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The Base of Party Political Support in Ireland: An Update

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Abstract: A recent paper by Madden used concentration indices to examine the bases of party support in Ireland in the 2011 election. This note updates this work to incorporate the 2016 election using the latest wave of ESS data. The results show that in terms of the bases of party supports many of the features of the "earthquake election" of 2011 remain, in particular the widely differing support bases for Fine Gael and Sinn Fein. Concentration indices with respect to income show little change from the 2011 election. However, there is some evidence that the support base for Fianna Fail in 2016 was older and less well-educated than in 2011, with the change in support base for Fine Gael over the same period a mirror image.

Keywords: Party support, social base, concentration index.

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The Base of Party Political Support in Ireland: An Update

1. Introduction

In a recent paper Madden (2018) explored the bases of party political support in Ireland employing the technique of concentration indices. These indices capture the covariance between an initial variable (such as voting for a particular party) and a ranking variable (such as income, age or years of education). Thus they provide in a single index a summary of the degree to which party support is "concentrated" along dimensions of interest such as income, age and education.

The Irish party political system had long been characterised as "politics without social bases" (Whyte, 1974) owing to the absence of a social or economic base to party support. This description was subsequently challenged (e.g. Laver, 1986a, 1986b, 1987 and Breen and Whelan, 1994) and results from the 2011 election seemed to herald the emergence of some degree of income or class base to party support. The results from Madden (2018) showed support for Fine Gael to be concentrated amongst higher income and more educated voters, while Sinn Fein support was more concentrated amongst lower income and less well-educated voters. This was echoed by the findings of Tilley and Garry (2017) who showed that when the vote of Fianna Fail (traditionally the largest party) imploded in the 2011 election, voters did not randomly move to different parties. Higher income and more educated voters tended to move to Fine Gael while lower income and less well educated voters moved to Sinn Fein.

Ireland's 2011 election was dubbed the "earthquake election" coming as it did after the 2008 financial crash and dealing Fianna Fail the greatest defeat in its electoral history (Gallagher, 2011). At the time it was the third most volatile election result in Western Europe since the Second World War and the most volatile in the absence of a new party (Marsh and Mikhaylov, 2012). Of particular interest was the question of whether the 2011 election was a unique event and unlikely to be repeated, or whether it had permanently altered the political landscape in Ireland. This short paper addresses this issue by updating the results of Madden (2018), as the necessary data (from wave 8 of the European Social Survey, discussed in more detail below) has now become available.[1] Results suggest that many of the features of the 2011 election, at least in terms of our measure of the social base of party support, were also evident in the 2016 election, suggesting that the aftershocks of the earthquake election have persisted for some time at least.

[1] For a broader analysis of the 2016 election see the excellent accounts in Gallagher and Marsh eds. (2016) and Marsh et al eds. (2018).

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: in section 2 we briefly outline our measure of the social base of party support, the concentration index, and we also describe our data. Section 3 presents results from the 2016 election in the light of results from the 2011 and previous elections, while section 4 presents concluding remarks.

2. Method of Analysis and Data

Suppose we have a variable which measures support for political party k by individual i, s_i^k. Then if r_i is the fractional rank of individual i in the income distribution (or whatever ranking variable is being used), the concentration index for political party k ($PPCI^k$) is

$$PPCI^k = \frac{2\,\mathrm{cov}(s_i^k, r_i)}{\bar{s}^k}$$

where $\bar{s}^k$ is the mean value of support for party k (Kakwani et al, 1997). $PPCI^k$ can take on a value from -1 to +1, where a negative (positive) value indicates that support is concentrated among the relatively poor (rich).[2]

The analysis above assumes that the party support variable is continuous. In reality, support is measured via the decision whether or not to vote for the party, and so s_i^k is a binary variable which takes on values of 0 or 1. This does not fully capture the richness of the voting process in Ireland, which uses a single transferable vote (STV) system and where voters express preferences for candidates via a ranking 1, 2, 3 etc. Our study only measures the "1" ranking. This is unavoidable as our data only includes information on the first ranked party for each voter. In the case of binary data a normalisation must be applied to the index (since the bounds would not be -1 and +1). Erregeyers (2009) suggested a normalisation of $PPCI_n^k = 4\bar{s}^k PPCI^k$, which is applied here.

Our data comes from wave 8 of the European Social Survey (ESS) although we also replicate some results from Madden (2018) which used earlier rounds of ESS. The ESS is a cross-national survey carried out approximately every two years. It measures attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns in more than thirty nations for individuals aged 15 and over, in addition to collecting basic demographic information such as age, gender, education etc.

The sample size for Ireland for each round of the ESS ranges from 1700 to about 2800, and in all but one cases exceeds 2000. It is necessary to drop some observations who either do not or cannot provide voting information (usually around 30-35 per cent of the sample who either

[2] Note that the concentration index for income when income itself is the ranking variable is the well known Gini index of inequality.

choose not to vote or are not eligible to vote). The fieldwork for wave 8 of ESS was carried out from November 2016 to May 2017, thus about 9-14 months after the 2016 election (which was held on February 25, 2016). We compare the results from wave 8 (corresponding to the 2016 election) with those from Madden (2018) for waves 2, 4 and 5 (the ESS waves held closest to the 2002, 2007 and 2011 elections respectively).[3]

We are concerned with measuring party political support, and the principal source of information we have on this comes from the answers to the question: *did you vote in the last national election?* Those who answer "yes" to this question then answer the question: *which party did you vote for in that election?* We choose to measure the PPCI for the four main parties in Ireland which featured in elections from 2002 to 2016: Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the Labour Party, and Sinn Féin and create a binary variable for each party.[4] Typically around 30 per cent of respondents to the question on voting state that they did not vote or were not eligible to vote and these observations were dropped.

One issue which arises when using this type of data is the extent to which self-reported voting is measured with error. Error may arise because people genuinely forget who they voted for (such error should not bias our results assuming its incidence is randomly distributed across the population). However, bias may not be random if recall draws people more towards their current political preference, or if it draws them towards the larger and more successful political parties (Himmelweit et al, 1978). It is also likely to be the case that error will increase the further away from the event in question (van Elsas et al, 2014). Himmelweit et al (1978) suggest that recall error may be at least as high as 10 per cent when dealing with the most recent election and up to 20 per cent for more distant elections.

In table 2 we compare declared voting for the ESS waves with actual first preference votes from the corresponding elections (we do so only for the parties analysed in this paper). The correspondence is quite close. The "winning" party tends to do better in the ESS waves, perhaps reflecting the phenomenon referred to above whereby recall-bias draws people to larger more successful parties. However, as discussed at more length in Madden (2018), any

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[3] Information from waves 6 and 7 are also available which contain information regarding the 2011 election. However we choose to use the ESS wave held just after each election, hence the wave for the 2011 election is wave 5. In table 1 we show the fieldwork dates for each of the waves we use and the date of the corresponding election.

[4] There were two other parties which potentially could have been included: the Progressive Democrats (PDs) and the Green Party. However, the PDs were dissolved in 2009, while votes for the Greens in 2016 and 2011 especially were so small that it was not possible to calculate a meaningful concentration index for them. We also choose not to include results for independent candidates since, while such candidates can attract considerable support, in many instances it is on the basis of purely local issues and so it does not seem appropriate to investigate a nationally based social base to their support.

recall bias in the ESS numbers are likely to be less problematic in the case of the calculation of concentration indices.

We employ three ranking variables, income, education and age. Information on income is provided via the answer to the question: *using this card, please tell me which letter describes your household's total income after tax and compulsory deductions from all sources*. Respondents are offered ten options and hence the income data is grouped. The groups correspond to deciles of income as derived from the Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC) and prices etc are adjusted to reflect the year of the survey. As explained in Clarke and Van Ourti (2010), a grouping of ten should be sufficient to pick up an economic gradient in voting. For observations either refusing to answer or else stating that they don't know their income we impute a value of income via conditional mean imputation. We do this by regressing income category on age, education, gender, working/non-working and whether partner is working/non-working. We then use the fitted values from this regression for those observations who do not answer the original question on income.[5]

Our second ranking variable is years of education. Information upon this is obtained from the answer to the question: *about how many years of education have you completed, whether full-time or part-time.* Respondents convert part-time years into full-time year equivalents. Less than one per cent of observations either refuse to answer or don't know, and we drop those observations.

Table 3 provides summary statistics for the ranking variables for the waves analysed. Education levels appear to rise slightly in wave 8. The average income decile shows some variation but it must be pointed out that all the analysis in the paper uses sampling weights so results should be representative for the frame of the ESS sample.

Table 4 provides concentration indices for the ESS waves closest to the elections from 2002 to 2016. Three sets of indices are provided with ranking variables of disposable income, education and age and figures 1-3 provide the corresponding graphs. Perhaps the best way to detect an emerging social base to voting is to look at the graphs and examine the extent to which concentration indices by party have converged or diverged over time. A divergence reveals an emerging pattern with respect to that particular ranking variable. Note that the value of the concentration index is independent of underlying support for that party. It simply tells us, conditional on whatever support that party received as measured by declared first vote, the extent to which that vote was concentrated with respect to the ranking variable.

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[5] For more detail on this procedure, see Madden (2018)

In figure 1 the ranking variable is income so perhaps this best captures what we might understand by a social base to voting.[6] For the elections of 2002 and 2007 we see that values of the concentration indices are all close to each other and as table 4 shows, for wave 2 (corresponding to the election of 2002) in no case can we reject the null hypothesis that the concentration index is zero i.e. the covariance between voting for the parties and income rank is zero. In wave 4 (corresponding to the 2007 election) we see the first emergence of a social base with the index for Sinn Fein negative and statistically significant. Indices for the other parties show very little change. However in wave 5 (corresponding to the election of 2011) we see the emergence of a clear social base to party support with concentration indices for Fine Gael, Fianna Fail and Sinn Fein all diverging from their previous values. The Fine Gael vote is now concentrated amongst higher income groups, Fianna Fail is concentrated amongst lower income voters and the Sinn Fein vote becomes even more concentrated amongst lower income voters. The concentration index for the Labour vote remains insignificantly different from zero. Note that these striking developments with respect to the concentration indices happened for Ireland's earthquake election when underlying support for the parties changed dramatically (see table 2).

The key development which we investigate in this paper is whether the dramatic pattern which emerged in the 2011 election would continue in the 2016 election, or would the 2011 election be a once-off. Figure 1 suggests that the social base with respect to voting observed in 2011 became if anything more pronounced in 2016. The index for Fine Gael stays positive and increases, while those for Fianna Fail and Sinn Fein both become even more negative. The index for Labour is finally statistically different from zero, with a low positive value, suggesting that those voters who stayed with Labour in 2016 came from the slightly higher income groups.

The results for education in figure 2 tell a very similar story. For the 2002 election concentration indices with respect to education are not significantly different for any party, with the exception of Fianna Fail, whose votes are concentrated amongst less educated voters. By 2007 and 2011 voting with respect to education as measured by the concentration indices has become somewhat more polarised and developments are consistent with those for income. Votes for Fine Gael and Labour become slightly more concentrated amongst better educated voters while the index for Sinn Fein becomes negative and statistically significant. Again, returning to the key question we address in this paper, these developments become more pronounced in 2016 (with the exception of Labour). Votes for Fine Gael are now even more concentrated amongst higher educated voters while those for Fianna Fail and Sinn Fein

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[6] As explained in Madden (2018) it is not possible to construct a concentration index for social class as there is no clear greed upon ranking for social classes and also at least ten different categories are recommended. However, it seems reasonable to suggest that voting by income and education is likely to be highly correlated with social class.

become more concentrated amongst less educated voters. It is worth noting that the extent to which voting for Fianna Fail is concentrated amongst the less educated may also reflect the fact that Fianna Fail voters tend to be older (see below) and older voters typically have fewer years of education.

Finally figure 3 shows developments with respect to age. Again results for the 2016 election show a continuation of some of the trends observed in the 2011 election. For the elections of 2002 and 2007 the pattern is clear, older voters are concentrated amongst Fianna Fail and Fine Gael while younger voters are more concentrated amongst Labour and Sinn Fein. The 2011 election saw this polarisation increase with greater divergence between Fianna Fail/Fine Gael on the one hand and Labour/Sinn Fein on the other. The trend for Fianna Fail voters to be concentrated amongst the old and Sinn Fein amongst the young accentuates in 2016. However voting for Fine Gael and Labour with respect to age decouple to some extent from Fianna Fail and Sinn Fein respectively. By 2016 the patterns with respect to age are more pronounced for Fianna Fail and Sinn Fein than for Fine Gael and Labour.

3. Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this short note is to incorporate the results of the 2016 election and to update the analysis of Madden (2018) on the social bases of party political support in Ireland as reflected in concentration indices. The election of 2011 had seen the emergence of a degree of social base to party support, but such was the nature of the 2011 election it was by no means inevitable that the patterns which surfaced in that election would be repeated. The analysis here shows that in the context of social base as measured by concentration indices the 2011 patterns persisted and in the case of voting with respect to income and education became perhaps more pronounced.

Our results are consistent with other analysis in this area. For example, Cunningham and Elkink (2018) in their analysis of ideological dimensions in the 2016 election point to the economic left-right divide as separating Fine Gael and Sinn Fein voters and this is also noted by Marsh and McElroy (2016). This left-right divide between these two parties is echoed in the diverging concentration indices by income for these two parties. Interestingly they also point to a left-right divide on social/moral issues arising between Fianna Fail and Labour and the potential emergence of another dimension relating to populism and the relative importance of local versus international issues which divides Fine Gael/Labour from Fianna

Fail/Sinn Fein. This last divide is consistent with the development of concentration indices for income and education during the 2011 and 2016 elections.[7]

Garry (2018) comes to similar conclusions in his analysis of the social and ideological bases to voting. He suggests that the emergence of Sinn Fein implies that political-cleavage based models now work reasonably well in Ireland, in terms of differentiating Sinn Fein voters at least. Our analysis confirms this and further suggests that the socio-demographic profiles of Fine Gael and Fianna Fail voters have also become more sharply defined in recent elections. Note that our analysis focuses on the profile of party voters only and does not examine the ideology/policies of parties. As Garry points out, the ideological distinctions between Fianna Fail, Fine Gael and Labour remain relatively weak.

In conclusion, our analysis confirms the emergence of some degree of social basis to voting in Ireland, commencing in 2011 and continuing in 2016. Two elections is probably too short a time frame to suggest a fundamental re-alignment of Irish politics but for the moment at least the changes evident in 2011 show some signs of persistence.

Table 1: Elections and ESS Waves

Election date	ESS Fieldwork
17/05/2002	Wave 2: 18/01/2005-20/06/2005*
24/05/2007	Wave 4: 11/09/2009-12/03/2010
25/02/2011	Wave 5: 20/09/2011-30/01/2012
26/02/2016	Wave 8: 25/11/2016-08/05/2017

*Fieldwork for wave 1 of ESS was carried out closer to the 2002 election. However no income data was collected so we use wave 2 data instead.

Table 2 – voting % by party, ESS waves and corresponding elections

	FF		FG		Lab		SF	
	ESS	Vote	ESS	Vote	ESS	Vote	ESS	Vote

[7] For a discussion of populism in the 2016 election and a comparison with the 2016 US Presidential election see Quinlan and Tinney (2019).

2002	49.3	41.5	23.0	22.5	10.2	10.8	6.7	2.6
2007	41.8	41.6	33.4	27.3	9.8	10.1	5.7	6.5
2011	18.8	17.4	47.0	36.1	14.8	19.4	8.4	9.9
2016	26.3	24.3	32.7	25.5	5.1	6.6	11.2	13.8

Table 3: Summary statistics of ranking variables

	Age	**Education (years)**	**Income (decile)**
Wave 2	49.8	13.7	7.6
Wave 4	51.1	13.9	5.0
Wave 5	48.5	13.8	3.8
Wave 8	51.1	14.9	4.9

Table 4. Voting Concentration Indices for 2002-2016 elections, standard errors in brackets

Income				
	FF	**FG**	**Lab**	**SF**
Wave 2 (2002), N=1597	-0.023 (0.032)	-0.020 (0.027)	0.007 (0.019)	-0.008 (0.016)
Wave 4 (2007), N=1236	-0.015 (0.035)	-0.004 (0.034)	0.012 (0.021)	-0.047*** (0.016)
Wave 5 (2011), N=1554	-0.060** (0.026)	0.098*** (0.031)	0.021 (0.022)	-0.089*** (0.017)
Wave 8 (2016), N=1910	-0.076*** (0.024)	0.131*** (0.027)	0.030** (0.012)	-0.101*** (0.017)
Education				
	FF	**FG**	**Lab**	**SF**

Wave 2 (2002), N=1597	-0.097*** (0.032)	0.030 (0.027)	0.007 (0.020)	0.002 (0.016)
Wave 4 (2007), N=1238	-0.100*** (0.035)	0.058* (0.034)	0.009 (0.022)	-0.047*** (0.016)
Wave 5 (2011), N=1554	-0.097*** (0.025)	0.054* (0.032)	0.064*** (0.024)	-0.048*** (0.016)
Wave 8 (2016), N=1935	-0.148*** (0.024)	0.112*** (0.026)	0.022** (0.010)	-0.062*** (0.016)
Age				
	FF	**FG**	**Lab**	**SF**
Wave 2 (2002), N=1597	0.082** (0.032)	0.081*** (0.028)	-0.037* (0.021)	-0.061*** (0.016)
Wave 4 (2007), N=1230	0.059* (0.035)	0.080** (0.033)	-0.049*** (0.019)	-0.048*** (0.018)
Wave 5 (2011), N=1554	0.107*** (0.027)	0.104*** (0.032)	-0.091*** (0.025)	-0.079*** (0.018)
Wave 8 (2016), N=1905	0.143*** (0.024)	0.067*** (0.026)	-0.022** (0.011)	-0.074*** (0.018)

*** p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1.

Figure 1

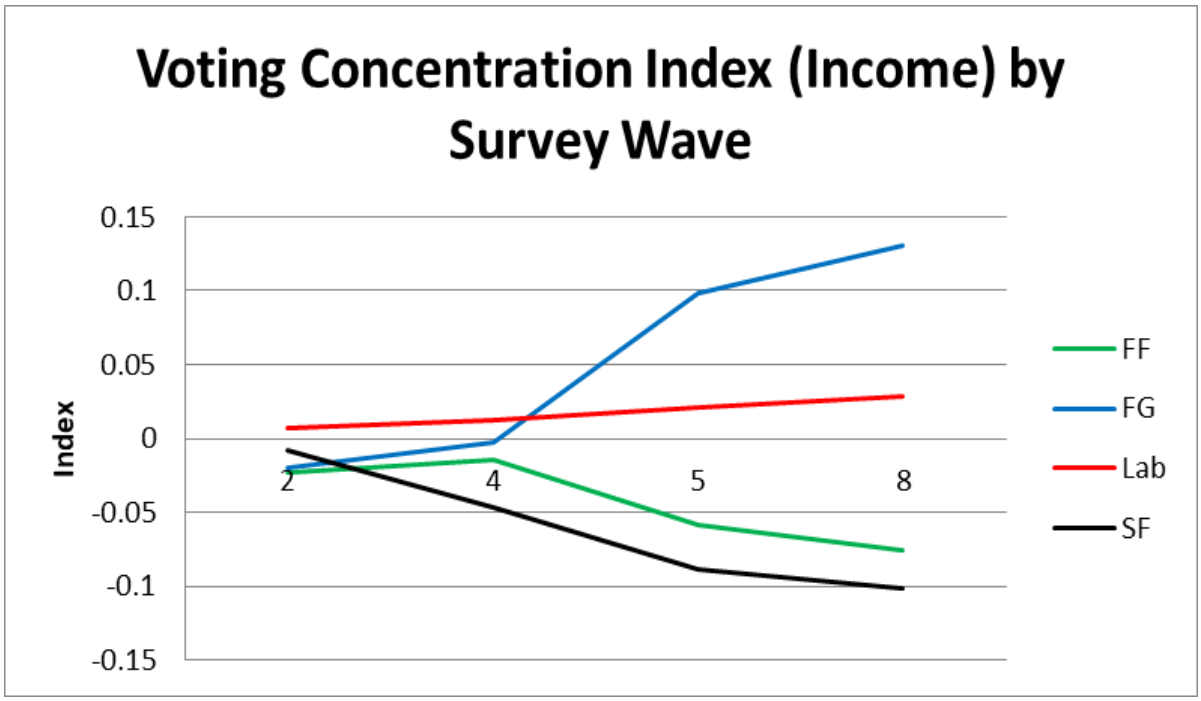


Figure 2

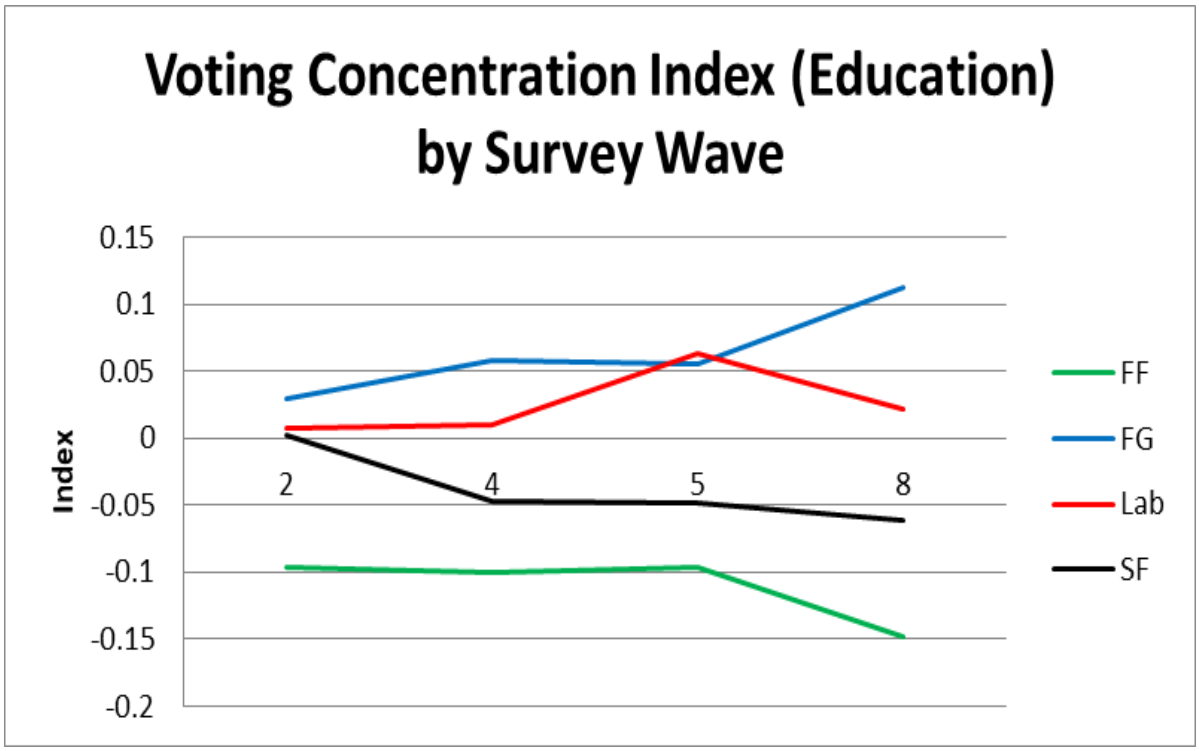
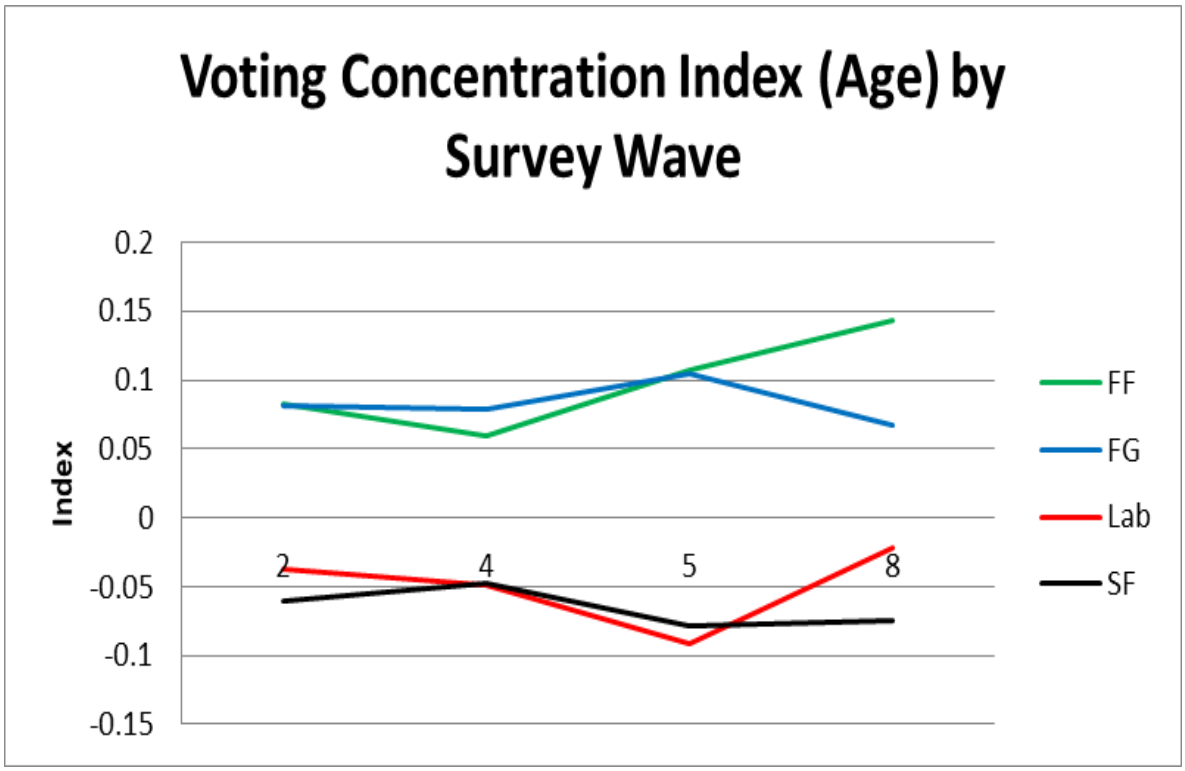


Figure 3


Voting Concentration Index (Age) by Survey Wave
Index
0.2
0.15
0.1
0.05
0
-0.05
-0.1
-0.15
2
4
5
8
FF
FG
Lab
SF

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