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ELECTIONS IN CONTEXT

The Irish General Election of February 2016: Towards a New Politics or an Early Election?

Conor Little, University of Copenhagen

The general election that followed the ‘earthquake’ of 25 February 2011 (Gallagher and Marsh 2011; Hutcheson 2011; Little 2011) was always going to be an important staging post on the journey from the Fianna Fáil party’s predominance towards some new dispensation. That election took place five years and one day later. It delivered the most fragmented Dáil (lower house of parliament) ever and was followed by Ireland’s longest government formation process. Fine Gael’s Enda Kenny succeeded in becoming the first leader of his party since the 1920s¹ to retain the office of Taoiseach (Prime Minister) after a general election. He achieved this by negotiating a minority coalition with several non-party (‘Independent’) TDs (MPs) and a ‘confidence and supply’ agreement with Fianna Fáil. However, the durability of these arrangements is in doubt.

Background to the Election

Having taken office with the largest parliamentary majority of any Irish government in March 2011, the outgoing coalition of Fine Gael and the Labour Party could point to some successes by early 2016, despite operating within the terms of Ireland’s multi-lateral ‘bailout’ loan (see

¹ The party was then called *Cumann na nGaedheal*.

Brazys and Regan 2016). It had provided continuity in government for five years, unemployment was less than 9% and falling, the economy was growing strongly, tax receipts were rising, and Ireland's borrowing costs were low. It had introduced some substantively and symbolically important reforms, such as same-sex marriage (see Elkins *et al.* 2016) and candidate gender quotas. Although the government parties – especially the Labour Party – were perceived to have broken key election promises, they had also kept many promises: 44% of their manifesto pledges were fulfilled fully and 18% partially, a higher tally than previous governments in good economic times (Costello and Thomson, forthcoming).

Alongside these successes, policy failures and social problems abounded. A housing and homelessness crisis was rapidly deteriorating: the number of homeless children in Dublin doubled to 1,570 in the year to January 2016. Youth unemployment and emigration remained high. The government had abandoned its central healthcare policy of Universal Health Insurance; by botching the establishment of a national water utility and the introduction of water charges it had allowed a large anti-water charges movement to gain momentum; and it had disappointed on promises of political reform.

The Taoiseach was constitutionally obliged to call an election by 9 March 2016; in Autumn 2015, its timing became the focus of intense speculation. Some Fine Gael TDs pushed for an election to follow the October Budget, and the normally sober newspaper of record, *The Irish Times*, led in early October with the headline that a 'November election looms as Kenny to reveal key pledge'. However, the Labour Party, facing the prospect of significant seat losses, successfully opposed the calling of a November election.

Early in the new year, the timing of the election was signalled quite clearly, while maintaining some room for manoeuvre. Three of the four main parties – Fine Gael, Fianna

Fáil, and Labour – held their party conferences in January.² The government granted the President, who is a key figure in the process of dissolving the lower house, permission to go on a holiday from 14 to 24 February. At a cabinet meeting on 2 February, the Taoiseach informed ministers that he would seek to have the Dáil dissolved the following day. After a perfunctory statement to the lower house on 3 February, he announced the election date by way of a video message on social media: Friday 26 February.

The government's campaign got off to a faltering start. Some journalists felt that Kenny handled the dissolution of the lower house poorly and that he was avoiding engagements with traditional news media. He struggled to explain core elements of his party's economic policies. There was little scope for increasing spending or reducing taxes in the years ahead, but the extent of that 'fiscal space' became a key issue. Fine Gael's estimate was exposed by Sinn Féin as being an overstatement and all of the main parties identified figures higher than the national Fiscal Advisory Council's estimate of €3.2bn.

Fine Gael's main messages were to 'keep the [economic] recovery going' and to choose political stability over 'chaos'. Both government parties framed their main competitors – Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin – as parties that had 'wrecked' the economy and that 'would wreck' the economy, respectively. They pointed to Portugal as an example of the dangers of post-election uncertainty (Fernandes 2016); to Spain, where no new government had formed after its December election; and to Greece's difficulties under a Syriza-led coalition as a reason not to support anti-austerity parties (Rori 2016). During the campaign, they increasingly emphasised economic threats, including global risks, a UK exit from the EU, and the response of mobile capital to an unstable or unorthodox coalition. Some commentators drew parallels with the British Conservative Party's campaign in 2015 (Green

² Sinn Féin, which had scheduled its conference for February, postponed it until after the election to avoid consuming its allocation of media coverage during the campaign with a party conference.

and Prosser 2016) and indeed Fine Gael had turned to that party and their consultants for advice as they prepared for the election; in late January, Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron endorsed Fine Gael's 'long term economic plan'. Some frustration at the failure of their strategy was perhaps evident when, days before polling day, the Taoiseach referred to voters in his hometown who did not appreciate the government's achievements as 'whingers'.

The Labour Party tried to distinguish itself from its coalition partner and, indeed, it differed from Fine Gael on a range of issues, such as taxation, the place of religion in education, abortion, and the goal of universal free General Practitioner healthcare by 2020. It emphasised that it was required for 'balance' in government. Just before the campaign began, President Michael D. Higgins, a former Labour TD, declared that parties' emphasis on tax cuts (and, implicitly, Fine Gael's policy) was not compatible with an ethical society. This was controversial, as the President is expected to remain at a remove from day-to-day politics.

Fianna Fáil approached the election in a difficult position: although the party had disposed with apologies for its role in Ireland's economic crisis early in the parliamentary term, its reputation for competence on economic policy was in tatters; there were limits to how much it could credibly oppose measures that it had initiated in the previous government; and it was divided on the major 'moral' issues of the moment: same-sex marriage and abortion. Its leader, Micheál Martin, majored on 'fairness' – a theme that the party had developed over several years – and he described his party as belonging to the centre-left.

In the highly competitive space on the left, Sinn Féin sought to position itself as the leader of anti-austerity sentiment. It attempted to harness votes for leftist parties and Independents through the Right2Change platform, encouraging its voters to give a high preference to like-minded candidates. More than 100 candidates subscribed to the platform (of which 50 were Sinn Féin's candidates) which was supported by several trade unions. Also on the left, the small Anti-Austerity Alliance and People Before Profit parties merged in late

2015. Opposition to water charges remained a central focus for the left but its anti-austerity offer was based on shifting sands, as Syriza became unfashionable after entering government in Greece in 2015 and Ireland's economic recovery continued. In mid-February, former Greek Finance Minister Yannis Varoufakis intervened in the election campaign, urging Irish voters to remove the government.

The absence of new parties was a notable feature of the volatile election in 2011. Approaching the 2016 election, three potentially significant new groupings formed. On the right, Renua Ireland was founded by former Fine Gael TDs and Senators who had left the party due to their opposition to legislation that allowed abortion in circumstances where the life of the pregnant woman was in danger. (In an effort to ensure that abortion did not impinge on the election campaign, Enda Kenny announced in November 2015 that he would refer the future of Ireland's constitutional prohibition on abortion to a Citizens' Assembly.) On the centre-left, the Social Democrats was founded by three TDs with national profiles, including one who had been a junior minister representing Labour in 2011 and 2012 and another (also a former Labour member) who had pursued the government with allegations that businessman and media baron Denis O'Brien had been favoured in his dealings with a State-owned bank. A diverse group of Independent candidates, including five sitting TDs, formed the Independent Alliance group, but did not register as a political party. In addition to these three new groupings, four left-wing Independent TDs formed their own Independents4Change party and the Green Party, which had been represented in parliament from 1989 until its electoral drubbing in 2011, sought to regain a parliamentary presence.

The beginning of the election campaign coincided with two gang-related killings in Dublin that highlighted the problem of organised crime. This put pressure on the government, but above all it put Sinn Féin in a difficult position. The party was opposed to the non-jury Special Criminal Court (SCC), which was intended to deal with organised crime, and which

had tried members of Sinn Féin and the Irish Republican Army (IRA). In the aftermath of the killings, the SCC was supported in public opinion by a majority of two to one. At the same time, a prominent Sinn Féin supporter was in the process of being sentenced by the SCC for tax evasion. His sentence of 18 months in prison was delivered on polling day.

Opinion polls frequently drove the media agenda during the campaign. As it entered its final week, there seemed to have been little detectable change in party support (Louwse 2015, 2016). Crucially, the government parties had made no progress towards building the electoral base that they would need to return to office without significant additional support in parliament. Local opinion polls in some of the 40 multi-member constituencies also took a prominent place in the news media indicating, amongst other things, that the Labour party leader would lose her seat; that the Renua Ireland leader was at risk of losing her seat; and that the Green Party's leader would fail to win a seat.

In the months before the campaign, Fine Gael and Labour each stated their preference for remaining in government together. Fianna Fáil ruled out coalition with the two other parties that were likely to emerge with most seats – Fine Gael and Sinn Féin – yet insisted that they intended to enter government. Sinn Féin ruled out entering government as a junior partner.

In late January, attention turned to the Independents from whom Enda Kenny would seek support and, in particular, whether he would seek support from the disgraced (yet electorally successful) former Fine Gael minister Michael Lowry (see Byrne 2012: 160–8). After spending some days avoiding foreclosing this option, the Fine Gael leader eventually ruled out any 'dealings' with Independents. As the government parties' failure to gain support became clear, a novel Fine Gael-Fianna Fáil coalition became more likely. Kenny avoided ruling this out for some of the campaign but ultimately, during a televised leader's debate, he said that he would 'certainly not' do business with the Fianna Fáil leader.

Intra-party tensions about candidate-selection are a regular feature of Irish politics and the months before this election proved particularly lively in this regard. In late 2015, a Fine Gael TD took his own party to court after not being selected as a candidate, forcing them to add him to the ticket. A smaller Dáil of 158 TDs (down from 166 in 2011) and new candidate selection gender quotas of 30% – to be achieved on pain of losing half of a party’s public funding – led to some unedifying public rows between party members. In several cases, the parties imposed female candidates on local constituency organisations. A Fianna Fáil member took a legal challenge against the quotas, but failed due to his lack of legal standing to take the case. Ultimately, almost 30% of candidates (163 out of 551) were women, a substantial increase from 15% in 2011. No party failed to meet the 30% quota and the five parties standing the most candidates selected between 31% and 36% women. Women accounted for just 19% of the 159 Independent candidates.

The Result

The final count ended on Thursday 3 March at 8.30am. Turnout was 65%, which is within the range of pre-crisis elections. The election produced most fragmented Dáil ever, with the largest parties winning modest seat shares and with a large number of Independent candidates and minor party TDs elected. The effective number of parties (Laakso and Taagepera 1979) stood at 4.9, up from 3.6 in 2011. Twenty two percent of TDs were women (up from 15% in 2011) and quotas will no doubt continue to be a mechanism for achieving greater gender balance, not least as they rise to 40% in 2023.

More than half of voters reported deciding how to vote during the three-week campaign and many (about four in ten) gave precedence to choosing individual candidates who would look after their local constituency over choosing parties, governments or policies. Health services and the economy were each the most important issues for about one in five voters.

Almost half of voters thought the economy had improved in the year before the election (and only one in five thought it had disimproved), but only a quarter felt themselves better off. Consistent with the party’s main messages, economic policy and ‘stable government’ were the most important issues for Fine Gael voters. While economic issues were also influential for those voting for the other main parties, the health service was the most important issue for Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and Labour Party voters. Water charges – an issue that was to dominate the government formation process –was the most important issue for fewer than one in ten voters, but it was highly salient for those who voted for Sinn Féin, small parties on the left, and some Independents (RTÉ/B&A 2016).

TABLE 1

RESULTS OF THE IRISH GENERAL ELECTION OF FEBRUARY 2016

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Fine Gael remained the largest party, but won little over a quarter of the votes, underperforming even its worst opinion poll estimates in the six months before the election. It retained little more than half of voters who reported voting for Fine Gael in 2011, losing a substantial tranche of those former voters to Fianna Fáil (RTÉ/B&A 2016). It succeeded in translating its modest vote share into a substantially greater seat share (31.6%) in part because it attracted more than half of the lower-order preferences from the ballots of eliminated Labour Party candidates. It was down 26 TDs on its 2011 result (although nine of these were accounted for by losses during the parliamentary term). Its losses at the election included two senior ministers, who continued in office until a new government was formed.

The Labour Party won its lowest ever seat share of 4.4% (seven seats), which was 18 percentage points and 30 seats down on 2011, and far below its typical seat share of about

10%. It too lost two senior ministers. Only 10% of exit poll respondents reported voting for Labour in 2011 (compared to their 19.5% vote share at that election), indicating a failure of their former voters to turn out and, perhaps, regret at their vote choice. Among those who turned out and who did report voting for Labour in 2011, little more than a third voted again for the party in 2016. They lost significant proportions of former voters (about 10% each) to Fine Gael, Sinn Féin and to non-party Independents (RTÉ/B&A 2016).

That Labour Party leader Joan Burton would have to step down appeared likely even before the election, not least because she had justified her own ouster of the previous leader in 2014 with reference to the party's electoral fortunes. After the election, the party's Deputy Leader and Director of Elections, Alan Kelly, had the most obvious leadership ambitions, but he had involved himself in several controversies during the campaign, including an argument with a journalist, refusing to say whether the party leader was his 'boss', and proclaiming that 'power is a drug'. He so-alienated colleagues that he could not find anyone among the handful of surviving Labour TDs to nominate him for the position and so Brendan Howlin was selected uncontested.

Although it did not re-emerge as the largest party, and despite it being its second-worst general election result since the 1920s, Fianna Fáil effectively won the election. After its exceptionally poor result in 2011, it gained 16 percentage points in seat share, exceeding even its highest opinion poll estimates. Fine Gael's failure made Fianna Fáil's result seem all the more impressive. Its vote share left it little more than one percentage point behind Fine Gael and it outperformed Sinn Féin by some considerable distance. The result represented a triumph for party leader Micheál Martin who had performed well during the campaign, not least in televised debates (RTÉ/B&A 2016). It re-set the balance of power between him and his rivals within the party, amongst whom dissent had rumbled during his five years as leader.

Although Sinn Féin's result represented yet another underperformance relative to its showing in opinion polls, it was also a further step in its steady electoral growth. Its basis for growing further is underlined by the fact that it was the strongest party among young voters (under-35s) and that it was strong in both urban and rural constituencies (RTÉ/B&A 2016). It had suffered in the final week of the campaign after its leader, Gerry Adams, did a series of very poor live interviews in which his failure to master the detail of policy was once again exposed. The party also continued to suffer from a relatively poor rate of vote transfers, a legacy of its association with political violence. Nonetheless, after 33 years as leader, Adams was re-elected by the party conference that followed the election.

The performance of the new parties ranged from unspectacular to poor. The Social Democrats retained its three seats and Independents4Change retained their four seats. Renua Ireland lost all three of its seats and within months its highest-profile figures left the party, despite its entitlement to public funding. The Anti-Austerity Alliance/People Before Profit party gained two seats, as did the (non-party) Independent Alliance. Many other non-party candidates performed well. One of the more unusual achievements was that of the Healy-Rae brothers, whose father had been a TD before them, and who comfortably won two seats in the same (five-seat) constituency. The Green Party returned to the Dáil with two TDs.

The New Government

The new Dáil elected a Ceann Comhairle (Speaker) on 10 March, using a secret ballot of TDs for the first time, although voting was mainly along party lines. The Social Democrats, the Green Party and the Labour Party each ruled out entering cabinet relatively early in the government formation process. As the largest party, Fine Gael had the best chance of forming a coalition, but throughout March, Fianna Fáil also pursued negotiations with the smaller parties and Independents, arguing that they too could lead a government. They abandoned

this process in mid-April. By then, a putative Fine Gael-led government had received pledges of support from two non-party TDs – former Fine Gael minister Michael Lowry and marriage equality campaigner Katherine Zappone – but an arrangement between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil became a precondition for other Independents’ support, as this was necessary in order to make any government viable.

Fianna Fáil had put water charges on the agenda after the election – most likely because of its importance to its electoral rivals – and the issue dominated negotiations between the two parties. At the end of April, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil agreed on a suspension and review of water charges, several broad policy parameters, and Fianna Fáil’s abstention in votes of confidence and on budgetary measures. Suspending water charges was a significant concession for Fine Gael, which had incurred substantial electoral costs at local and national level in defending the unpopular measure.

The new coalition minority government took office after a 10-week government formation process. Dramatically, negotiations with Independents continued until the vote of investiture on 6 May, even while speeches on nominations for Taoiseach took place in the Dáil chamber. Fianna Fáil claimed that it would support Kenny by abstaining only if he received at least 58 votes. Ultimately, he received 59 votes in favour of his nomination (Fine Gael and nine Independents) and 49 against, with 49 abstentions (Fianna Fáil,³ four Independents, and two Green Party TDs).

Of the fourteen senior cabinet ministers appointed by Kenny, four retained their portfolios, four were moved within cabinet, and three were promoted into cabinet. Three Independents were appointed as senior ministers and one received a junior ministerial portfolio with the right to sit in cabinet. Government departments were renamed and reconfigured, with ‘Housing’, ‘Planning’, ‘Rural Affairs’ and ‘Climate Action’ added to

³ These figures do not include one Fianna Fáil TD who had been elected Ceann Comhairle (Speaker). The Ceann Comhairle does not usually vote.

Departmental titles (although not all for the first time). The removal of ‘Environment’ from the title of any government department was sufficiently controversial that it was reinstated within weeks, while the arts community was unhappy with arts policy being lumped into the Department of Regional Development, Rural Affairs, Arts and the *Gaeltacht*.⁴ Showing clear signs of a Taoiseach with an acute need to keep on board as many TDs as possible, Kenny increased the number of junior ministries from 15 to 18, the second-highest number ever, meaning that half of Fine Gael TDs would hold a ministerial position. Neither the cabinet, which included four women, nor the wider ministerial corps came close to the gender-balanced government that Kenny had said, in January, that he wanted to achieve. Then again, there was little about this new government that reflected his pre-election wishes.

The Fine Gael-led coalition appears more fragile than any newly-formed Irish government in recent history. Potential threats to its stability come from Fine Gael’s multiple Independent coalition partners, from Fianna Fáil, and from within Fine Gael. During the election campaign, Kenny said that he would serve a full term but that he would not lead Fine Gael into another general election. During negotiations for government, one of the Independents described the Taoiseach as ‘possibly a political corpse’. (He was later appointed Transport Minister.) The all-but disastrous election result for Fine Gael has increased the likelihood that Kenny will leave office early in the term.

As a result of the government’s fragility, the implementation of much of the 160-page Programme for Government negotiated by Fine Gael and Independents must also be in doubt. Many have pointed to the need for a ‘new politics’ of negotiation and compromise in parliament to ensure stability and legislative productivity. Shifting majorities and defeat by alternative majorities may become regular features in what has always been among the most executive-dominated parliamentary democracies (MacCarthaigh 2005: 45–51; Martin and

⁴ Irish-speaking areas.

Vanberg 2011: 40–2). An all-party committee on Dáil reform began meeting in March to agree new parliamentary rules that would facilitate this ‘new politics’. Whether the Irish system can perform this change of gear during the 32nd Dáil – and how long that parliamentary term will last – remain open questions.

Notes on Contributor

Conor Little is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Copenhagen where his research is funded by an Individual Postdoctoral Grant from the Danish Council for Independent Research | Social Sciences (FSE). His research interests include political parties, political careers, and the comparative politics of climate change. His research has been published in *Scandinavian Political Studies* and *West European Politics*. [cli@ifs.ku.dk]

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Table 1. Results of the Irish general election of February 2016

	2016			2011		
	Seats N	Votes	Votes %	Seats N	Votes	Votes %
Fine Gael	50*	544230	25.5	76	801628	36.1
Fianna Fáil	44	519353	24.3	20*	387358	17.4
Non-party ('Independents')**	19	334814	15.7	15	279459	12.6
Sinn Féin	23	295313	13.8	14	220661	9.9
Labour Party	7	140893	6.6	37	431796	19.5
Anti-Austerity Alliance/People Before Profit***	6	84168	3.9	NA	NA	NA
Social Democrats	3	64094	3.0	NA	NA	NA
Green Party	2	57997	2.7	0	41039	1.9
Renua Ireland	0	46552	2.2	NA	NA	NA
Independents 4 Change	4	31365	1.5	NA	NA	NA
Other parties	0	14116	0.7	0	10097	0.5
Socialist Party	NA	NA	NA	2	26770	1.2
People Before Profit Alliance	NA	NA	NA	2	21551	1.0
Totals	158	2132895	99.9	166	2220359	100.1
Turnout		65.1%			69.9%	

* Includes the outgoing Speaker (Ceann Comhairle) who is returned automatically.

** Includes the Workers and Unemployed Action party, which ran only one candidate.

*** The Anti-Austerity Alliance - People Before Profit party was a joint initiative of the Socialist Party (under the Anti-Austerity Alliance label) and the People Before Profit Alliance.

Turnout figures are based on the number of voters/electorate as per the Register of Electors.

Source: Houses of the Oireachtas Service 2016