

Outlook for the political landscape in Ireland 2015-2017

DAVY VIEW

Davy has commissioned David Farrell, Professor of Politics at University College Dublin, to provide an outline of the outlook for Ireland's political landscape 2015-2017.

Current state of Ireland's political landscape

This briefing note assesses the potential for new forces of the left to make an electoral breakthrough in Ireland's next general election, which must take place no later than spring 2016. In a context of continuing economic hardship for many voters, and in the light of electoral developments in other European countries (notably Greece and Spain), there are grounds for expecting big gains for Sinn Féin and/or some alliance of left-wing independent members of parliament (TDs). Current opinion polls give Sinn Féin and independent candidates close to 50% of support.

Sinn Féin has made significant electoral inroads in recent years but, given the difficult economic circumstances, its opinion poll trends and performance in mid-term elections have not been that stellar. Its support base is among the less well-off and younger voters – the two constituencies least likely to turn out to vote. The conservative nature of the Irish electorate, the historical baggage associated with the current party leadership and the constraints set by Ireland's electoral system make the task for Sinn Féin all the harder. It will make electoral gains, but not as many as some commentators have suggested.

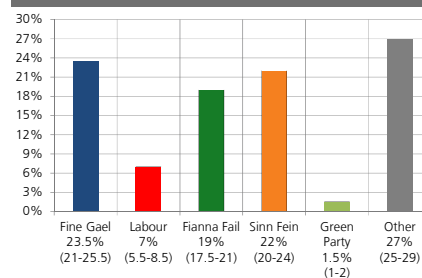
The independents, while a large group collectively and attracting growing support in the opinion polls, are very diverse ideologically and are riven with personality differences. There is little, if any, evidence of support mobilizing around any single figure. Previous efforts to form alliances have failed. Independent candidates and Sinn Féin already fill the ideological (and supporter) space that any aspiring Alexis Tsipras or Pablo Iglesias might seek to occupy, in effect blocking the way.

Four potential scenarios

Four scenarios are explored: (1) steady state, where some combination of established parties form a coalition; (2) the Greek outcome, where the newer forces of the left form a coalition; (3) middle of the road, where a coalition is formed between established parties and some elements from the left; and (4) electoral uncertainty, where a minority and unstable government is formed. Of these, the least likely scenario is the Greek outcome; the most likely outcomes will either be steady state or middle of the road.

David Farrell, Professor of Politics, University College Dublin

Current state of the Irish parties in the opinion polls*



* As of January 25th 2015.

Mean estimates and 95% uncertainty margins.

The next Irish election must occur no later than spring 2016

Sinn Féin is now well established as the fourth-largest party

Irish politics in context

The international Great Recession has impacted dramatically on the politics of a number of Europe’s democracies, with many observers seeing the recent Greek election result as a harbinger of things to come elsewhere. Attention is now focused on the next Irish election, which must occur no later than spring 2016 but may happen sooner.

A strong likelihood is that the government will call an early election, possibly at the start of 2016, hoping for a bounce after a budget that is expected to focus more on economic stimulus than austerity. There is a special significance about the year 2016 – the centenary of the hugely iconic 1916 Easter Rising, an event in Irish history whose ructions in the years that followed in large part define today’s party political divide.

The purpose of this briefing note is to review the potential for dramatic political change in 2016. We first describe the Irish political system. Ireland has always had an unusual party politics by European standards, with three key features:

- The principal political divide is between two right-of-centre parties: Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, with Fine Gael generally being slightly to the right of Fianna Fáil on economic policy (though not always);
- The electoral dominance of Fianna Fáil, which has been in government far more than any of the other parties, including an uninterrupted stint from 1997-2011;
- The weakness of the left, with the Labour party as the main standard bearer generally attracting a vote percentage barely above 10%.

Table 1 provides a snapshot of the state of the parties today. The three established parties – Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour – hold the most seats in the Dáil (lower house of the Irish parliament), with Sinn Féin now well established as the fourth-largest party. As the table shows, party representation in the Dáil changed quite distinctly in 2011.

Table 1: Party representation in the Dáil

	2011 vote (%)	Vote change since 2007	Seats -2011	Seats (today)*
Fine Gael	36.1	8.8	77	69
Labour	19.4	9.3	37	33
Fianna Fáil	17.4	-24.1	19	20
Sinn Féin	9.9	3	14	14
United Left Alliance	2.7	1.6	5	0
Green party	1.8	-2.8	0	0
Independents and others	12.5	4.4	14	30
Total			166	166

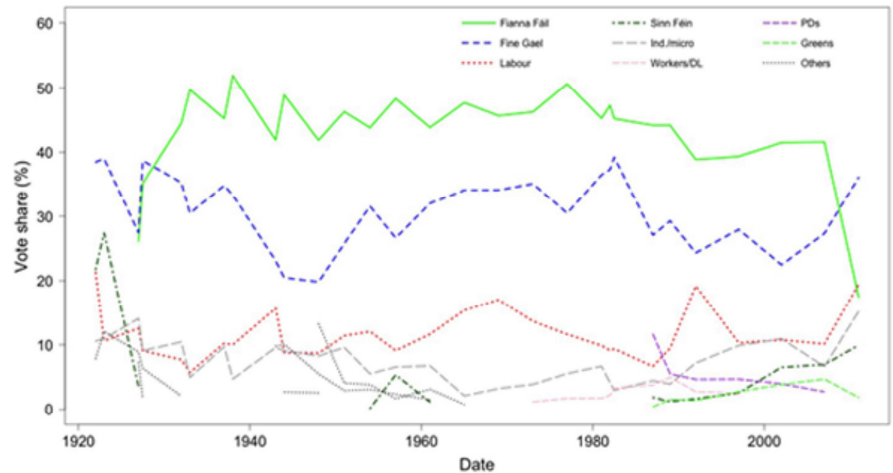
* The changes in seat numbers for the most part are due to: (a) TDs leaving or being expelled from their party for not supporting the government line; (b) by-election results; (c) and in the case of the ULA its disintegration due to policy and personality differences. ‘Independents and others’ category includes a large mix of different viewpoints. See the text for further details.

Source: Electoral returns; Oireachtas and political party websites

The 2011 general election saw dramatic changes in party political support

The 2011 Irish general election, held right in the heat of the country's economic collapse, was one of the most dramatic ever witnessed: in all the established democracies, only two other elections (the Italian election of 1994 and the Dutch election of 2002) have surpassed it in terms of 'aggregate volatility' (a commonly used measure of the extent of vote change in established democracies).

Figure 1: Irish party politics, 1922-2011



Source: John Coakley and Michael Gallagher (eds), *Politics in the Republic of Ireland* (fifth edition), London: Routledge: 2010, Appendix 2b; updated with 2011 election returns

Voters were paying for political blood and the two government parties suffered badly. They were replaced in office by a new coalition of Fine Gael and Labour, two parties that have been in government together on a number of occasions in the past. The most notable outcome of the 2011 election was the collapse of Fianna Fáil, one of the world's most enduring and successful parties. In comparative terms, Fianna Fáil's defeat was among the largest experienced by a major party in the history of parliamentary democracy. It went from being the largest party in the state (a position it had held since 1932 – see Figure 1) to being a bit player in Irish political life; it had never received so few seats (12% in the lower house, or Dáil) or such a small vote share (17.4%). Fianna Fáil's smaller coalition party, the Green party, was all but obliterated, losing all its parliamentary seats.

But traditional parties retained 133 of the Dáil's 166 seats in the 2011 election

And yet, for all this change, much remained the same – perhaps most distinctly the fact that no new parties emerged. In 2011, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour – the three parties that have defined Ireland's 'two-and-a-half' party system throughout most of the years of the state – won 133 of the Dáil's 166 seats, the same total they had jointly won in 2002 (albeit with very differing individual fortunes).

The party constellation has remained largely unscathed to date and so have the party leaderships. The Fine Gael leader (and Taoiseach), Enda Kenny, is the longest serving member of the Dáil and has been party leader since 2002. A failed leadership coup on the eve of the 2011 election left him in a secure position that, despite a wobble last year (after a series of silly government own goals), will see him lead his party into the next election. His approval ratings hover around the 20-25% margin (19% in the Irish Times/Ipsos MRBI poll of December 2014 – a drop of 7 points since the previous poll).

A potential – and self-inflicted – headache for Mr Kenny in the next election is the prospect of electoral competition from his erstwhile former party colleague, Lucinda Creighton, who, together with three other Fine Gael TDs, was expelled from the party in 2013 after defying the party whip on an important vote relating to abortion. With little prospect of being allowed back into the fold, Mrs Creighton has decided to establish her own party – for now called Reboot Ireland – and promises to field candidates across the country in the next election. To date, there is little sign of her new force gathering much support, but it is still early days.

After poor local election results in 2014 – which began to threaten the stability of the coalition government – the Labour party changed leader. Joan Burton (who, on assuming leadership, also became the deputy prime minister) is a more media-savvy performer than her predecessor and also much more embedded in the Labour party organization – making her position very secure, even if she didn't deliver the poll bounce the party had hoped for. Her approval rating in December 2014 was 25%, a large drop of 12 points from the previous poll taken soon after her election but still significantly more than her predecessor. The party's poll ratings have steadied in recent months, rising slightly to 9% in the most recent Sunday Business Post/Red C poll of January 2015. This has calmed nerves and removed the prospect of an early election, though it hasn't stopped moves by Labour to differentiate itself from Fine Gael as the end of the parliamentary term draws near.

The Fianna Fáil leader, Micheál Martin, took on the leadership mantle on the eve of the party's electoral meltdown in 2011. His record as a senior government minister in the now much-maligned Fianna Fáil-led governments of the early 2000s has made him an easy target for government jibes, but there are no competitors for his position, at least until after the next election. As of December 2014, his approval rating remained at 25%.

Gerry Adams is by far the longest surviving party leader, first elected as Sinn Féin leader in 1983. Poor media performances and recent controversies over his handling of a rape scandal involving a senior figure in the IRA have dented his image (resulting in a 9 point drop in his approval rating to 26% as of December 2014), but he retains a huge personal following in his party. The timing of his departure as party leader will be of his choosing and is unlikely to occur before the 1916 centenary.

The picture so far is one of relative stability. How might that change? After years of austerity budgets and as we approach the next election, what is the prospect now for major political transformation?

The signs would appear to be there: high levels of unemployment (though on a declining trajectory); high levels of mortgage debt and squeezed household budgets; an ongoing vocal (and sometimes quite violent) campaign against water charges; and opinion poll trends that, over time, reveal a growth in support for those parties and groups clamouring for political and economic change. These indicators (and more) would seem to suggest another major European electoral upheaval is on the horizon.

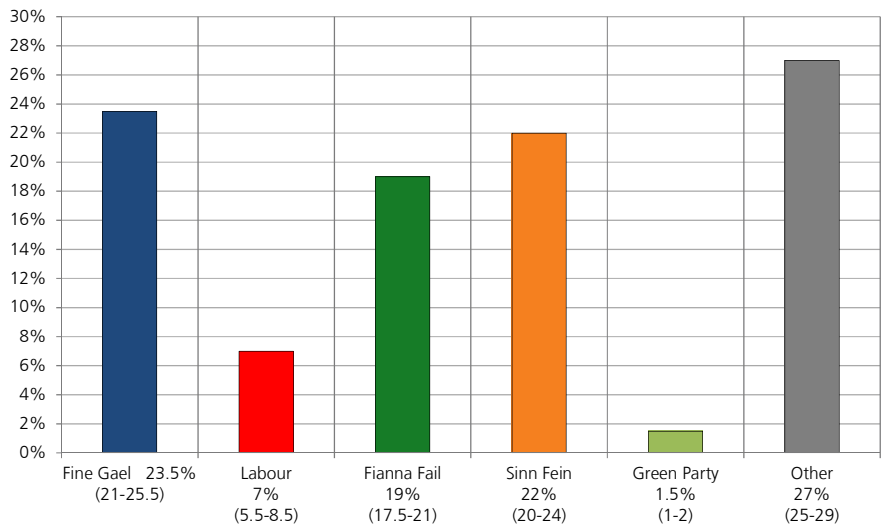
After relative stability, the signs of political upheaval are there

The contenders

If change is to occur, then the most likely beneficiaries are either the Sinn Féin party or some new force that may emerge from among the disparate group of micro parties and independent members of parliament (TDs).

Syriza’s dramatic election victory in Greece has propelled Sinn Féin into the international spotlight, stoked by statements from the Syriza leadership that Sinn Féin could emulate its success in the next Irish election. Over the lifetime of this parliament, Sinn Féin’s support in the opinion polls has doubled from the 10% vote it secured in the 2011 election – in itself an historic high – to about 22% today (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2: Current state of the Irish parties in the opinion polls*



Mean estimates and 95% uncertainty margins. Figures below figure rounded to 0.5%

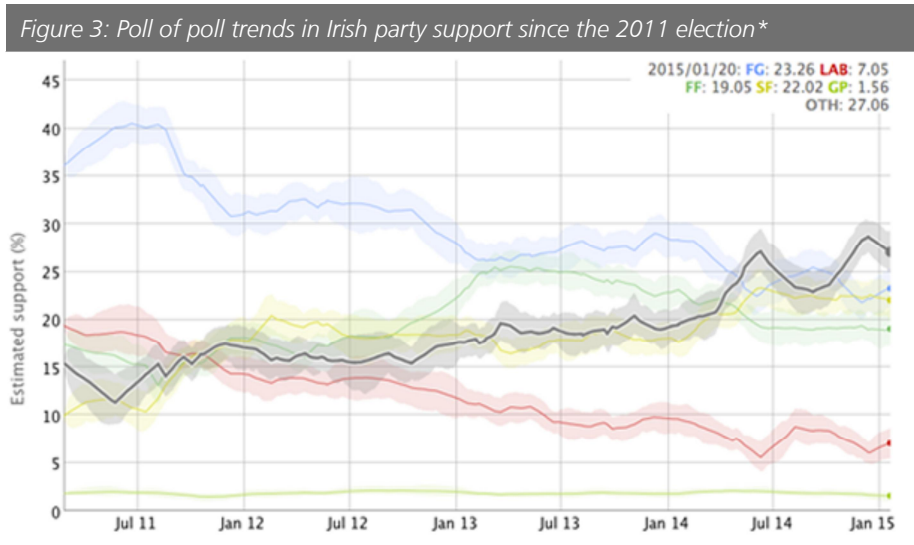
* As of January 25th 2015.

The Irish Polling Indicator is a ‘poll of polls’ that combines all poll data over time into a ‘best estimate’ of political support for each Irish party. It is developed by Dr Tom Louwerse (Trinity College Dublin), using a Bayesian statistical model developed internationally by political scientists. The reported trends are the mean estimates, with 95% uncertainty margins. For more detail, see <http://ipi.tomlouwerse.nl/p/method.html>

Source: Irish polling indicator (<http://ipi.tomlouwerse.nl>)

Sinn Féin’s support has doubled since the 2011 election

The comparison with Syriza would seem powerful: a party that did very well in the first election of the economic crisis and whose poll trends have been rising ever since; a party that is seen as one of the main forces of opposition to the government’s economic policies of austerity and restructuring; a party that is comfortable chasing populist agendas (notably over the decision of its TDs to refuse to pay their water charges).



* This displays the development of party support in the Polling Indicator over time since the 2011 election. The shaded areas indicate the 95% uncertainty margin.
 Source: Irish polling indicator (<http://ipi.tomlouwse.nl>)

Opinion polls give Sinn Féin and independent candidates close to 50% of support

Meanwhile, there are the micro parties and independents – the ‘others’ category – who, between them, garnered 15% of the popular vote in 2011, winning 19 seats in the Dáil (the parliamentary lower house). This was undoubtedly a high watermark, though not historically so.¹ Compared to Sinn Féin, the growth trajectory since 2011 has been even more dramatic. The support for ‘others’ in the polls has all but doubled to 27%, making this collectivity the most popular group in Irish politics today. Furthermore, with the usual attrition resulting from mid-term by-elections and also following a series of internal party rows in the two coalition parties, the number of ‘others’ in the 166-member Dáil has swelled to 30 TDs.²

With support for these two main sets of contenders – Sinn Féin and the ‘others’ – approaching 50% in recent opinion polls, there is good reason to speculate over the prospect for major political change in the next Irish election. This note considers three themes: opinion poll and mid-term election trends; structural issues in Irish electoral politics; and policy positions.

¹ Independents and micro parties have performed equally well in previous Irish elections, notably the 1920s and the late 1940s and early 1950s. In short, over time levels of support for independents tend to ebb and flow.
² The 30 TDs comprise the following mix: independents (25), the Socialist Party/Anti Austerity Alliance (3), People Before Profit (1), and the Workers and Unemployed Action Group South-Tipperary (1).

Opinion poll and mid-term election trends

What can we learn from opinion poll and election trends since 2011? Starting with Sinn Féin, there are two points to make. First, as we have seen, the party’s poll ratings have been climbing ‘steadily’ since 2011. That adjective is used deliberately, because the other way of assessing this is to ask why the trend has been so relatively shallow?

After six years of austerity and tough budgets, we might have expected a more meteoric rise. If anything, the most recent polling evidence suggests some tapering off. A Red-C poll, published in the *Sunday Business Post* on January 25th, reports a drop in the party’s support to 20%. The party’s left-wing credentials have been tarnished recently by embarrassing personal controversies relating to the party leader, by splits over the moral issue of abortion (forcing the party to abstain in a recent parliamentary vote, a point that its competitors were quick to draw attention to) and by being out-flanked by leftwing independent TDs in the high-profile campaign to prevent water charges.

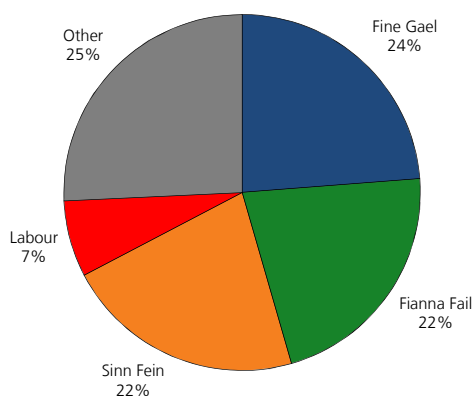
These poll trends are reflected in the party’s mixed performance in mid-term elections. It dramatically increased its tally of council seats in the 2014 local elections (tripling in size since the previous local elections in 2009) and won three of Ireland’s 11 seats in the European Parliament in the same election that year (putting it in second place). Yet, against that, its presidential candidate – Martin McGuinness, the high-profile deputy first minister of the Northern Ireland executive – came a poor third in the 2011 presidential election, winning less than 14% of the popular vote in a race that was wide open for the winning: this was a lower vote tally than many of the campaign polls had predicted, some of which had his support approaching 20%.

A similar disjuncture between poll trends and election outcomes occurred in the May 2014 local elections. As Figure 4 shows, the pre-election polls significantly over-estimated the Sinn Féin vote: the poll of polls predicted a vote of 22%, whereas what transpired was a significantly lower vote tally of 15%. This raises an important question over the degree to which the polls may over-estimate the party’s support.³

Poll trends may overstate support for Sinn Féin and ‘independents’

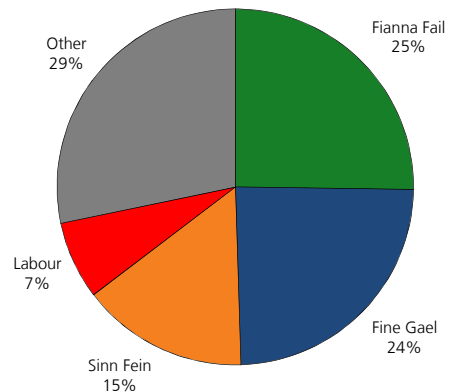
Figure 4: How the polls can over-estimate the Sinn Féin vote: the 2014 local elections

RTE poll-of-polls May 21st



Source: www.politicalreform.ie

Local elections May 23 2014 - % of votes won



Source: www.politicalreform.ie

³ Inaccurate poll trends were a feature of the last election, when the Labour leadership was emboldened by favourable poll trends to focus its campaign message on ‘Gilmore for Taoiseach’ – a slogan that caused some embarrassment as polling day drew near and the poll ratings no longer looked quite so stellar.

The least well off and the young are least likely to vote

In Ireland, mid-term opinion poll trends are notorious for underestimating true government support

Sinn Féin also suffered an embarrassing electoral setback in the 2014 Dublin South-West by-election, which it was widely expected to win. It found itself out-flanked on the controversy over water charges and, against all expectations, its candidate was defeated by Paul Murphy of the Socialist Party/Anti-Austerity Alliance. This episode for the first time saw commentators asking questions over Sinn Féin's potential vulnerability from forces to its left.

Sinn Féin's support is greatest among the least well off, particularly in working class urban areas, and the youngest voters. For instance, the December 2014 Irish Times Ipsos-MRBI survey reported the socio-demographic breakdowns in support for Sinn Féin as follows: its strongest support was among the semi-skilled and unskilled working class (36%) and the skilled working class (28%), giving it a very strong presence in urban working class areas. Across the age groups, the party received most support from those in the 25-to-34 age bracket, making it the strongest party among younger voters. Its support was noticeably lower among older voters.⁴ This is the usual profile of support for this party, which we might anticipate for a party that seeks to locate itself firmly on the left of the spectrum. But the problem for the party is that in Ireland, as elsewhere, these categories of voters – the least well-off and the young – are least likely to vote. The party goes into the next election with the handicap of having to work harder than its opponents in driving out its vote.

There is less to say about micro parties and independents for the simple reason that they are so diverse that the opinion pollsters are unable to track individual trends for them. As reported above, all we can say for certain is that en masse this 'group' is the most popular among voters today. But there is more that divides the group than unites it, and any previous efforts to form an alliance have failed.

Of the 30 TDs in this category,⁵ five of them are members of three separate micro parties – all of them located on the left of the spectrum. Ten of the remaining 25 'independents' are clearly identifiable as leftwing. In summary therefore, we can state that 15 of the 30 are to varying degrees on the left of the spectrum and the remainder is to varying degrees on the right. Efforts to delve into survey data to seek out a coherent social basis for independent support have proved fruitless,⁶ reflecting the fact that in many cases (if not most) independent TDs are first and foremost advocates for their electoral constituencies and far less so proponents of ideological positions on the political spectrum.

There is one final point to make about the opinion poll trends – while they are useful for telling us where Irish public opinion is and has been, they're no good for estimating where it is going. In Ireland, as elsewhere, mid-term opinion poll trends are notorious for underestimating true government support: respondents are prone to exaggerate their dissatisfaction with the government of the day, using the opinion poll as an opportunity to register their protest with one or other aspect of government policy – in Ireland's case most recently, that has been the vexed question of water charges.

⁴ <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/irish-times-ipsos-mrbi-poll-independents-and-small-parties-gain-as-coalition-falters-1.2024817>

⁵ The 30th – Anne Ferris – having just 'joined' this category after defying the Labour party whip a few days ago. There is every likelihood that she will be welcomed back into the fold before the election.

⁶ See Liam Weeks, 'Rage against the machine: Who is the independent voter?' *Irish Political Studies*. 26 (2011): 19-43.

As the election draws near, we can anticipate some realignment in opinion polls

There are grounds for thinking that late 2014 was the high watermark for anti-government protests coming at the end of a long fiscal consolidation programme, before the economic recovery (and tax cuts introduced in the October 2014 budget) had started to be felt, and stoked by the government's clumsy handling of the introduction of water charges.

There are signs that the water charge protests may be waning. According to latest estimates, some 60% of households have now registered for this charge. The most recent protests, in early February, saw far fewer turning out. And there is growing disquiet over some of the offensive (in some instances bordering on violent) tactics deployed by more radical elements among the protesters. But we cannot be entirely sure if this protest is on the wane. The next flash point is likely to be when the first bills are dispatched in April.

As the election draws near and minds start to focus on the issues that really matter (i.e. the economic programmes parties propose for the next parliament), we can anticipate some realignment in opinion poll trends. Indeed, the latest Sunday Business Post/Red-C poll, on January 25th, is suggestive of this: both government parties experienced a rise in support. Short of a major shock, we can expect that to continue, fed by the growing signs of economic improvement.

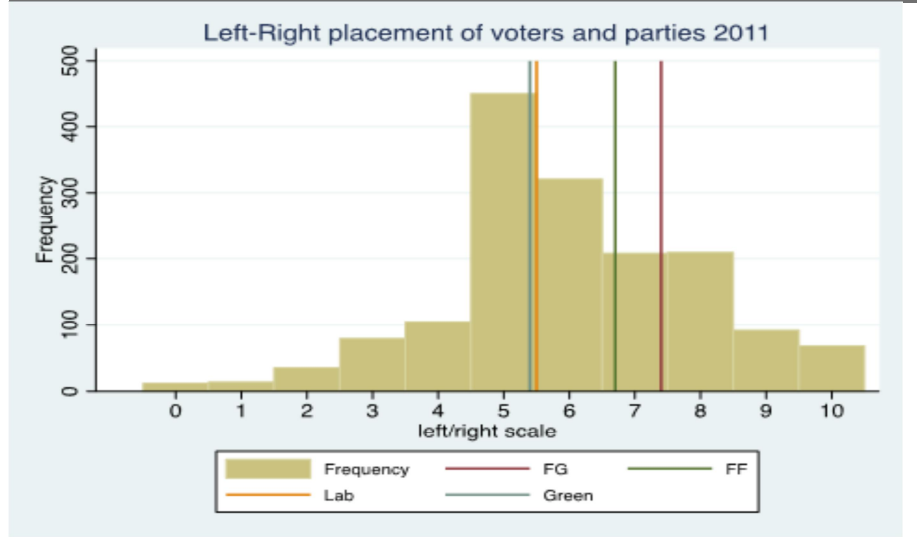
One explanation for the weakness of the left is the inherent conservatism of the Irish voter

Structural issues and the Irish voter

Many European democracies are experiencing dramatic political change. In the UK, the 2014 European Parliament elections propelled the UK Independence Party (UKIP) into the limelight, putting the established parties, notably the British Conservatives, on the back foot. Marine Le Pen’s National Front has been making electoral headway in France to such an extent that a bid by her for the Presidency is a realistic proposition. The Spanish election later this year is likely to see major electoral gains by Podemos. And then there’s Greece.

However, there is good reason to argue that Ireland may be immune from much of this political churning in part due to the profile of the average Irish voter, but also because of key structural factors. Irish politics has always stood apart from that of its European neighbours. One of the explanations for the long-term dominance of Fianna Fáil and the weakness of the left is the inherent conservatism of the average Irish voter.

Figure 5: Left-right placement of voters and parties by Irish voters in 2011



Source: Irish National Election Study, 2011

Figure 5 shows this using the most detailed recent survey of Irish voter opinion – the 2011 Irish National Election Study. What the figure reveals is that the Irish electorate skews towards the centre-right and right where it seems that it is well served by the current brood of political parties. On average, the electorate places itself at around 6 on the left-right scale, closest to the territory traditionally held by Fianna Fáil (6.7 on this scale). Remember that these data were gathered in the heat of the most dramatic election in Irish history, yet even then the default position for most Irish voters remained centre-right. What this tells us is that the best space for a new party to emerge is on the centre-right of the spectrum.⁷

Innate conservatism is aided by the high level of emigration

This innate conservatism is aided by the high level of emigration that has been a feature of Irish life from the early 1800s. The single exception to this was the Celtic Tiger years when Ireland experienced net migration. Since the onset of the economic crisis in 2008, emigration has become a familiar feature once again, and while there are many

⁷ This is precisely the space that independent TD, Lucinda Creighton, seeks to fill with Reboot Ireland.

The Single Transferable Vote system and party finance rules make it hard for new parties to form

negatives (especially for the families affected) what cannot be denied is that it serves as something of a 'pressure valve', taking younger citizens out of the country who otherwise would have swelled the ranks of youth unemployment in the way we have seen in Greece and Spain.

Two key structural factors also have a role to play, the first of these being Ireland's quirky electoral system, the single transferable vote (STV). Voting is candidate-based (voters rank order as many candidates on the ballot paper as they like), which provides a useful stalking ground for prominent personalities to run as an independent on a strong local issue (as we've seen with 'turf-cutter' candidates). But because the system operates with small constituencies (or electoral districts), it makes life difficult for small parties to break through: in effect, the electoral system is not very 'proportional'.

There is a feature about the STV counting system that has a particular significance for Sinn Féin. Unlike other electoral systems where candidates are chasing as many votes as possible, under STV candidates are chasing as many 'preferences' as possible. This is problematic for Sinn Féin because it tends to polarize public opinion: it is strongly supported by some, whereas for others it is a toxic brand. There are members of the older generation in the Irish Republic who simply cannot countenance ever voting for the party (given its record in Northern Ireland), particularly under its existing leadership. This results in the party picking up fewer lower preference votes than average, which can hurt their candidates in a tight race.

The other structural factor of relevance is the party finance regime, which has an important impact on any group seeking to form a new party. Irish parties are generously funded by the state, between them receiving just short of €13 million annually, which amounts to two-thirds of their total income.⁸ But in order to receive any of this money, a party must first win seats in the Dáil, putting aspirant parties at a significant disadvantage.

The party finance rules also affect fund raising. The limit on how much one person can donate to a political party in a calendar year is set very low (€2,500). This provides an additional advantage to established parties with well-developed party branch networks that can engage in local fundraising on a grand scale. New (and small) parties cannot compete against this.

Overall, the conditions are more congenial for independents TDs than for new parties, explaining why Ireland has the highest number of independents in Europe (by a wide margin) and has one of the poorest records in the emergence (and survival) of new parties.

⁸ A pretty standard proportion in most European democracies.

Sinn Féin's socialism takes more of a back-seat role in the north

Policy positions

Further details about party policy positions are provided in a separate report written by Davy Chief Economist Conall Mac Coille ("[Political risks to Ireland's recovery](#)"), also published this morning. A dimension to consider here is the potential for a moderation of views. Sinn Féin portrays itself in the Irish Republic as a socialist party with a 'Republican' hue. In the North, by contrast, its socialism tends to take more of a back seat. It enjoys political power there and, as a consequence, it already manifests the usual examples of policy moderation that we might expect from any party in government over an extended period of time. The recent welfare reform debates in Northern Ireland are a good illustration of just how far Sinn Féin is prepared to go to attain and retain power.

There is little to say under this heading about the independents and micro parties on the left because they have a very poor record of coming to a common view on anything. The most ambitious attempt was at the last election when a number joined forces to run under the common banner of the United Left Alliance (ULA), fielding 20 candidates and winning 2.6% of the vote. But this initiative proved short-lived and crumbled within months due to policy differences and personality clashes.

Efforts are ongoing among various of the independents to form some sort of loose alliance but, given the different and differing egos, the likelihood is that, if anything, we may see several competing groups rather than one unified body following the Syriza model.

A final point to note is that there is no love lost between Sinn Féin and the 'others' on the left: they compete against each other in elections (and vigorously so); each is prone to criticize the other's social and economic policies; each seeks to wrap itself in the mantle of being the source for Ireland's Syriza.

There is a 50/50 chance between the status quo and a coalition of established parties with elements of the new left

Scenarios

Four possible scenarios seem likely after the next election. Of these four scenarios, a Greek Syriza-like government is the least likely. Broadly, there would seem to be a 50/50 chance between effectively the status quo (a coalition centred around the established parties) or a coalition of established parties with elements of the new left. The latter might result in some policy shifts but these are unlikely to be too radical.

1. Steady state: the establishment holds the line

There are various options here, the least likely being the continuation of the current Fine Gael/Labour coalition, especially given the low point Labour has reached in the polls. Its change of leader last summer helps, but the party is seen by many of its erstwhile supporters to have 'sold out' on its 2011 election promises and it is hard to see the party rectifying this in the near future.

A more likely option would be a new coalition among the established parties – perhaps one centred on Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. Based on current poll trends, it's not impossible for these parties to accumulate enough seats to have the potential to form a coalition; and if they were to fall short by a small margin, Labour might also be in the frame too.⁹ This is certainly electorally possible and has attracted some speculation, with some senior Fine Gael ministers among those expressing support (to the ire of the leaderships of both parties). Such a move would be politically difficult, however, for two reasons. First, these parties were formed out of a violent civil war split in the early years of the Irish state: it is the divide between these two parties that has always been at the heart of the Irish party system. The second point flows from this. A coalition between these two parties could be the death knell for whichever of them has the least seats in the next parliament.

Having said that, in the heat of post-election euphoria, anything is possible. If presented with the choice between forming a coalition among established parties or the alternative, electoral expediency could well trump political sensibilities.

2. Greece is the word: a left alliance

Short of a major cataclysmic event – that by its nature cannot be predicted – this is the least likely scenario. Sinn Féin, for one, faces a number of constraints. Between them, the less than stellar opinion poll trends it attracts combined with its skewed support base, how the electoral system can work against it and its historical baggage all set limits on how far the party can continue to grow its support in the next few years. A leadership change, new image and moderation of policies might change that over time, but this is unlikely to occur this side of the next election.

The history of failed alliances among independents and micro parties on the left makes it very unlikely that a major force for change will emerge from this quarter either. Many of these TDs will easily retain their seats in the next election, and they are likely to be joined by others to swell their ranks, but they start from such a small critical mass that there is little likelihood of a major breakthrough in the near future.

A left alliance is the least likely scenario

⁹ We shouldn't rule out the possibility that a new right-of-centre party (such as Lucinda Creighton's Reboot Ireland) wins sufficient seats to also be a contender as a coalition partner.

Finally, the ideological space that Sinn Féin and the 'others' occupy places something of a block on the potential for budding political entrepreneurs such as Alexis Tsipras or Pablo Iglesias to emerge.

3. Middle of the road: established parties join forces with Sinn Féin (and/or others on the left)

It has been said about political parties that when it comes to forming coalitions they can be very 'promiscuous': opponents that in the past might have been treated as pariahs by the established parties can suddenly become ideal partners; radical parties that have foresworn against ever going into coalition with the establishment can suddenly do just the opposite. There are plenty of examples from Irish electoral history of parties burying their differences and forming coalitions 'for the national interest'.

Also relevant here is the question over just how far Sinn Féin might be prepared to moderate its policies if entry to government were in the offing, especially in this most symbolic of periods, as we approach the centenary of 1916 Easter Rising. As we have seen, the party has been perfectly happy to moderate its views to enter (and retain) government in Northern Ireland.¹⁰

The current belief among most commentators, however, is that even if the opportunity presents itself, Sinn Féin is likely to want to stay in opposition and bide its time, emulating Syriza's decision in 2012 not to go into government with the established parties. But this 'one more push' strategy is risky, especially in the context of an improving economic situation.

An alternative option is for a set of established parties to make a deal with a group of like-minded independent TDs, who might by then have formed some sort of alliance with this very scenario in mind. The way this could play out is that the independent group set some conditions – such as a requirement that budgets be progressive – in return for their support.

In either event – a coalition including Sinn Féin, or a minority government supported by an alliance of independents – we might expect a shift in government macro-economic policy in a left-of-centre direction.

4. An uncertain future: a minority unstable government

While unlikely, this scenario cannot be entirely ruled out. An obvious way this might arise is if the established parties for some reason or other fail to form a coalition, and one of the larger among them (Fine Gael or possibly Fianna Fáil) form a minority government, perhaps with an undertaking of parliamentary support from some independent TDs who trade their support for constituency favours. This would most likely result in an early election. There is precedent. Over an 18-month period from 1981-1982, there were a series of three elections resulting from minority governments that were unable to hold onto power for more than a few months.

¹⁰ And, after all, there is some precedent. In the 1980s a splinter organization from SF – 'Official SF' – that had started out as a Marxist socialist grouping gradually moderated its views, passing through various party name changes to become the Democratic Left party that joined a coalition with Fine Gael and Labour. Democratic Left later merged with the Labour party.

Under this scenario, the outcome is uncertain. The early 1980s experience gives reason to hope that the end result ultimately (after a further election or two) would be a stable coalition government formed around some combination of the established parties: voters don't like uncertainty, and they don't like regular elections; so, just as in the 1980s, we might anticipate (though obviously we can't be certain) that voters ultimately would opt for the party combination that they believe can best provide political and economic stability.

Overall, of these four scenarios, a Greek Syriza-like government is the least likely. Broadly, there would seem to be a 50/50 chance between effectively the status quo (a coalition centred around the established parties) or a coalition of established parties with elements of the new left. The latter might result in some policy shifts but these are unlikely to be too radical.

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