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ABSTRACT

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The 2011 Irish parliamentary election was dramatic in its outcome. In the wake of a sustained economic crisis, the incumbent Fianna Fáil-led government was swept from power and replaced by a Fine Gael-Labour coalition that enjoyed a record majority. Fianna Fáil's support collapsed and after eight decades as Ireland's dominant party, it was reduced to a parliamentary rump and its Green coalition partner eliminated from parliament altogether. The decisive change in the party system was marked by a high degree of electoral volatility that made the 2011 election the third most volatile election in post-War Western Europe. The new government faces unprecedented political and economic challenges as it seeks to resolve the country's prolonged recession.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Dr Derek Hutcheson is Head of Subject in European Studies and Lecturer in Comparative Politics in the UCD School of Politics and International Relations. His research focuses on electoral politics and voting rights in a comparative perspective, and he is a UCD co-partner in the European Commission-funded “Access to citizenship and its impact on immigrant integration” consortium headed by the European University Institute in Florence.

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INTRODUCTION

If Ireland after the 2007 election resembled Japan or pre-1993 Italy, in which the dominant Fianna Fáil (FF) party seemed “almost irremovable from office” (Ó Muineacháin and Gallagher 2008: 154), by early 2011 the improbable had become inevitable. In the parliamentary election of 25 February 2011, FF failed for the first time since 1932 to emerge as the largest party and slipped to a distant third place in terms of vote and seat share. In an election campaign dominated by the ongoing economic crisis and recent International Monetary Fund/European Union (IMF/EU) financial bailout, the main opposition party, Fine Gael (FG), reaped the reward of the government’s unpopularity, whilst the Labour Party recorded its best ever election result to join a new governing coalition.

BACKGROUND

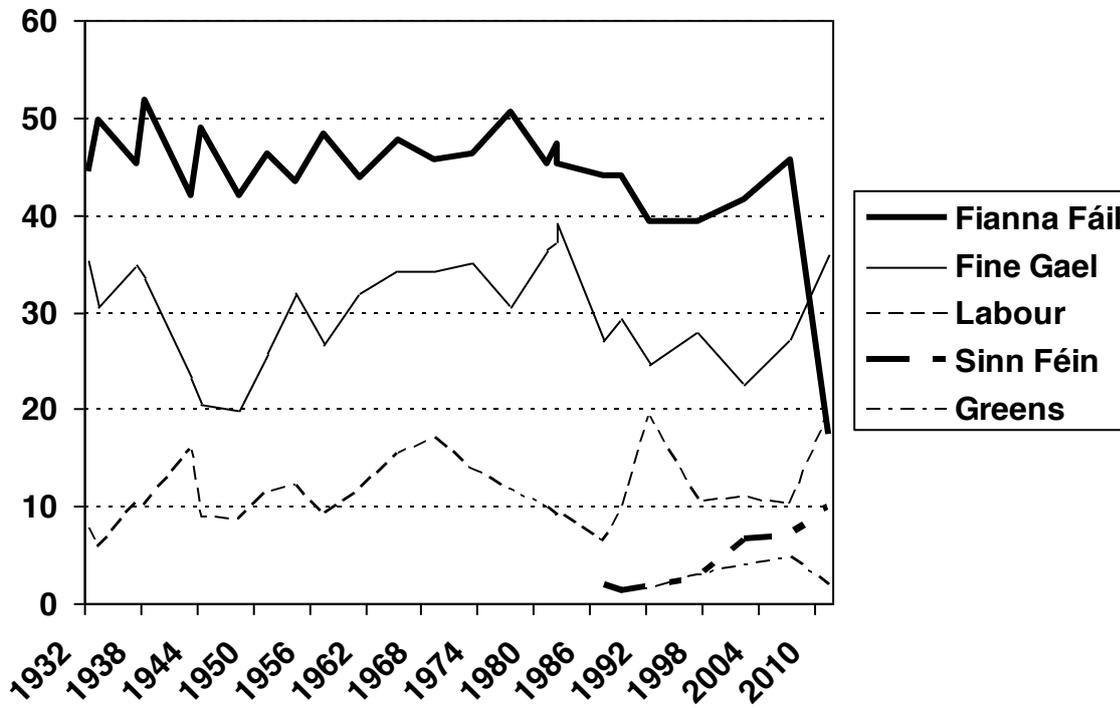
The Irish Party System

Ireland’s party system does not follow traditional left-right lines (Weeks 2010: 140-46). The initial dividing line between the two parties which have dominated politics since the 1930s—Fianna Fáil (FF—“Soldiers of Destiny”) and Fine Gael (FG—“Family of Gaels”)—focused on their attitudes to the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty (Fianna Fáil was against; Fine Gael in favour) rather than economic ideology. Both over time evolved into centre-right “catch-all” parties with relatively similar social and economic policy positions (Benoit & Laver 2006: Appendix B). As figure 1 shows, FF had until 2011 consistently been the larger of the two in the Dáil, even when in opposition, and had been in office (either alone or in coalition) for 61 of the previous 79 years. The third party, Labour, has traditionally been one of the weakest social democratic parties in Europe, although its occasional coalition potential has given it relevance as a “proximal mainstream” party (McDaid & Rekawek 2010: 630). From 1932 to 2007, these three parties maintained their relative positions with a fairly steady average 4.5:3:1 ratio of votes.

The Green Party first entered parliament in 1989 and its six seats in the 2007 election allowed it to join an oversized coalition with FF and the Progressive Democrats (the latter of which was dissolved in 2009). The modern incarnation of Sinn Féin (SF—“We ourselves”), a left-wing republican nationalist party better known in recent times for its role in Northern Ireland, has had a small presence in the Republic since abandoning its previous policy of abstentionism in the mid-1980s, and had four

deputies in the 2007-11 Dáil.¹ A further traditional feature of Irish elections is the relatively strong vote for non-party candidates (Weeks 2011).

Figure 1: Support for main parties, 1932-2011 (% vote)



Sources: Coakley & Gallagher (2010: 439).

Notes: Elections of the 1920s are excluded from the graph as they were contested by the forerunners of FF/FG. The 1932/33 FG results are for *Cumann na nGaedheal*, the main constituent part of the FG (formed 1933). Sinn Féin results are for the modern party, not the original party of the same name from which FF/FG emerged.

The 30th Dáil Éireann (2007-11)

In the May 2007 election, FF came first with a fractionally increased share of first preference votes (41.6%), well ahead of the main opposition party FG (27.3%) (Government of Ireland 2007: 61). Requiring a majority of over 83 seats in the Irish parliament (the *Dáil Éireann*), incumbent prime minister (*Taoiseach*) Bertie Ahern put together an oversized coalition comprising his own FF deputies (77 seats), the Greens (6 seats), and the Progressive Democrats (2 seats), and made agreements with three independents. Ahern's third term in office ended prematurely in the face of allegations about his personal finances, and he was replaced on 7 May 2008 by the then Minister for Finance and deputy prime minister (*Tánaiste*) Brian Cowen. Most of Cowen's premiership was dominated by a growing and sustained economic crisis. GDP fell by 15% from the last quarter of 2007 to the end of 2010 (CSO 2011a: 3). The government introduced a series of extremely deflationary budgets to

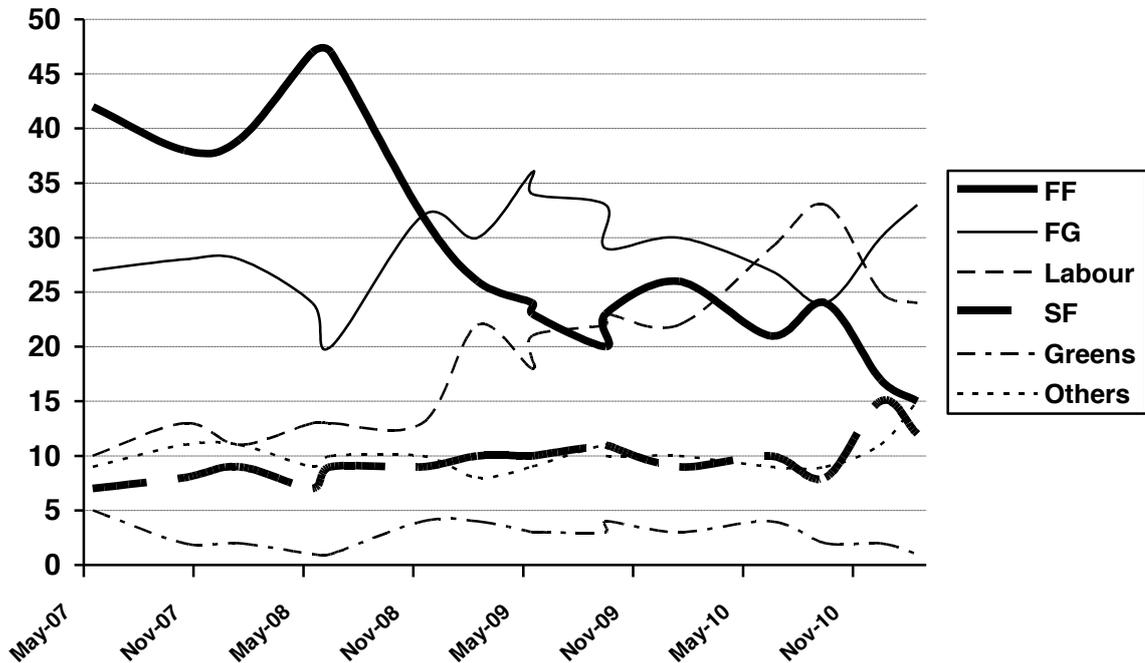
¹ A fifth was added in November 2010 after Pearse Doherty won the Donegal South West by-election.

tackle a growing budget deficit caused by a sharp fall in tax receipts and, in particular, a haemorrhaging of funds to recapitalise the banking sector. Unemployment more than trebled from 4.5% to 14.7% between May 2007 and January 2011 (CSO 2011b), and public sector pay was cut substantially. The general government balance in 2010, at €50bn or 32% of GDP, was by far the highest in the Eurozone as the banking crisis continued to snowball (Department of Finance 2010: 5). The ongoing economic chaos culminated in the announcement in November 2010 that Ireland would draw on an €85bn “bailout” capitalised by the EU, IMF and its own National Pensions Reserve Fund.

As figure 2 shows, the economic crisis had a precipitous effect on popular support for the governing parties and FF in particular. The proportion of voters indicating that they would vote for it in an immediate election fell from over 40% to the 20-25% range after the implementation of the bank guarantee in late September 2008. There was a further step-change down to the low- to mid-teens after the government was forced to agree to the EU/IMF bailout package in November 2010. Support for the two main opposition parties, meanwhile, rose somewhat after the start of the banking crisis, but with continued doubts about the effectiveness of the FG leader Enda Kenny (there was an unsuccessful attempt to unseat him as party leader in summer 2010), it was the Labour Party that benefited more. By the autumn of 2010, Labour was at 33% in the opinion polls, several percentage points ahead of its two main rivals and far ahead of its 10.1% vote share from 2007. For a brief period there was talk of a potential coalition in which Labour could be the larger partner.² By the start of the real campaign in February 2011, however, the two opposition parties had reverted to their more traditional order, with Fine Gael staging a recovery and Labour’s support falling back slightly, while Fianna Fáil continued to languish.

² *Irish Times*, 30 September 2010, 1.

Figure 2: Party support 2007-11 (% respondents)



Source: Ipsos/MRBI Opinion Surveys, *Irish Times*, 21 February 2011, 10-11.

The government's hold on power became increasingly tenuous as the economic problems spiralled. In the middle of the November 2010 crisis, the Greens announced that they would remain in office to assist FF with the passage of the draconian 2011 Finance Bill, but wanted an early election thereafter. An internal FF crisis eventually precipitated the coalition's collapse in January 2011. Having won a vote of confidence amongst his parliamentary party on 18 January, Cowen sought to rejuvenate his leadership by forcing multiple ministerial resignations and attempting a wide-ranging cabinet reshuffle that was then blocked by the Greens, who claimed not to have been consulted. Humiliated, Cowen distributed the vacant ministries among the remaining nine ministers, many of whom now had two departments to oversee, and pre-emptively announced an election for 11 March 2011. As questions over his judgement mounted, he announced his resignation as party leader—but not as Taoiseach—on 22 January. The following day the Greens pulled out of the coalition, leading to a further redistribution of their portfolios among the last seven FF cabinet members, some of whose job titles now sounded sound like they were auditioning for roles in *The Mikado*.³ From the opposition benches, the Greens assisted the passage of the Finance Bill, the Dáil's final piece of legislation before Cowen asked the President for dissolution of parliament on 1 February and named 25 February as the definitive election date. Although he remained Taoiseach until the new Dáil convened on 9 March, he was replaced before the election as

³ Éamon O Cuiv, for instance, was Minister for Social Protection, Minister for Defence, and Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government; whilst Pat Carey was Minister for Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs, Minister for Transport, and Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources.

party leader by Micheál Martin, who a few days before had resigned as foreign minister in protest at Cowen's leadership.

ELECTORAL SYSTEMS, PARTIES AND CANDIDATES

Voting System

Unusually, Ireland uses a system of proportional representation by single transferable vote (PR-STV) to return its 166 members of parliament (a deputy is called a *Teachta Dála*, or TD). Full details of the system can be found elsewhere (e.g., Gallagher 2008). In essence, each voter has a single vote, but can indicate ordinal preferences for as many candidates as he or she wishes to rank. An electoral quota for each constituency is calculated by dividing the total valid votes in the constituency by a figure one higher than the number of seats to be allocated, and adding one to the resultant total. (For example, the quota in a three-seat constituency would be a quarter of the vote plus one.) Candidates are elected when they reach or exceed the quota. Surplus votes for elected candidates are transferred to next preferences on these ballot papers, as are votes for lower-ranked candidates as they are eliminated. The process continues until all seats have been filled, usually after multiple rounds of counting and vote transferring.

166 seats are allocated across 43 constituencies, returning between three and five deputies each. Only 165 seats are contested as the outgoing parliamentary speaker (*Ceann Comhairle*) has an automatic right of return. The predominance of Dublin in the population distribution of Ireland is reflected in the constituency distribution: the city and its environs account for 47 of the 166 seats and twelve of the forty-three constituencies. In the rest of the country, Leinster (the eastern region of Ireland) has ten constituencies and 42 seats; Munster (in the south), thirteen constituencies and 46 seats; and Connacht/Ulster (the western and the northern counties inside the Republic), eight constituencies and 31 seats.

The boundaries for 2011 were calculated based on the 2006 census, with an average population of 25,541 per deputy. The upper variance from this was of +4.73% (Carlow-Kilkenny) and the lower variance was -6.03% (Cavan-Monaghan). Based on population statistics, two constituencies (Louth and Dublin West) gained a seat compared with 2007 while two (Dún Laoghaire and Limerick East, renamed Limerick City for 2011) lost a seat. There were minor boundary changes in twenty other constituencies, and nineteen were left intact (Constituency Commission 2007: 5). Excluding the supplementary register, the number of registered voters stood at 3,161,854, with 48,963 added to the supplementary register in the course of the campaign.⁴

⁴ *Irish Examiner*, 24 February 2011, 8.

Candidates

As table 1 shows, 566 candidates stood in 2011—more than in the previous two elections. There were between 8 and 24 candidates per constituency (an average of 13.2). The largest number of candidates in a single constituency was 24 in the 5-seat district of Wicklow; at the other extreme, three 3-seat constituencies (Tipperary North, Tipperary South and Kildare South) had just eight candidates each. There were Independents on the ballot paper in every constituency except one (Cork North-West).

FF ran far fewer candidates than in recent elections. In fifteen constituencies, it fielded a single candidate to avoid splitting its vote. By contrast, FG and Labour, in the expectation of significant gains, fielded more candidates than before. FG had up to four candidates in some constituencies and Labour focused its multiple candidacies primarily in the Dublin and Leinster areas. The Greens fielded one candidate in every constituency. There were five constituencies without a candidate from SF, but three (Carlow-Kilkenny, Cavan-Monaghan and Mayo) where it put up two contenders. The most prominent group of candidates from other parties was that from the United Left Alliance—a coalition of three left-wing groupings. The sharp increase in the number of independent candidates was also noteworthy, reflecting the “anti-politics” sentiment of the election in 2011.

Table 1: Candidates 2002-2011

	2002	2007	2011
Fianna Fáil (FF)	106	106	75 ^a
Fine Gael (FG)	85	91	104
Labour	46	50	68
Green Party	31	44	43
Sinn Féin (SF)	37	41	41
Progressive Democrats (PD)	20	30	-
Independents	95	90	199
Other parties	43	18	36
TOTAL	463	470	566

Sources: Government of Ireland (2003, 58-61); *ibid.* (2007, 60-67); Irish Times, 10 February 2011, 1; Irish Times, 25 February 2011, 8.

^a plus Ceann Comhairle (speaker)

In total, 15% (86 of 566) of candidates were women. Among the leading parties, Labour had the greatest proportion of female candidates, at 25% of its total (17 of 68); followed by SF, 20% (8 of 41); FG, 16% (17 of 104); the Greens, 16% (7 of 43); and FF 15% (11 of 64).⁵ Women comprised 12% of the remaining candidates.

CAMPAIGN

Campaign Parameters

In the party landscape, one significant change since 2007 was the demise of the Progressive Democrats, which had been the junior government partner from 1997-2007. They won just two seats in 2007 (but retained a place in the cabinet—Mary Harney, the Minister for Health) and the organisation dissolved itself soon afterwards. Harney did not run for re-election in 2011. At the margins, three groups to the left of Labour branded themselves collectively as the “United Left Alliance” although officially they remained separate organisations. Other than that, the main difference at the outset of the campaign was the radically different configuration of public opinion compared with the previous election. Opinion polls in early February 2011 put FG on 33%, Labour on 24% and FF on 15%—a far cry from FF’s previous dominant position and Labour’s marginality.⁶

The official campaign was relatively short, lasting just over three weeks from the day the Dáil was dissolved until polling day. It took place to a backdrop of revolutions in north Africa and the Middle East, but the primary focus was domestic and economic. Constrained by the EU/IMF deal, the parties emphasised differences of detail rather than substance. The dynamic of the campaign was unusual insofar as the incumbent governing parties, Fianna Fáil and the Greens, were marginal actors, with the primary focus on the two leading opposition parties, Fine Gael and Labour. The main focus at the start of the campaign was about their relative strengths in the expected post-election coalition. By the end, with Fine Gael’s position having solidified and Labour’s weakened, the primary question of interest was whether Fine Gael might be able to form a minority government without Labour.

There were four televised debates amongst the party leaders. Three of these were billed as debates amongst potential prime ministers (*Taoisigh*) and only the Fine Gael, Labour and Fianna Fáil leaders were invited. The first was on the commercial TV3 channel on Tuesday, 8 February, followed by a debate conducted in the Irish language on the Gaelic TG4 channel on Wednesday, 16 February and a final three-way debate on the state RTÉ channel on Monday, 22 February. These were interspersed by a larger debate which also featured the other two main party leaders—John Gormley of the Greens and Gerry Adams of Sinn Féin—on Monday, 14 February. Micheál Martin was held by 32% of voters to have performed best overall in these debates, compared with 29% for Enda Kenny and just 14% for Eamon Gil-

⁵ *Irish Independent: Guide to Election 2011*, Supplement 23 February 2011, 12.

⁶ Ipsos/MRBI Opinion Surveys, *Irish Times*, 21 February 2011, 10-11.

more. Fianna Fáil supporters were much more impressed with Martin's performance (68% thought he had come out best in the debates) than were voters of the other two main parties with their respective leaders (Kenny and Gilmore were thought to have come out best by 50% and 34% of their respective parties' voters), although this seems to have made little eventual difference at the ballot box (RTÉ/Millward Brown 2011: 39).

Enda Kenny refused to participate in the first TV3 three-way debate, citing a clashing party engagement in Carrick-on-Shannon. Although mischievous speculation that his place in the studio would be taken by a demonstratively empty chair proved baseless, the perception that he was afraid to debate was satirised in a newspaper cartoon the next day suggesting that "overnight polls put the chair 15 points ahead of Enda Kenny".⁷

Party Strategies

Paradoxically, Kenny's perceived weakness as a debater ultimately strengthened the FG campaign overall by forcing the party to highlight its policies and its strength in depth. Although starting as an opposition party, such was its opinion poll lead that the election was perceived from the outset as "Fine Gael's to lose",⁸ and the campaign was largely framed by the party's agenda. Although constrained by the underlying economic situation, its approach was clearly market-oriented and well-planned, repackaging a programme of economic austerity into the apparently virtuous task of rebuilding Ireland. It condensed its policies into a concise, colour-tabbed "five-point plan" comprising job creation, budget balancing, healthcare reform, public sector reform and political reform that was plugged relentlessly on posters, campaign literature and in Kenny's and other leading figures' stump speeches. This gave a consistency of message throughout the campaign that other parties lacked. The perception of Kenny as a weak leader was countered by promoting him as the chairman of a strong team, rather than focusing on his own charisma. Where it did promote Kenny personally, FG sought to burnish his statesman credentials by organising meetings and photo opportunities (using its fraternal links in the European People's Party) with Jose Manuel Barroso, the European Commission President, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel.⁹

Labour adopted the opposite strategy, running a sales-oriented campaign that suffered from confusion about its underlying product. In contrast to Fine Gael's more team- and policy-based campaign, Labour hoped that the popularity of its leader Eamon Gilmore would translate into support at the ballot box. Much of his appeal had been based on forensic examination of Brian Cowen at the height of the banking crisis, but Cowen's resignation as party leader, and invisibility as Taoiseach during the campaign, meant that Gilmore's foil was missing. By emphasising Gilmore's profile, Labour arguably lost control of the policy agenda that had propelled it so

⁷ *Irish Times*, 9 February 2011, 16.

⁸ *Sunday Business Post*, 30 January 2011, 1.

⁹ *Irish Times*, 15 February 2011, 7.

high in public opinion at the end of 2010, as well as facing a challenge further to its left in some constituencies from the United Left Alliance candidates who, with no governmental aspirations, were free to be more vocal in their condemnation of the EU/IMF deal. An attempt to depict itself as the party most likely to renegotiate the terms of the bailout, exemplified by Gilmore's throwaway quip that it was "Frankfurt's way or Labour's way",¹⁰ had limited success when Frankfurt's way was thought more likely to prevail. As the campaign progressed, Labour was forced onto Fine Gael's territory in reacting to the latter's accusations that it was a "high tax party".¹¹ Whereas its campaign had initially been premised on the idea that it could translate Gilmore's appeal into becoming the largest Dáil faction, by the end of campaign it appeared afraid of losing its claim even to be the junior partner in the coalition. The ebullience of its early slogan contrasted strongly with the almost plaintive message of its final week posters not to leave it out of government altogether (see figure 3).

Figure 3: First- and last-week Labour posters



(Source: Author's own photographs).



Convulsed by internal divisions in the run-up to the election, **FF** had little time to plan a strategy around its new leader Micheál Martin. The party's manifesto ("Real Plan, Better Future") was based on the outgoing government's four-year budget plan. At the same time, Martin sought to draw a line under Fianna Fáil's unsuccessful recent stewardship of the country. Having been foreign minister in the preceding three years and relatively low-profile during the worst of the crisis, he depicted himself as a fresh and radical leader distant from the day-to-day events of recent times, keeping the most high-profile members of the outgoing government, especially the

¹⁰ *Irish Times*, 4 February 2011, 9.

¹¹ *Irish Times*, 18 February 2011, 8.

Taoiseach, as far from the forefront as possible and campaigning with a parallel party front bench. (In the week before polling day, Brian Cowen had a single public engagement launching a charity football match, and was otherwise rarely seen.¹²) This notwithstanding, the party's incumbency and Martin's role as a minister throughout the preceding fourteen years undermined his claims to quasi-opposition: there was some incredulity that such a "paragon of radical reform" could have sat around the cabinet table for so long before showing his reforming zeal.¹³

The 2011 election also represented the "normalisation" of **SF** in the Republic. The party tapped into the deep resentment about the economic crisis with its promise to "burn the bondholders" and repudiation of the EU/IMF agreement. The **Greens**, meanwhile, fought a low-profile product-oriented campaign. Their opinion rating was low throughout and it was clear that their primary challenge would be to retain any representation at all after four years of co-government with FF, rather than to play an active role in the future coalition. Little media attention was focused on them and the public profile of all but a few leading party members was low.

RESULTS

Polling took place on Friday, 25 February from 7am to 10pm, with the counts beginning the following morning. With multiple rounds of counting, determining the result of an Irish election is a time-consuming affair and it was not until the following Wednesday that the final TD was elected, in Galway West. Nonetheless, the overall trends were apparent by the end of the weekend.

By comparison with other countries, summarising Irish elections by percentage of the vote does not give a complete picture. In the first instance, the transferable element of the vote means that first preferences are not always the deciding factor in terms of who is elected. Second, there are multiple candidates from the same party in some constituencies and a strong personal element as to which of the candidates is higher ranked by voters. Third, independent candidates are a disparate group with radically different political views who have, by definition, chosen not to be categorised with other candidates, but for the purposes of summary it is difficult to avoid aggregating their vote share. Nonetheless, aggregated first preferences do give a reasonable indication of overall trends of public opinion and the results of the 2011 election on this basis are shown in table 2.

¹² *Sunday Independent*, 20 February 2011, 5.

¹³ *Irish Times*, 8 February 2011, 9.

Table 2: Results, 2011 Irish parliamentary election

Party	Seats Won (+/- 2007 re-sult)	% 1st Pref 2011	% Swing cf. 2007	Votes 2011	Difference cf. 2007
Fine Gael	76 (+25)	36.1	+8.8	801,628	+237,200
Labour Party	37 (+17)	19.4	+9.3	431,796	+222,621
Fianna Fáil	20 (-58)	17.4	-24.1	387,358	-471,207
Sinn Féin	14 (+10)	9.9	+3.0	220,661	+77,251
Green Party	0 (-6)	1.8	-2.8	41,039	-55,897
<i>Others, of which</i>	<i>19 (+12)</i>	<i>15.2</i>	<i>+5.9</i>	<i>337,877</i>	<i>-</i>
Independent	15 (+10)	12.6	+6.8	279,459	+160,508
Socialist Party	2 (+2)	1.2	+0.6	26,770	+13,552
People Before Profit Alliance	2 (+2)	1.0	+1.0	21,551	+ 21,551
South Kerry Independent Alliance	0	0.2	+0.2	4,939	+4,939
Workers' Party	0	0.1	0.0	3,056	+30
Christian Solidarity Party	0	0.1	0.0	2,102	+397
(2007 parties not contesting)	0 (-2)	0.0	-2.7	0	-56,396
Totals	166	99.8		2,220,359	+154,549

Source: RTÉ results (2011): 2 &.31; Government of Ireland (2007): 60-7. FF totals include *Ceann Comhairle* in both cases. Total does not add to 100% due to rounding.

On one reading, the 2011 election might be considered an “earthquake election”. The fixed relationship of the three main parties to each other, broadly constant since 1932, was comprehensively shattered. The dominant axis of differentiation between the largest and second-largest parties in the Dáil became a left-right one rather than the traditional centre-periphery cleavage that had separated FF and FG for nearly 80 years.

It was FG’s best ever performance in terms of seat numbers and the first time that it had been the largest party in the Dáil. (It was already the largest party at local government level following the 2009 council elections, and it completed its new domi-

nance of Irish politics by coming first in the *Seanad* (senate) election in April 2011.¹⁴) Labour, despite polling lower in the election than it had hoped for from late 2010 opinion polls, nonetheless obtained its highest ever proportion of first preference votes and seats. Traditionally a “wing” party alongside the larger centre-right FF/FG, for the first time it became the second-largest faction in the *Daíl*, albeit with half the representation of FG.

Balanced against this, however, these two parties’ levels of support were good but not unprecedented compared with the range of support that both had enjoyed since the 1930s, and there were no major breakthroughs for new parties. Instead, the fundamental realignment of the party system was primarily caused by a calamitous collapse of FF’s vote. It had never failed to be the largest party in the *Dáil* (even when in opposition) since the 1920s, nor had its vote ever dropped below 39% — but in 2011 it slumped to a distant third place with 17.4% of first preferences, reducing its parliamentary faction to around a quarter of its previous size. For the first time, 25 constituencies were without FF representation. The Green Party fared even worse, emerging with no representation at all for the first time in twenty-two years.

Alongside FG and Labour, the other winner was SF. Although the percentage rise in its vote (6.9% in 2007 to 9.9% in 2011) was relatively small, its representation in the *Dáil* almost trebled to fourteen seats, only six fewer than FF. More significantly, among their number were some much higher profile figures than previously—party president Gerry Adams, well known for his role in Northern Irish politics, and Mary Lou MacDonald, a former MEP, as well as Pearse Doherty, who had won the Donegal South West by-election in November 2010 and enjoyed much media exposure in his first few months as a TD.

Nineteen other candidates were elected to the *Dáil*. They included four candidates from the United Left Alliance—two each from the Socialist Party and the People Before Profit Alliance—and fifteen independents of various political persuasions.

An analysis of the demographic profile of voters (table 3) suggests that support for both the major “civil war” parties, FG and FF, was relatively higher amongst older voters, with the reverse true for more ideologically-oriented parties and independents. However, the fact that the largest two parties emerged along a left-right rather than centre-periphery cleavage was not the result of a major shift in the demographic bases of parties’ support, as table 2 shows. By contrast with most countries, class is not a major dimension in differentiating the parties’ electorates. The only salient class-based dimension is a rural/urban divide, with Labour accruing virtually no support from farmers who consistently vote for FF and FG. Among the working- and middle-class voters that account for 90% of the electorate, FG has traditionally been slightly stronger among middle- than working class voters, with the reverse true for FF. This pattern continued in 2011 but as usual the differences were not large. As a

¹⁴ The 60-member *Seanad* is not elected by popular vote but by a narrow electorate restricted to members of the incoming *Dáil*, outgoing *Seanad*, county councils and county borough councils (for 43 seats); and graduates from Trinity College Dublin and the colleges of the National University of Ireland (3 seats each). The last 11 seats are filled by direct nomination from the Taoiseach.

social democratic party, it would be expected that Labour would be dominant among working class voters and less popular among the middle classes, but its 2011 support was completely even between these two groups.

There were some geographical patterns to the vote, although the regional differences were less pronounced than in many countries. Whilst Leinster and Munster voted in line with the national pattern, FG and SF did better than average in the more sparsely populated north-western region of Connacht/Ulster (where Enda Kenny's home county of Mayo is located and which borders SF's stronghold of Northern Ireland). By contrast, the voters of Dublin were substantially more left-wing than in the rest of the country. Labour won a plurality of seats (though fractionally fewer votes than Fine Gael) and the United Left Alliance collectively won 7.1% of the vote, accounting for two thirds of its total vote across the country as well as its four seats. The Labour, ULA and SF results combined meant that the left, broadly conceived, won a majority (26) of the capital's 47 seats. By contrast, FF's performance was even more disastrous than elsewhere, its vote share falling by 26.3% compared with 2007 and its representation reduced to just a single seat, that of the outgoing finance minister Brian Lenihan (whose untimely death in June 2011 left it entirely without representation in Dublin).

Table 3: Demographics of party support

	Fine Gael	Labour	Fianna Fáil	Sinn Féin	Greens	Ind./Other
Total (cf. actual result)	36.1 (36.1)	20.5 (19.4)	15.1 (17.4)	10.1 (9.9)	2.7 (1.8)	15.5 (15.2)
Sex						
Male	36	18	15	12	3	15
Female	36	24	13	9	3	16
Age						
18-24	32	23	10	11	4	20
25-34	32	24	13	12	4	16
35-49	26	20	14	11	3	16
50-64	39	20	16	9	2	14
65+	43	15	23	6	2	12
Social Class						
ABC1	37	23	13	7	4	16
C2DE	32	23	15	14	2	15
Farmers	49	2	25	10	1	13
Regional vote share (seats)						
Dublin	29.9 (17)	29.3 (18)	12.5 (1)	8.2 (4)	3.6 (0)	16.5 (7)
Leinster	36.6 (21)	19.2 (8)	19.5 (7)	10.4 (3)	1.6 (0)	12.6 (3)
Munster	38.1 (21)	18.6 (9)	18.8 (7)	7.7 (3)	1.3 (0)	15.5 (6)
Con-nacht/ULster	40.1 (17)	8.7 (2)	18.9 (5)	14.8 (4)	0.8 (0)	16.7 (3)

Source: RTÉ/Millward Brown Landsdowne (2011); RTÉ Results (2011: 3-7).

Notes: Figures are from the exit poll and refer to percentage of voters in a given category expressing support for that party or list of candidates (e.g., 32% of 18-24 year olds voted Fine Gael). Actual vote shares differed slightly from the predictions. *Social classes*: ABC1 = Upper middle, middle and lower middle class; C2DE = skilled working class, working class.

In addition to the above, a number of features stood out about the election: First, it was one of the most volatile in post-War West European history. The Irish electorate had not previously been noted for its fickleness: the country's electoral volatility, as measured by the Pedersen index, had been at or below the European average since the 1950s (cf. Pedersen 1979; Gallagher et al. 2011: 310) and as we have seen, the relative support of the three main parties had until 2011 remained relatively stable for decades. Yet a Pedersen index of 29.6 placed the 2011 Dáil election in third place only to Italy in 1994 and the Netherlands in 2002 in terms of West European electoral volatility since 1945—and in both these other cases there were new parties which artificially inflated the index (ibid.: 311). Individual-level data reinforce the point. According to the exit poll, almost half of voters (48%, disproportionately drawn from the 35-49 years age group) voted differently from 2007, compared with an average of 20% in the previous three elections. 40% claimed to have decided how to vote within the last seven days of the campaign, compared with 28% in 2007 (RTÉ/Millward Brown 2011: 17).

Second, this volatility, and FG's and Labour's victory, was not simply the result of abstention by normal FF supporters. Turnout was 70.0%, up 3% on 2007. As table 2 shows, the absolute numbers of votes obtained by both parties (and SF) increased substantially. Of the "switchers", two-fifths (42%) of former FF voters directly lent their votes to FG and a further quarter (24%) to Labour. The remainder voted for independents (22%) or SF (10%) (RTÉ/Millward Brown 2011: 23). It is clear that many disenchanted former FF voters actively voted against the party, rather than simply staying at home.

Third, FG's margin of victory was exaggerated by the disproportionality of the result, which gave it a 16-seat "bonus" and FF a 9-seat "deficit" compared with a strict division of national vote shares. This was related to two factors. First, FG benefited from significantly better transfer patterns. It accrued more votes from FF (approximately 19,500 intermediate and 13,000 terminal transfers) than flowed in the opposite direction (c.8,500 and 5,200 respectively). FG also obtained three times as many transfers—both intermediate and terminal—from Labour voters than FF did, and benefited from a higher level of intra-party transfers between its candidates (66.8% compared with 58.2%). In many seats, FF's vote was split between two candidates, neither of whom had enough transferable votes to keep the other in the race (RTÉ results 2011: 8).

Small district magnitude exaggerated this. Marginal differences of one seat in constituencies that returned only 3-5 deputies each had large cumulative effects across the forty-three districts. With transfers, FG's seat total often rounded up to one higher than its initial whole integer of quotas, while FF failed to reach a quota despite starting closer to one. For example, FG won three seats having had 2.2 electoral quotas in the first round of counting in Dublin South, while FF failed to win seats in Cork South West and Donegal South West despite starting from 0.9 quotas.

Fourth, there was substantial turnover in the Dáil. The majority of TDs (84) elected in 2011 were not members of the 2007-11 convocation. Of these, 76 were complete

newcomers who had never previously been TDs, including approximately half of both governing parties' parliamentary groups.¹⁵ By contrast, 45 incumbent TDs failed to win re-election, in addition to 36 previously prominent politicians, including government ministers, who retired. (The other 3 seats were vacant at the time of the dissolution.) Having said that, this turnover did not translate into a radically different profile among parliamentarians. The 2011 election saw 25 women elected, surpassing the previous high of 22 in the outgoing convocation, but the influx of 16 new female TDs was mitigated by the fact that some of FF's highest-profile losses were women, including the former Tánaiste, and that there were no female TDs among its new 20-strong faction. Moreover, at just 15% of the Dáil, only Cyprus, Hungary, Malta, Romania and Slovenia had worse records within the EU for female representation in the main chamber of parliament (IPU 2011). The influx of new TDs also failed to bring about a generational change in the Dáil: the average age was only slightly lower than in the 2007-11 convocation, at 48.5 years compared with the previous 50.4 years (Farrelly 2011).

GOVERNMENT FORMATION AND PROSPECTS

FG had the median legislator and was seven seats short of an overall majority. There were several possible minimum winning coalitions involving it and the three other main parties, but in practice its degree of historical and present antipathy towards FF and SF rendered these coalitions highly unlikely. The two realistic options were a FG-Labour coalition or a minority FG administration.

The most widely-expected outcome—a FG/Labour coalition—emerged as the final result. Talks began on the Monday after polling day. The details were worked out in a series of meetings during that week comprising teams of three from each of the two main parties (Michael Noonan, Alan Shatter and Phil Hogan from Fine Gael and Brendan Howlin, Joan Burton and Pat Rabbite from Labour, with the two party leaders intervening at the beginning and end of the process). The jointly authored “Programme for a National Government” was approved by the Labour Party and outlined to Fine Gael members at specially convened conferences on 6 March, nine days after the election (Fine Gael/Labour 2011). It found a middle road on most issues of policy difference, and Enda Kenny was elected Taoiseach by 117:27 votes (supported by all but two Labour TDs and with no opposition from FF) on 9 March. The ratio of ministers from the two parties is shown in table 4. It broadly reflects their ratio of seats relative to each other in the Dáil, with nine cabinet positions (plus the Taoiseach's office) going to FG and five to Labour. Eamon Gilmore took on the role of Tánaiste as well as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade. Fifteen junior ministers were appointed to secondary roles with a 9:6 FG/Labour split.

¹⁵ The distribution of the 76 was as follows: FG—34; Labour—19; SF—9; United Left Alliance—3; FF—3 (including Brian Cowen's brother Barry); independents—8 (RTÉ results 2011: 26-27).

Table 4: The distribution of Cabinet portfolios, March 2011 (party affiliation)

	Cabinet minister	Junior Minister(s)
Taoiseach	Enda Kenny (FG)	Lucinda Creighton (FG)*
Tánaiste & Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade	Eamon Gilmore (Lab)	Jan O'Sullivan (Lab); Lucinda Creighton (FG)*
Minister for Finance	Michael Noonan (FG)	Brian Hayes (FG)*
Minister for Education and Skills	Ruairi Quinn (Lab)	Seán Sherlock (Lab)*; Ciarán Cannon (FG)
Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform	Brendan Howlin (Lab)	Brian Hayes (FG)*
Minister for Enterprise, Jobs and Innovation	Richard Bruton (FG)	John Perry (FG); Seán Sherlock (Lab)*
Minister for Social Protection	Joan Burton (Lab)	-
Minister for Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht Affairs	Jimmy Deenihan (FG)	Dinny McGinley (FG)
Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources	Pat Rabbitte (Lab)	Fergus O'Dowd (FG)*
Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government	Phil Hogan (FG)	Willie Penrose (Lab); Fergus O'Dowd (FG)*
Minister for Justice, Equality and Defence	Alan Shatter (FG)	Paul Kehoe (FG); Kathleen Lynch (Lab)*
Minister for Agriculture, Marine and Food	Simon Coveney (FG)	Shane McEntee (FG)
Minister for Children	Frances Fitzgerald (FG)	-
Minister for Health	James Reilly (FG)	Róisín Shortall (Lab); Kathleen Lynch (Lab)*
Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport	Leo Varadkar (FG)	Michael Ring (FG); Alan Kelly (Lab)

Source: *Irish Times*, 10 March 2011, 9 & 11 March 2011, 8.

* = role crosses more than one ministry. Junior Ministers have specific subject portfolios that focus on sub-sections of one or more departments' agendas. For example, Lucinda Creighton is Minister for Europe—only one of the responsibilities of the Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade—while Kathleen Lynch has responsibility for Disability, Equality and Mental Health, making her both Minister of State for Health and for Justice, Equality and Defence. For ease of reference, Junior Ministers are listed under the departments of the cabinet ministers with whom they work, and recorded under both where these interconnect.

Although Labour's share of junior ministers is slightly over-proportional, FG is clearly the dominant partner in the coalition. Four ministries (Finance; Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht Affairs; Agriculture, Marine and Food; and Children) are the exclusive preserve of FG party at the ministerial and junior ministerial levels, as well, of course, as the Taoiseach's office. By contrast, no Labour cabinet minister is without Fine Gael representation amongst his or her junior ministers, with the exception of Joan Burton as Minister for Social Protection.

PROSPECTS

The new government entered power on a wave of goodwill with the votes of more than half the electorate that voted in 2011, but is faced with myriad challenges. In particular, the strictures of the EU/IMF bailout will significantly affect policy for several years to come, and the challenge of overcoming the country's seemingly endless recession (GDP and GNP have contracted for three consecutive years) will challenge both the ability and the popularity of the new coalition. The new government's first months in office have seen it generally regarded as competent but there has been little in the way of policy initiative that was not foreseen in the EU/IMF terms, and continued exogenous crises in the Eurozone, focused in the first instance on Greece and Portugal, continue to threaten Ireland with contagion.

Fianna Fáil must also adopt to an unaccustomed role as a small opposition party, having been in power for all but three of the previous twenty-four years, but over time it may be able to capitalise on this role as memories of its role in the economic crisis fade and the new incumbent government's policies face scrutiny. It remains to be seen whether Ireland's apparent "earthquake election" of 2011 will represent a fundamental shift of the political tectonic plates, or merely a temporary tremor.

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