

Volatility begets volatility. The European Parliament election of 2014 in Ireland.

Conor Little, Keele University

After the volatile general election of February 2011, the European Parliament and local elections of 23 May 2014 were the first nationwide electoral test of whether the Irish party system that had persisted with minor variations from the 1930s until 2011 would begin to re-emerge. Would these elections indicate a reassertion of a primary axis of competition between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael or would they indicate that Irish politics was moving towards a new structure?

In the short term, the questions that framed these elections included the following:

- Having never been in government outside of Northern Ireland and with anti-austerity sentiment in the ascendant, would Sinn Féin (GUE/NGL) meet expectations of a strong performance?
- Would Fianna Fáil (ALDE), which was Ireland's largest party from 1932 until its unprecedented defeat at the general election of 2011, perform well enough to for its leader to avoid or see off a challenge to his position in the short term?
- Would Fine Gael (EPP) receive the largest vote share, as did at the European Parliament election in 2009 and the general election in 2011, further cementing its place as Ireland's predominant party in-waiting?
- After three years as junior coalition partner, how poorly would Labour (S&D) perform and would this lead to the replacement of its leader?
- What form would indications of strong support for non-party candidates take at the polls?

Context and campaign

Ireland's eleven MEPs for the 2014-2019 term – reduced from twelve in the previous term – were elected by two large constituencies (South and Midlands-North-West, with four seats each) and one smaller constituency (Dublin, with three seats). EU issues did not feature prominently in the campaign and brief visits by the Euro-parties' Commission presidency candidates Martin Schulz (S&D), Guy Verhofstadt (ALDE) and Ska Keller (Greens) received little attention. Although trust in the EU had fallen substantially and the image of the EU held by Irish people was considerably more negative compared to 2009 (Eurobarometer, 2013), there was little by way of a concerted Eurosceptic challenge, other than from Sinn Féin, which preferred to describe itself as "Euro-critical".

Unemployment was falling but was still high at 11.8% in April (CSO, 2014). A leading research institute forecast continued decline in unemployment as a result of economic growth in 2014 and 2015 (Duffy et al., 2014). However, four out of five Irish people evaluated the Irish economy negatively (Eurobarometer,

2013) and two months before the election, a leading economist warned of dire consequences were the European Central Bank to force Irish banks to foreclose on outstanding loans to small businesses (Kelly, 2014).

A week before the election, a senior civil servant suggested that, having endured spending cuts since 2008, Irish people were suffering from “austerity fatigue” (Institute for Government, 2014). New taxes (including a property tax) and charges (including a water charge) provided considerable traction for opposition parties. The government parties were involved in a drawn-out public row over the details of the introduction of the water charge, culminating in the finalisation of the policy two weeks before the election. Spending cuts were also the focus of attention and, just two days before the election, the government was forced to promise a review of its policy that was restricting access to free medical care for those with serious illnesses. An exit poll taken on election day indicated that the property tax, water charge and the controversies over free medical care each influenced more than half of voters (RTÉ/B&A, 2014).

In urban areas, and especially in Dublin, rapidly rising house prices and rents and increasing numbers of individuals and families who were homeless featured prominently in the media throughout the campaign. The government published a housing strategy (much-criticised for its potential to drive up house prices) ten days before the election and agreed a package of measures on homelessness three days before the election. In rural areas, the prospect of the development of wind turbines and electricity pylons were the focus of formidable local campaigns. However, the former was made irrelevant by the British and Irish governments’ failure to agree terms for electricity export and the latter was sidelined when it was assigned to an expert panel by the responsible minister.

Some of the most significant events of the campaign were beyond the control of party leaders. The government lost a senior minister for the first time in its three years in office when the (Fine Gael) Justice Minister was forced to resign after he was found to have failed to adequately investigate complaints of malpractice in the police force. His resignation continued to distract from his party’s campaign into the final days when he took two days to clarify whether he would accept a payment of €70,000 on resignation in spite of the government’s policy (yet to be enacted as law at the time of his resignation) to end such payments.

Labour’s campaign was not helped when, a month before the election, one of its two sitting MEPs (the third having left the party a year before) called on the party leader to resign after an opinion poll taken indicated that she would perform very poorly. Ten days out from the poll, Labour announced that it would seek a “renewal” of the government programme.

Sinn Féin’s campaign was interrupted by the arrest of its party leader and his detention for four days by police in Northern Ireland in connection with the abduction, murder and secret burial of a woman in the early 1970s. Neither opinion polls taken after his release nor an exit poll taken on election day indicated that the episode reduced the party’s vote share.

Results¹

Forty-one candidates contested the election, including ten of the twelve sitting MEPs. Three of these ten had taken their seats as replacements after individuals elected in 2009 retired or were elected to the national parliament. Eleven of the candidates did not represent any party and a number of very small parties contested the election in 2014 having not done so in 2009. One non-party candidate in the South constituency challenged the law that excluded undischarged bankrupts from running for office; the government responded by repealing it a number of weeks before the election.

Just over half of the electorate (52.4%) turned out to vote, a markedly lower proportion than in 2004 or 2009 (59%). As in previous European Parliament elections, turnout in Dublin (43%) was considerably lower than in the rest of the country. Of the votes cast, 2.7% were spoiled, a slightly higher proportion than in 2009 (2.5%).

Ireland was the last member state to finalise the election of its MEPs. After the elections took place on Friday 23 May, counting of votes began on Sunday. It continued in Dublin until Monday, in the South constituency until Tuesday and in Midlands-North-West until early on the morning of Thursday 29th. The delay in finalising the results and criticism of relatively arbitrary constituency boundaries led to renewed calls for the establishment of an independent electoral commission to better coordinate elections (Reidy, 2014).

This was another volatile election: aggregate inter-party volatility measured by the Pedersen index stood at 23.7. By way of comparison, the 2009 election was associated with a score of approximately 10 and the 'earthquake' general election of 2011, 29.6 (Mair, 2011).² Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil each won 22.3% of first preference votes and Sinn Féin won 19.5%. However, while Fine Gael won four seats and Sinn Féin won three, Fianna Fáil won only one. In one respect, the results were considerably more proportional than before: for the first time, a majority of Ireland's MEPs (six out of eleven) are women.

Non-party candidates won 19.8% of the vote. Seventy percent of these votes were received by the three successful non-party candidates: Flanagan, Harkin and Childers. Labour won 5.3%, a new low for the party in European Parliament elections, and the Green Party won 4.9%, marking a recovery from previous elections during and immediately after its participation in government in 2009 and 2011, respectively.

Large constituencies left little room for those without an existing national profile and significant resources. Most of those who won seats were already European

¹ Results for 2014 are drawn from the website of the national broadcaster (RTÉ, 2014). Comparisons with 2009 and previous elections draw on data from Quinlan (2010), Little et al. (2010) and Electionsireland.com (Took and Donnelly, 2013).

² The Pedersen index is calculated summing the magnitude of the differences in vote share since the last EP election and dividing by two (see Mair, 2011).

or national office-holders. They included five MEPs (Childers, McGuinness, Harkin, Crowley, Kelly), two MPs (Flanagan, Hayes) and one Senator (Clune).

Table 1: European Parliament election in Ireland, 2014

Party (Party Group)	MEPs (compared to 2009)	% 1st pref. vote share	Pct pt change since 2011 GE	Pct pt change since 2009 EP
Fine Gael (EPP)	4 (=)	22.3	-13.8	-6.8
Fianna Fáil (ALDE)	1 (-2)	22.3	4.9	-1.8
Non-party candidates*	3 (+2)	19.8	7.2	8.3
Sinn Féin (GUE/NGL)	3 (+3)	19.5	9.6	8.4
Labour Party (S&D)	0 (-3)	5.3	-14.2	-8.6
Green Party (Greens/EFA)	0 (=)	4.9	3	3
Socialist Party (GUE/NGL)	0 (-1)	1.8	0.6	-1
Other parties**	0 (=)	4	NA	NA
Total	11 (-1)	99.9		

* Of the non-party candidates, Marian Harkin was a member of a party group (ALDE) at the time of the election.

** 'Other parties' in 2014 were the Catholic Democrats, Direct Democracy Ireland, Fís Nua and People Before Profit.

The election count illustrated some features typical of the Irish electoral system, which involves a single transferable vote in multi-member constituencies. As in 2009 when Mairead McGuinness (Fine Gael) was elected on first preferences alone, only one of the successful candidates (Fianna Fáil's Brian Crowley in South) was elected on first preference votes. Second and subsequent preferences allowed Nessa Childers (Non-party) in Dublin and Deirdre Clune (Fine Gael) in South to overtake candidates with higher shares of the first-preference vote. However, transfers comprised only 19% of the more-than 1.25 million votes that were eventually received by the eleven candidates who won seats.

Another effect of Ireland's electoral system is competition within parties where they run more than one candidate per constituency. Two parties (Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael) ran more than one candidate in each of the two large constituencies and they each adopted different strategies. Fine Gael divided the constituencies between candidates, while Fianna Fáil did not. While Fine Gael had some vote management problems in 2009 (Little et al., 2010: 110), Fianna Fáil's problems in this regard were clearest in 2014. Had they persuaded their poll-topping candidate in South to engage in active vote-management with his running mate, they could have won a second seat.

Consequences and implications

The Labour Party leader announced his intention to resign days after the election, setting a date for a leadership contest by a vote of the party's membership in early July. The government reshuffle that had been expected to take place soon after the election was delayed by the leadership selection process. The favourite for the leadership, Joan Burton, positioned herself before the election by objecting to further spending cuts, but has since stated her commitment to meeting Ireland's 3% budget deficit target.

The government will face a by-election to replace Brian Hayes (Fine Gael) as an MP and another if it chooses to select a sitting MP as a European Commissioner. There will also be a by-election to replace Luke 'Ming' Flanagan (Non-party).

The election results put the coalition strategies of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Sinn Féin firmly centre-stage. Any combination of any of these parties would be novel and it seems increasingly likely that a combination of two of these parties will be necessary to build a majority after the next general election, to be held by April 2016. This presents dilemmas for each of these parties, not least for Sinn Féin, whose supporters may be ambivalent about entering government. Were a centre-right coalition between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to emerge, it may mark a restructuring of the party system between the centre-right (Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil) and 'anti-austerity' parties, including Sinn Féin.

Although anti-incumbent voting is to be expected, especially in mid-term European Parliament elections (Quinlan, 2014), the results again raise questions about the strategies and viability of junior partners in government, particularly those that have made rapid gains and that may have a correspondingly soft electoral base comprising voters who have not become strongly attached to the party by voting for it repeatedly. Would alternative strategies, such as 'contract parliamentarism' serve them better in electoral terms, and would this be worth the price paid in terms of policy influence (Bale and Bergman, 2006)?

It remains possible that, over coming elections, long-established patterns of electoral behaviour and party competition may re-assert themselves (Hutcheson, 2011). However, the key element in the traditional party system's recovery – a Fianna Fáil recovery such that it can lead a potential government – is not guaranteed. Their recovery, even though it was stronger at the local elections and even if it was sufficient to protect its leader from any serious challenge for the time being, has been decidedly modest and they face difficulties arising from an imminent parliamentary inquiry into the Irish banking crisis.

The effects of Ireland's volatile February 2011 general election continued to play out in mid-2014 and the Irish party system, while it may eventually revert to its pre-2011 *status quo*, remains vulnerable to lasting change.

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