. 'who make ends meet very easily') strongly agree with the individualistic explanation. This compares with about the same proportion (60.6 per cent) of those who are experiencing great financial difficulty but who *disagree* with the individualistic explanation. But while the results for the other categories of respondents examined on this characteristic are more mixed, on balance there is more rather than less support for the individualistic explanation of income inequality. The results presented for the social class distinctions across the respondents suggest higher levels of support for the individualistic explanation of income distribution amongst those in the lower class (63.1 per cent) and middle class (57.7 per cent) and a much more mixed pattern of support amongst those in the higher social classes (47.4 per cent).

Clusters of Attitudes

We have identified two dimensions of attitudes, an individualist and a societal. In the case of the individualist scale, respondents identified in the strong category would be those who agreed with an individualist explanation of income distribution: they believe that individuals effectively determine whether they are wealthy or poor, according to how hard they work, how much talent they have, and so on. In the case of the societal scale, someone in the strong agreement category believes that the possibility of becoming wealthy or poor is largely determined by social structures and institutions, that the well-off have been doing better, and starting out with money and connections is important.

But we also recognized that it is possible for people to hold views that do not fall entirely into one or other category. People might well have mixed values. To capture

this, we need to take the information we have about how attitudes are patterned across these two dimensions and see how they interact with each other. The patterns of responses across the two scales are presented in Table 2.8 below. Taking the respondents who express the strongest views on any dimension, we find quite an even pattern of distribution across the categories that might indicate the most consistent ordering of values and interpretations.

If respondents agree most strongly with the societal scale and less strongly with the individualist scale, we might consider them to have a classic ‘left-wing’ interpretation of wealth and poverty – that is, that while personal initiative matters, societal factors matter even more in accounting for patterns of income distribution. About a quarter of our respondents (24.4 per cent) fall into this category.

If, on the other hand, respondents agree most strongly with the individual scale and less strongly with the societal scale, we might consider these to have a classic ‘liberal’ interpretation of wealth and poverty – that is, while societal factors have a bearing on outcomes, individual initiative, entrepreneurship, and the free exercise of talents account for most of the outcomes in the reward structure. A little more than a quarter (28.6 per cent) of our respondents fall into this category.

Table 2.8 Response pattern across both explanations of income distribution

| % Total support | Individualist Explanation | | |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|------|-------------------------|
| | Level of support | Weak | Strong |
| Societal Explanation | Weak | 14.4 | 28.6 |
| | <i>free floaters</i> | | <i>liberal</i> |
| | 24.4 | | 32.7 |
| | <i>left</i> | | <i>left libertarian</i> |

Respondents might agree strongly with both the individualist and the societal dimension – that is, they could understand income distribution as resulting from both

individualistic and societal causes. Only slightly more – about a third of our respondents (32.7 per cent) – fall into this category. They evidently have a strong sense of individual initiative and responsibility, but also possess a strong sense of the constraints that people work under. We might consider these to fall into a ‘libertarian left’ category of values.

The smallest percentage of respondents – about one seventh of the total (14.4 per cent) – is identified as being in weak agreement with both scales. This means that while they do not hold much truck with the notion of individuals’ personal responsibility for their own situation, neither do they give much credence to explanations of poverty and wealth that are couched in terms of societal causes. These respondents may hold that people’s fortunes are subject to fairly arbitrary processes that can neither be foreseen nor controlled. We might therefore term this combination of values the ‘free floaters’.

Conclusion

Our key findings are that the Irish public in general support individualist values in its interpretation of poverty and wealth, and that this stance co-exists with a structural view of poverty among people in lower socio-economic groups.

Overall, we have identified four clusters of views that may be found among the electorate. About a quarter of respondents have a value-profile that we identify as a classic left-wing position, and a little over a quarter fall into what we term a classic liberal grouping. We would expect that the former might well find parties of the left most attractive, and that the latter would be drawn to any party that stressed traditional market values. One-third of respondents take a mixed position that values individual responsibility but that also takes a wider, societal view of the conditions under which people exercise their choices. These people may well be open to persuasion by political parties stressing either of the two value orientations. The fact that the two largest parties in the Irish political system might be characterized as spanning both value orientations may help explain why this is the largest single grouping we found. Finally, the smallest grouping does not take a very strong view on either the individualist or the societal value dimension. We have termed them ‘free floaters’; they may well be people with relatively little interest in politics in any case.

Examining the values and attitudes people adopt toward income inequality may help us to understand better why voters prefer some policies over others on issues relating to the distribution of wealth. Just as income inequality has increasingly been mapped comparatively, it may be of interest to understand whether there are systematic comparative differences in citizens' attitudes toward poverty and wealth, and how these can be explained. But more importantly perhaps, this kind of study may also have implications for practical politics. Mapping the cultural values underlying people's current political attitudes might make it possible to identify repertoires for future political action. Information about people's value profiles might be just as valuable to those favouring market solutions to social problems as to those interested in political interventions to redress inequalities.

We have shown some preliminary findings in this paper that indicate that the profile of Irish attitudes can be understood in terms that have already been widely identified in cross-national research. But much more needs to be done to fill in our understanding of the implications of these findings for the dynamics of party competition and political life more generally in Ireland. We intend to address these issues in future research.

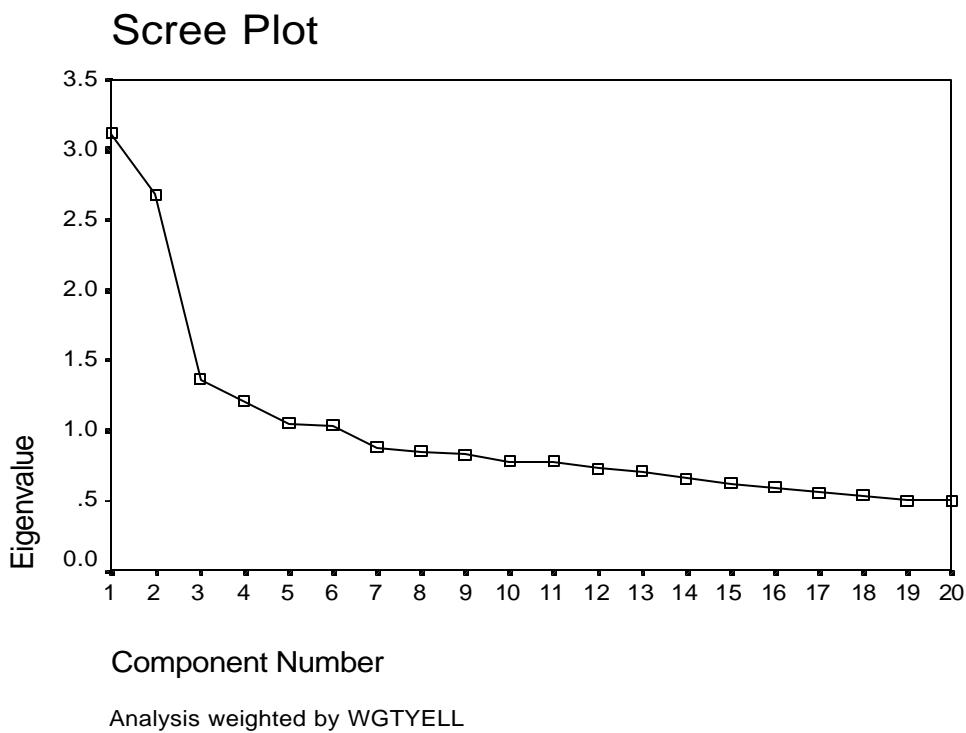
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Appendix

Figure A



Overall Measure of Sampling Adequacy: 0.786
Bartlett Test of Sphericity: 3539.786 Significance 0.000

Table A: Total Variance Explained (Principal Component Analysis: 2 factors)

| Factor | Eigenvalue | % of variance | Cumulative % of Variance |
|--------|------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | 3.12 | 15.6 | 15.6 |
| 2 | 2.69 | 13.4 | 29.04 |
| 3 | 1.37 | 6.8 | |
| 4 | 1.2 | 6.0 | |
| 5 | 1.04 | 5.3 | |
| 6 | 1.05 | 5.2 | |

Note: Only Eigenvalues greater than 1 are listed in Table A

Table B: Rotated pattern and structure matrices

| Survey Items | Item Label | Pattern matrix | | Structure matrix | |
|--|---------------|------------------|-------------------------|------------------|-------------------------|
| | | Social Factor | Individualist Factor | Social Factor | Individualist Factor |
| The only people who can make a lot of money are the people with the right connections | C1.2 | 0.65 | | 0.643 | |
| You can't really have equal opportunities because in the end it all comes down to what social class you are from | C6.5 | 0.615 | | 0.616 | |
| The incomes of well-off people are rising faster than anyone else's | C5.3 | 0.516 | | 0.515 | |
| To become really well-off you have to have to start off with some money to begin with | C1.5 | 0.497 | | 0.491 | |
| Great differences in wealth and income are unfair | C7.4 | 0.481 | | 0.484 | |
| The poor are getting left behind | C5.2 | 0.475 | | 0.475 | |
| There is one law for the rich and one for the poor | A3.4 | 0.468 | | 0.472 | |
| The Government does not give enough money to people on Social Welfare | C1.4 | 0.465 | | 0.470 | |
| You have to be dishonest to make a lot of money | C1.9 | 0.456 | | 0.453 | |
| Ordinary workers and their families don't have the same opportunities as well-off people | C6.3 | 0.441 | | 0.452 | |
| The ordinary person's income is not much better than 5 years ago | C5.4 | 0.439 | | 0.447 | |
| Everybody has an equal chance to get on | C6.1 | | 0.673 | | 0.683 |
| Everybody gets rewarded for their effort and hard work | C6.2 | | 0.651 | | 0.656 |
| Everybody in Ireland is much better off now than 5 years ago | C5.1 | | 0.581 | | 0.584 |
| People with talent always make money | C1.6 | | 0.552 | | 0.544 |
| There is no real poverty left now | C5.5 | | 0.542 | | 0.536 |
| Badly off people just waste their money | C1.1 | | 0.520 | | 0.507 |
| Hard work makes the difference between a lot of money and a little | C1.7 | | 0.486 | | 0.483 |
| If a child from a low income family gets a good education, he | C6.4 | | 0.377 | | 0.390 |

| | | | | |
|--|------|--|-------|-------|
| or she will get on as well as any other child | | | | |
| Some people don't make the effort to help themselves | C1.3 | | 0.367 | 0.367 |

Note: Extraction method: Principal Component Analysis/Rotation Method: Oblimin with Kaiser

Normalisation/Cumulative Extraction sums of squared loadings: 29.3%

Table C: Scale Reliability of Social Scale

Social Scale (Social Factor)

| Scale | Scale | Corrected Mean if Item Deleted | Variance if Item Deleted | Item- Total Correlation | Alpha if Item Deleted |
|-------|---------|---|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| C1_2 | 43.5562 | 67.8345 | .4732 | .6682 | |
| C1_4 | 43.3443 | 72.1431 | .3564 | .6883 | |
| C1_5 | 43.1470 | 71.9646 | .3268 | .6935 | |
| C1_9 | 44.8700 | 74.8346 | .3008 | .6964 | |
| C6_3 | 42.7034 | 74.5051 | .3123 | .6947 | |
| C6_5 | 43.8183 | 69.5426 | .4398 | .6746 | |
| C7_4 | 43.2653 | 73.0162 | .3389 | .6909 | |
| C5_3 | 42.1032 | 75.9441 | .3822 | .6879 | |
| C5_4 | 43.8229 | 73.1890 | .3089 | .6959 | |
| C5_2 | 42.8298 | 73.4894 | .3569 | .6884 | |
| A3_4 | 42.6054 | 72.2723 | .3175 | .6950 | |

Reliability Coefficient

Cronbach's Alpha : 0.7088

Table D: Scale Reliability of Individualist Scale

Individualist Scale (Individualist Factor)

| Scale | Scale | Corrected | | | |
|-------|---------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | | Mean if Item Deleted | Variance if Item Deleted | Item- Total Correlation | Alpha if Item Deleted |
| C6_2 | 35.3502 | 47.5027 | .4782 | .6538 | |
| C6_1 | 34.9512 | 45.9716 | .5085 | .6461 | |
| C1_6 | 34.3235 | 50.6415 | .3727 | .6765 | |
| C1_1 | 35.8917 | 51.0520 | .3507 | .6809 | |
| C1_7 | 34.1449 | 51.4709 | .3436 | .6822 | |
| C5_5 | 36.2951 | 52.0089 | .3531 | .6801 | |
| C5_1 | 33.9596 | 51.0402 | .4082 | .6700 | |
| C6_4 | 33.6385 | 54.8282 | .2845 | .6915 | |
| C1_3 | 34.0114 | 54.9197 | .2536 | .6969 | |

Reliability Coefficient

Cronbach's Alpha : 0.7014