

Change gradually, then all at once: the general election of February 2020 in the Republic of Ireland

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Abstract

At the general election of February 2020, Sinn Féin won a plurality of the vote in the Republic of Ireland for the first time. The party system remained highly fragmented and, with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael refusing to enter government with Sinn Féin, government formation took a record 20 weeks. Those 20 weeks coincided with the emergence of the Covid-19 public health emergency in Europe. A minority caretaker government introduced significant policy measures to address the emerging public health and economic crises. At the end of June, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael entered government together for the first time, and the Green Party joined them in a three-party majority coalition. The government faces significant challenges resulting from Covid-19 and from the UK's exit from the EU, and other policy problems including housing and healthcare.

Keywords: Ireland; election; caretaker government; Brexit; Covid-19; Sinn Féin

Introduction

In the 2010s, the Irish party system retained some of its core characteristics despite highly volatile elections. The election of February 2020 was characterised by less inter-party volatility than the 2011 or 2016 elections, but it pushed the Irish party system across some important thresholds. Sinn Féin became the largest party by vote share for the first time, failing to become the largest party in the Dáil (lower house) because it underestimated its own electoral potential and therefore selected too few candidates. The results led to a long government formation period, in common with several other recent elections in Europe (see Eberl *et al.* 2020; Rodon 2020; Pilet 2020). Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael each refused to countenance entering government with Sinn Féin, and so they were forced to form a government coalition with one another – another first for the Irish party system. The Green Party’s participation in the coalition gave the new government a majority in the Dáil.

More than ever before, government and opposition are divided along right–left lines, suggesting that Irish exceptionalism in the structure of its party politics may be coming to an end. But in the first months of the new legislature, ordinary politics was largely subsumed by the emergence of the Covid-19 crisis, which presented a hard test of Ireland’s caretaker institutions and is one of several significant challenges facing the new government.

Background to the election

The general elections of 2011 and 2016 in Ireland were volatile and even seismic, yet the Irish party system remained within some of its distinctive parameters: it continued to be weighted towards the centre-right and structured around competition between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil to lead government coalitions with smaller parties. In 2016, some of the electoral results of the

earthquake election of 2011 were reversed, partly or in full: Fine Gael's results reverted to being within their normal range, Labour's electoral success turned out to be transitory, and Fianna Fáil recovered some ground (Little 2011, 2017; Little and Farrell, in press).

The governing arrangement that emerged ten weeks after the 2016 election – Fianna Fáil's abstention on budgetary and confidence issues to support a minority coalition of Fine Gael and some non-party ('Independent') TDs (MPs) endured for four years. Its surprising stability was underpinned by the unfolding Brexit process; indeed, the threat posed to Ireland by Brexit was the reason given by Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin for extending his support for the government through 2019. And for most of the coalition's lifespan, neither Fianna Fáil nor the non-party TDs who supported the government had a strong electoral incentive to defect from the arrangement, especially after Fine Gael replaced Enda Kenny with Leo Varadkar as party leader and Taoiseach (premier) in mid-2017, giving the party a sustained boost in public support and a clear lead over Fianna Fáil in opinion polls until early 2019 (Louwarse and Müller 2020).

Sinn Féin changed its leader too, in February 2018. After 34 years as party leader, Gerry Adams stepped down and was succeeded by Mary Lou McDonald. The party had grown fairly steadily over the previous two decades, but upon McDonald assuming the leadership, it experienced some setbacks: its candidate came only fourth in the presidential election in October 2018 and in mid-2019 it lost half of its councillors at local elections and two of its three seats in the European Parliament.

Economic and fiscal indicators were strong in 2019 and early 2020, but there were also clear threats posed by Brexit and international pressure for corporate tax reform. As the economy had recovered, healthcare and housing had taken the place of unemployment and the economy as the public's main concerns (Collins 2020; European Commission 2020).

Inside the Houses of the Oireachtas (parliament), the most significant changes were a result of the small size of the minority coalition, which commanded little more than one third of Dáil seats. While Fianna Fáil was bound to support the government on confidence and budget issues, it was under no such obligation on many other issues, leading to regular defeats for the government in parliament. Fifteen Private Members' Bills (PMBs) were enacted during the 32nd Dáil, compared to just 41 that had been enacted between 1923 and 2015 (Houses of the Oireachtas 2020a). Oireachtas committees adopted substantial reports that garnered cross-party support and informed government policy on issues including healthcare and climate change.

The government's position became precarious in late 2019. In one of four bye-elections held on 29 November, Sinn Féin won a seat that Fine Gael had previously held. The government defeated by 56 votes to 53 a confidence motion in the housing minister in early December, thanks to the support of three Independents who wished to avoid an election. However, the government's prospects were dim: after the vote, one Fianna Fáil TD said that he would not abstain again on a confidence motion and a Fine Gael TD resigned in order to take up a position in an EU Commissioner's *cabinet*, having double-jobbed for the European People's Party in Brussels for two years while claiming a TD's salary and expenses.

With record numbers of patients waiting for treatment in accident and emergency units in January, 750,000 people on public waiting lists, and with the costs of a new National Children's Hospital rising rapidly, an opposition Independent TD said that he would move a motion of no-confidence in the health minister within weeks. Thus, it was with a significant defeat in prospect (O'Malley 2019) that the Taoiseach indicated in a radio interview on Sunday 12 January that he would ask for the Dáil to be dissolved; the dissolution followed on 14 January, with the election set for Saturday 8 February. A general election on a Saturday was a new departure for Ireland,

with the closest precedent being the pre-independence UK general election of 1918. When nominations closed on 22 January, 531 candidates were to compete for 159 seats.

Sinn Féin succeeded in setting the campaign agenda and it won the social media campaign with an ‘anti-elite populist narrative’ (Park and Suiter in press). Its opposition to planned increases in the age at which retirees could draw a State pension put its rivals on the back foot and made it the surprise issue of the campaign. Its housing policies, too, were distinct from Fianna Fáil’s and Fine Gael’s and appealed to young people. They placed a heavy emphasis on state intervention and spending and they were delivered by a housing spokesperson who was seen as credible (Taylor and Leahy 2020). Around 10,000 people were homeless and this issue became even more salient when, in the first days of the campaign, a mechanical digger that a state agency was using to remove tents inflicted life-changing injuries on a homeless man in Dublin.

Ireland’s relationship with the UK impinged on the election in several ways. Fine Gael faced criticism in early January about a planned State event that would include commemoration of members of Ireland’s pre-independence (pre-1922) police forces. Just before the election was called, Sinn Féin agreed to re-establish the executive in Northern Ireland – it having been in abeyance for three years – in which they would share power with four other parties, potentially broadening its appeal.

However, Brexit, which had consumed much political attention during the 32nd Dáil, featured very little on the agenda. The Withdrawal Agreement had been struck between the EU and the UK in late 2019 and following the UK general election in December (Prosser 2020), the UK’s exit from the EU was set for 31 January. Ultimately, Brexit was not an influential issue at

the polls (Collins 2020) and this was to the disadvantage of Fine Gael, which was perceived to have handled it competently.

Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil ruled out coalition with Sinn Féin. Fianna Fáil also ruled out coalition with Fine Gael, but Fine Gael remained open to coalition with Fianna Fáil. Sinn Féin said that it would speak with all parties and unlike in 2016, it did not rule out being a junior coalition partner; it did make a referendum on unity between Ireland and Northern Ireland a precondition for participation in government.

On the left, Solidarity (formerly the Socialist Party and the Anti-Austerity Alliance) and People Before Profit continued to work together in an alliance. Under the Single-Transferable Vote system voters' lower-order preferences ('transfers') can be instrumental in electing candidates and this was reflected in parties' campaigns. Leftist parties urged voters to 'vote left, transfer left' between Sinn Féin and other leftist candidates. On the centre-left, Labour asked its voters to transfer to Greens, Social Democrats, and 'progressive Independents', but this was not reciprocated. The Greens had high hopes given the increased salience of climate change, their surprise success at the local and European elections, and a bye-election success in 2019. On the right, Aontú was founded as a new nationalist and socially conservative party by a TD who was expelled from Sinn Féin because of his position on abortion. The Independent Alliance, an informal grouping that had supported the government, disintegrated, with its TDs retiring or severing ties with the alliance.

Opinion polls showed big changes in party support between late 2019 and February 2020, which culminated in Sinn Féin leading in some opinion polls taken a week before polling day (Louwerse and Müller 2020). Such was the surge in public support for Sinn Féin that Mary Lou McDonald was added to a televised debate between Martin and Varadkar in the final week of the

campaign. As a result of what transpired in that debate, much of that final week focused on the murder of a 21 year-old man who was beaten to death by Irish Republican Army (IRA) members in 2007, and an attempt shortly thereafter by former IRA member Conor Murphy (a Sinn Féin MP in 2007 and newly-appointed finance minister in Northern Ireland in early 2020), to denigrate the victim by alleging publicly that he was involved in criminality. Mary Lou McDonald was confronted with Murphy's 2007 comments during the televised debate and denied he had made them, but the next day Murphy apologised for his comments and suggested that Mary Lou McDonald's denial was due to a misunderstanding on her part. The victim's mother maintained that Murphy should resign and give the names of those involved in the murder to the police.

The result

2,183,489 valid votes were cast; this represented low turnout at an Irish general election, at 62% of those on the electoral register. Fragmentation in the Dáil reached a new high, at 5.95 'effective' parliamentary parties (Laakso and Taagepera 1979); the results included the smallest ever seat share for a 'largest party' (Fianna Fáil, with 23.8%). For the first time, no two parties could form a majority without the support of other TDs.

Sinn Féin became the largest party by vote share, gaining 10.7 percentage points (p.p.) since 2016. It was the first time in the nearly century-long history of the State that any party other than Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael (and its predecessors) had won a plurality of the vote. Only by virtue of its candidate selection strategy – it nominated just 42 candidates, of which 37 were elected – did Sinn Féin miss out on winning most seats. Its fortunes had changed rapidly: some of its new TDs had failed to win seats on local councils in mid-2019. It won approximately one

third of the vote among under-35s, suggesting that its support for past paramilitary violence does not deter many younger voters. Its support of the IRA continued to cause controversy after polling, when one of its TDs exclaimed ‘Up the RA!’ during a victory speech.

Fianna Fáil lost vote share (-2.1 p.p.) but held one seat more than Sinn Féin thanks to the automatically-returned Ceann Comhairle (speaker of the Dáil), a Fianna Fáil TD. Fine Gael came close behind, experiencing its second very poor result in as many general elections. It lost 4.6 p.p. of vote share, having lost 10.6 p.p. in 2016. Like in 2016, Fine Gael appeared to have misjudged its campaign message, this time emphasising Brexit while voters’ concerns were elsewhere. Among the smaller parties, the Greens were the big winners, with twelve TDs. The Social Democrats gained seats, while Labour and Solidarity/People Before Profit each lost a seat. Non-party TDs collectively retained a high level of representation, comprising nearly one-eighth of the new Dáil.

Table 1. Results of the Irish general election of February 2020

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

There was little change in the Dáil’s gender balance – or lack thereof. While 31% of candidates were women, thanks in part to the candidate gender quota of 30% introduced ahead of the 2016 general election, just thirty-six women were elected (22.5%); this was a marginal increase on the 35 women elected in 2016 and on the 33 female incumbents at dissolution. When the new government was formed, four women (26.7%) and eleven men held senior ministerial

positions. The candidate gender quota – which parties must meet on pain of losing part of their public funding – will increase to 40% from 2023.

A caretaker government, Covid-19, and – eventually – a new government

It was to be an eventful 20 weeks between the election and the formation of a new government, the longest government formation period in the history of the State. The first sitting of the new Dáil took place on 20 February and Fianna Fáil's Seán Ó'Fearghail was re-elected Cean Comhairle in a secret ballot, comfortably defeating non-party TD Denis Naughten. No other party stood a candidate, perhaps reserving their TDs for coalition bargaining. (The Cean Comhairle has a casting vote in the event of a tie, but does not otherwise vote.)

Although it now held less than one quarter of Dáil seats and three of its ministers no longer held parliamentary seats – an unusual situation in Irish politics – a caretaker government was to lead Ireland's initial response to the Covid-19 health emergency. The threat of Covid-19 had become clear to the Irish health authorities in late January, and they established a National Public Health Emergency Team on Covid-19 comprising officials from the health and social services to advise on Ireland's response. Ireland detected its first case on 29 February and the first known death occurred on 11 March. During the week beginning 9 March, the government announced significant funding for sick pay and the health service; it cancelled St. Patrick's Day gatherings (Ireland's national day); it closed childcare and educational institutions; and it asked pubs to close. On 16 March, it published a National Action Plan on Covid-19 and from 28 March until 18 May it closed most non-essential services and everyone was asked to remain at home, with limited exceptions. Thereafter, restrictions were gradually eased. The government emphasised throughout that its response was led by public health advice. By the time the new

government formed at the end of June, more than 1700 people had died from the virus, most of them in April.

In the government formation process, Mary-Lou McDonald took the initiative immediately after the election, talking to the left and centre-left, and describing a Fine Gael-Fianna Fáil coalition as her least preferred outcome. Within days, however, Sinn Féin acknowledged that it could not muster the seats for a viable government. It organised a series of ‘Government for Change’ rallies, although this was interrupted in early March when detected cases of Covid-19 increased.

Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin was in a weak bargaining position, most likely facing a leadership contest if his party again ended up in opposition. Immediately after the election, he had left open the possibility of coalition with Sinn Féin but, deterred by intra-party dissent, he reaffirmed his stated position ruling out such a coalition. He began talks with Fine Gael in March, a decision eased by the need for a new government in the context of the Covid-19 crisis; these talks produced an agreed framework policy document in mid-April. As the government formation process wore on, Fianna Fáil’s position weakened further, as it fared very poorly in all published post-election opinion polls. In contrast, Fine Gael’s fortunes – and those of its previously embattled health minister – improved during the first months of the Covid-19 crisis (Louwerse and Müller 2020), as it was seen to perform competently and to follow expert advice.

The Green Party became central to many of the most feasible parliamentary majorities due to its size and its broad acceptability as a coalition partner. With its number of TDs having quadrupled at the election, its number of councillors having quadrupled in mid-2019, and its membership quadrupling over the previous two years, it was now a much broader church than before and it was troubled by internal divisions. Several of its new TDs and councillors opposed

entering coalition and the party's deputy leader, Catherine Martin, challenged Éamon Ryan for the party leadership. Martin was appointed head of the party's negotiation team and supported its entry into government, despite initial misgivings. Their participation in government was ultimately supported by 76% of voting party members in a postal ballot, but the leadership contest, held in July, was much closer with Ryan just shading victory.

By June, there was increasing pressure to finalise a coalition agreement. The election of 49 Senators to the Seanad (upper house) by approximately 1,100 elected representatives and 53,000 university graduates had taken place at the end of March, as it must take place within 90 days of the Dáil's dissolution. Constitutionally, the Seanad is not properly constituted until an incoming Taoiseach appoints eleven Senators, meaning that the Oireachtas was unable to legislate until a new Taoiseach was elected. This posed problems: the continuing Covid-19 crisis required a functioning legislature and a stable government. There was also an immediate difficulty: a law that established a non-jury court to hear organised crime and terrorism cases was to expire at the end of June, at which point it would need to be renewed or it would lapse.

After membership votes in the Green Party and Fianna Fáil approved their entry into government, and after Fine Gael did so through an electoral college dominated by its Parliamentary Party, Fianna Fáil's Micheál Martin was elected Taoiseach on 27 June by 93 votes to 63, with the support of the three coalition parties and several Independents. For the first time, the Dáil was sitting in the National Convention Centre to facilitate physical distancing, rather than in its usual home in Leinster House.

Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael held six senior cabinet positions each, and the Greens three. Fine Gael kept finance, foreign affairs, and justice, while Fianna Fáil TDs were appointed to the challenging health and housing portfolios. The Green Party leader oversaw two ministries that

were responsible for climate policy and transport and the party secured significant policy concessions in the government programme on issues including climate policy, transport, and the treatment of asylum seekers. Many senior ministers were allocated junior ministers from one or more coalition partners. The government's most unusual feature is its 'rotating Taoiseach', with an agreed resignation date for Micheál Martin of December 2022, at which point he is to give way to the leader of Fine Gael.

The geography of the ministerial appointments caused consternation, with much of the western seaboard unrepresented by a senior cabinet minister. This was resolved when the Fianna Fáil Minister for Agriculture was dismissed after only twelve days in post. He had not disclosed to the Taoiseach that in 2016 he had failed a drink-driving test when returning home from a football match, while driving on a learner's licence. His successor, from the west of the country, lasted little more than a month in office, as he attended an Oireachtas Golf Society dinner in contravention of his own government's Covid-19 public health regulations. Ireland's EU Commissioner was at the dinner too; he also resigned.

Covid-19 and the possibility of the UK leaving the EU without a trade agreement means that many of the parameters within which the 50,000 word government programme is constructed are less certain than would otherwise be the case. The distribution of the economic and social cost of Covid-19 will inevitably be a major political issue. There is also the potential for the UK to leave the EU without a trade agreement at the end of 2020, with grim economic consequences for Ireland. Problems of housing and healthcare provision have not gone away either. These conditions present an opportunity for Sinn Féin, unsullied by government participation, to consolidate its place as a major party and – perhaps – to lead government after the next election.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Table 1. Results of the Irish general election of February 2020

| | 2020 | | | 2016 | | |
|------------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| | Seats N | Votes | Votes % | Seats N | Votes | Votes % |
| Sinn Féin | 37 | 535573 | 24.5 | 23 | 295313 | 13.8 |
| Fianna Fáil | 38* | 484315 | 22.2 | 44 | 519353 | 24.3 |
| Fine Gael | 35 | 455568 | 20.9 | 50* | 544230 | 25.5 |
| Non-party ('Independents')** | 19 | 266353 | 12.2 | 19 | 334814 | 15.7 |
| Green Party | 12 | 155695 | 7.1 | 2 | 57997 | 2.7 |
| Labour Party | 6 | 95582 | 4.4 | 7 | 140893 | 6.6 |
| Social Democrats | 6 | 63397 | 2.9 | 3 | 64094 | 3.0 |
| Solidarity/People Before Profit*** | 5 | 57420 | 2.6 | 6 | 84168 | 3.9 |
| Aontú | 1 | 41575 | 1.9 | NA | NA | NA |
| Independents 4 Change | 1 | 8421 | 0.4 | 4 | 31365 | 1.5 |
| Other parties | 0 | 19590 | 0.9 | 0 | 60668 | 2.8 |
| Totals | 160 | 2183489 | 100.0 | 158 | 2132895 | 99.9 |
| Turnout | | 62.2% | | | 65.1% | |

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

** Includes the Workers and Unemployed Action party, which ran one candidate in 2016.

*** Anti-Austerity Alliance - People Before Profit in 2016. A registered party arising from a joint initiative of the Socialist Party (under the Solidarity label) and the People Before Profit Alliance. In 2020, an unregistered splinter party from Solidarity called RISE was also part of this alliance.

Turnout is based on the number of valid votes as a percentage of the electorate as per the Register of Electors.

Source: Houses of the Oireachtas (2020b)