

Climate policy at a turning point in GE2020

At this stage, all of the main political parties fielding candidates in the general election have published manifestos, which have been put through a [rigorous analysis](#) by a panel of academic experts¹. We scored the parties against all of the [One Future asks](#), and also the recommendations of the [Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate Action](#) from March 2019. Details of the methodology and scoring system used can be found [here](#).

Given Ireland's poor record on emissions, and the challenge of achieving the cuts recommended by the UN by 2030, we should be seeing the parties who expect (or hope) to be in the next government publish concrete proposals for decarbonisation that are fully costed, with quantified emission reduction estimates for each measure, along with implementation timelines and dates.

System change, or incrementalism?

So the first measure of political ambition is the overarching policy framework that sets the date for net zero emissions, and the legal architecture to support that, in terms of carbon budgets and the requirement for all public bodies (such as local authorities, Coillte and Teagasc) to adhere to these.

We compared the parties against One Future's ask for min. 8% cuts year on year with legally binding 5-year carbon budgets. Achieving such mitigation rates will require, at a minimum, implementation of the recommendations of chapter 1 of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate Action (JOCCA) including strengthening of the 2015 Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act. But only some of the parties explicitly commit to new legislation (including Fine Gael, the Green Party, and the Labour Party) and many of the parties are vague about dates and targets, or commit only to honour the existing 2030 targets with reductions of 2% per annum (Fine Gael and Sinn Fein). People Before Profit have an ambitious proposal to reduce emissions by 53% by 2030, the Labour Party wants 50% cuts by 2030, while the Greens propose cuts of 7% per annum over 2020 levels by 2030. Sinn

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Féin scored the lowest of all parties in this category of climate governance. But even the most ambitious target still lags somewhat behind the recommended 7.6% per annum reductions by UNEP that developed countries should undertake.

Now is the time to invest in sustainable mobility

Both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil explicitly commit to the existing capital programme under Project Ireland 2040 which involves €5.7bn on national road schemes. Sinn Féin have a radical public transport plan in terms of levels of an additional €1bn in capital expenditure but no detailed policy proposals.

All of the parties propose more resources for rural transport but with few details, and often without any costings. There is a link between transport policy and all aspects of quality of life and sustainable development (whether rural or urban). And it goes beyond just making public transport more affordable or even free. Yet only the Green Party and the Social Democrats were willing to sign up to the One Future target of a 10% commitment for cycling out of the land transport budget.

Retrofitting Ireland

To meet our 2030 targets as a minimum (that's the 2% trajectory, not 7.6%), we would need to bring over a million Irish homes and buildings up to a minimum B2 BER standard. On buildings and retrofitting, the parties appear to have more in common: there is a spectrum of policy options that range between 50-100,000 retrofits a year. Significantly Fianna Fáil supported the proposal for one-stop-shops for expert advice, and most parties support a combination of low-cost loans and state investment, and prioritising retrofitting the public housing stock. Sinn Féin oppose the carbon tax, and perhaps as a result their retrofitting measures are most likely underfunded at €160m or an additional €12m per annum. Fianna Fáil propose a new Green Homes Agency which would coordinate the grants, project management and low-cost loans.

The energy revolution

We did not grade the parties for their support for or against a carbon tax as it was not a One Future demand. However, it would be hard to deny that measures are needed to curtail *both* the demand for and supply of fossil fuels. The Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate Action acknowledged this in its 2019 report: if we are serious about avoiding dangerous global warming we will need to keep all fossil fuel reserves in the ground – including the fracked gas which threatens to enter our energy networks as Liquefied Natural Gas. Both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil were reluctant to commit to banning LNG or ending offshore exploration immediately. They also declined to commit to the closure of all peat and coal fired power generation by 2021.

Ireland's renewable energy resource is a major asset that needs to be developed rapidly to displace fossil energy sources such as coal, peat, oil and gas. People Before Profit and Sinn Féin propose to increase the percentage of renewable electricity on the grid to 90% and 80% respectively by 2030, and all parties support some degree of grid access for micro generators such as households, schools and farms. But rising electricity demand from data centres and the need for widespread grid improvements and regulatory changes to support distributed microgeneration will prove to be a challenge.

Agriculture must play its part

In short, there is a credibility gap evident throughout these manifestos. And although the Green Party scored highest overall, the party did not supply any detailed costings with their manifesto unlike Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, People Before Profit and the Social Democrats. The JOCCA report recommended a new diversification strategy for agriculture, along with CAP reforms to reward farmers for high nature value farming and carbon sequestration, especially for peatlands which make up almost 20% of Ireland's land area. Without a nationwide programme for rewetting and restoring bogs, and science-based measures to limit methane and nitrous oxide emissions, current policies will exacerbate the climate and biodiversity impact of agricultural practices. The Social Democrats have some particularly strong proposals on biodiversity, but it is the bigger parties' positions on agriculture and the sustainability of farm incomes that will be crucial in next programme for government. At the

moment, neither Fine Gael nor Fianna Fáil propose to shift production away from livestock farming. Measures to promote anaerobic digestion on farms or forestry will not be sufficient to offset rising emissions from the dairy herd.

Conclusion

What are the prospects for a 33rd Dáil that prioritises climate action? Based on the manifestos we reviewed, the three largest parties are proposing patchy policies that are light on detail or measures that are siloed rather than making climate action an overarching priority. Above all, we will need to see, as a matter of urgency, a new climate bill that corrects the deficiencies of the 2015 Act, and that sets a net zero target well before 2050 with 5-year carbon budgets. Those parties that aim to be in the next government will need to start thinking about providing detailed costings and quantified emission reductions to match their rhetorical gestures.