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The parliamentary election in Ireland, February 2011

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1. Background to the election

The three-party coalition government formed in 2007 between Fianna Fáil, the Green Party and the Progressive Democrats appeared to have a bulletproof majority, and there was every reason to expect that, like its two immediate predecessors, it would last the full five-year term. However, the global recession that began later that year and hit Ireland with full force in mid-2008 quickly reduced the likelihood that the government would survive until 2012. In September 2008 the crisis in the Irish banking system, which had over-stretched its loan books far beyond the realms of prudence in the previous decade, was finally exposed following the collapse of Lehman Brothers. After the event there were many questions as to why neither political actors, nor Ireland's or the EU's regulatory system, had noticed the many warning signs. On 29 September 2008 the Irish government guaranteed the deposits and loan books of the six Irish banks, and over the next two years it nationalised or effectively nationalised all but one of these. Consequently, the debts and losses of the banks were taken on by the taxpayer and a huge debt crisis emerged. Trust in and support for the government dropped sharply and never recovered, though the government remained in office for over two more years.

From this point, all the economic goals and pledges contained in the programme for government laid out in 2007 were pretty much irrelevant. Although the government's term ran until June 2012, many questioned its moral authority to implement the crisis management policies, especially given that perceived economic competence had played a large part in Fianna Fáil's continuation in office in 2007 (Ó Muineacháin and Gallagher 2008). However, everyone knew that an early election would result in huge losses for the government parties and the coalition held on through a series of setbacks. The breaking point came in November 2010, when fumbled communications around the arrival in Dublin of representatives of the

IMF and EU institutions to negotiate a financial rescue package led the Green Party to announce its intention to leave government as soon as the 2011 budget had been passed early in the new year.

By this time the government was under new leadership, as Bertie Ahern, who had been Taoiseach (prime minister) since 1997 stood down in May 2008 following awkward questions about his finances at a tribunal of enquiry. He was succeeded as Fianna Fáil leader and Taoiseach by Brian Cowen, who as Minister for Finance from 2004 to 2008 could hardly avoid responsibility for what the crisis revealed to have been the mismanagement of the country's finances during that time. Cowen proved entirely unsuited to the role of Taoiseach during such difficult times. Far from providing inspiration or leadership to his party and the country, he displayed a gruff, partisan and irritable demeanour towards the media and the parliamentary opposition, and in speeches he tended to mumble in inappropriately technocratic language. On several occasions his continued leadership of the party was questioned by disgruntled backbenchers but, surprisingly, most Fianna Fáil TDs (members of the Dáil) remained supportive. Matters came to a head in mid-January 2011. First, discontent within Fianna Fáil finally triggered an open leadership challenge, which foreign minister Micheál Martin announced that he would back. When Cowen won the vote, Martin resigned from government. Within two days, though, Cowen made one mistake too many, embarking on a bizarre attempt to refresh the government by persuading a number of ministers to resign, all without consulting his coalition partners. With yet another challenge inevitable, Cowen announced his resignation as party leader on 22 January, and the following day the Green Party pulled out of the government, declaring that its patience was 'at an end'. Fianna Fáil elected Martin as its new leader, the 2011 budget was passed swiftly through parliament with the tacit agreement of the main opposition parties, and the Dáil was dissolved on 1 February,

with the election set for the 25th – a relatively long campaign period by Irish standards, though of course the *de facto* campaign had long been up and running.

The Irish party system has always been difficult to situate in a comparative context. Labour and the Greens are comparable with their international counterparts, while Sinn Féin combines strong Irish republicanism with a left-wing stance, being a member of the European United Left group. The left was further strengthened when two small left-wing groups, the Socialist Party and People before Profit Alliance, together with some like-minded independents, came together in the United Left Alliance at the outset of the campaign. The two historically dominant parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, belong respectively to the European Liberal and Christian Democratic groups, though neither is quite typical of parties in those categories (Weeks 2010: 142–3). Both are generally termed ‘centre-right’, but tend to be catch-all in support and pragmatic in policy. Fianna Fáil had been Ireland’s strongest party for nearly 80 years, winning 39 per cent or more of the votes at every election since 1932, and Fine Gael was always second during that period. However, polls from October 2008 to September 2010 showed Fianna Fáil in second and sometimes even third place, while in September 2010, for the first time ever, several polls found Labour to be the most-supported party. From October 2010 Fianna Fáil dropped further, never again reaching 20 per cent. The Progressive Democrats, which with 3 per cent of the votes in 2007 had been a third member of the coalition government formed then, had dissolved in 2009.

2. The electoral system

The Dáil is elected using proportional representation by the single transferable vote, the system that has been used at every election since independence in 1922 (for explanation of PR-STV, see Sinnott 2010, Gallagher 2008). The 165 elected members are returned from 43 constituencies, each returning either three, four or five TDs. Average district magnitude (3.8)

is thus exceptionally low by PR standards. To cast a ballot under PR-STV voters simply place a 1 beside their most preferred candidate, and they may go on to rank some or all of the other candidates in order of their preference, without regard to candidates' party labels. As in open-list systems, candidates are competing not only with other parties but also with candidates of their own party. Votes are 'transferred' from one candidate to another, according to the next preference marked, when weakly-supported candidates are eliminated from the count and when strongly-supported candidates have their surplus votes distributed.

3. The campaign and election issues

The campaign was dominated by the economy: creating jobs, reducing unemployment, reducing emigration, and renegotiating the terms of the financial rescue package drawn down from the IMF and European institutions. It was widely felt that the interest rate on this package was punitive, designed more to discourage other countries, particularly Spain, from running large budget deficits than to help Ireland through its crisis. Critics also said that the package was designed primarily to rescue not Ireland, which might not be able to afford its terms, but those banks outside Ireland that had recklessly lent money to Irish banks who in turn lent it to speculators in Ireland's property bubble. In effect, the Irish people were being lent money at high interest rates so that they could 'repay' loans they had never taken out. However, alongside resentment at the terms of the arrangement, and particularly at the unaccommodating attitude of the European Central Bank, there was a widespread assumption that there was little any government could do to change the terms of the deal. The hardball declaration by Labour leader Éamon Gilmore on 3 February that it would be 'Frankfurt's way or Labour's way' carried little credibility and may have given the advantage on this issue to Fine Gael, which was emphasising discussion, dialogue and its political connections in

Europe through the European People's Party, particularly with the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel.

Clearly, there was little scope for lavish election promises. Parties differed mostly in the degree to which they emphasised fairness or fiscal pragmatism. Fine Gael proposed that the budget deficit target agreed under the financial rescue package should be achieved by 2014, mainly through spending cuts. This included cutting public sector employment numbers by 10 per cent. On the other hand Labour advocated a 2016 timeframe, on the basis that the adjustments necessary to meet the 2014 target would impose much greater hardship on society, and wanted tax increases to contribute as much to closing the deficit as spending cuts. The struggle between the two parties had a classic left-right dimension to it. Fine Gael accused Labour of being a high tax party, while Labour painted Fine Gael as being the party of cuts that would hurt the most vulnerable in society. All other issues were swept to the margins.

Fine Gael made most of the running during the campaign. It came out with a '5-point plan', which was enough to satisfy voters that it knew what it was doing without boring them with excessive detail. Party leader Enda Kenny was perceived as a potential electoral liability because of his poor grasp of policy detail, and he had only narrowly survived a leadership challenge in June 2010. However, as the campaign went on his standing rose, as his performances in the televised leaders' debates were unproblematic. Fine Gael advanced in the polls for the first two weeks of the campaign, though it remained static after that, and by election day betting markets saw a one-in-three chance that it might either win an overall majority, or come close enough to this that it could govern alone. In contrast, Labour, which had printed thousands of posters reading 'Gilmore for Taoiseach', saw its support drop for the first two weeks, before a late change of tactics brought about a minor recovery. The rising popularity of the hard left parties, Sinn Féin and the United Left Alliance, meant that Labour

was fighting a two-front war. Although some people floated the idea of a Labour-led left-wing coalition government, Labour made it clear that it was not interested, and indeed the polls never suggested that this could have been a realistic possibility.

Having been in government for the previous fourteen years, it was very difficult for Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin to propose solutions for the crisis with any credibility, and for the first time since the 1920s Fianna Fáil had no expectation of entering government after the election. For the foreign media, one of the most interesting aspects of the election was the decision of Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams to resign his seat in the House of Commons (he had represented West Belfast for 19 years) and to contest a Dáil seat for the first time. In 2007 his apparent unfamiliarity with the quotidian details of politics south of the border had been damaging for the party, although he was not personally contesting a seat on that occasion. In 2011 he led the campaign regardless, and was felt to have learned from his earlier mistakes. The Greens declared their openness to take part in a coalition after the election, but since they were expected to lose all their Dáil seats there was no rush to court them.

4. Election results

The 2011 Irish election was truly an earthquake election. It displayed one of the highest levels of volatility ever seen in postwar Europe, mainly due to the collapse of Fianna Fáil, whose losses were among the greatest ever sustained by any party anywhere (Mair 2011). Fianna Fáil lost virtually three-quarters of its seats, dropping to its lowest level ever, while its erstwhile junior coalition partners, the Greens, lost all of their seats (see Table 1). The main beneficiaries were the two main opposition parties, Fine Gael and Labour, which both made significant vote gains and won record numbers of seats. On the left Sinn Féin more than tripled its number of seats, Gerry Adams heading the poll in the Louth constituency, and the

United Left Alliance also fared well. The combined left won over 30 per cent of the votes, a record for Ireland, where the left has always been the weakest in western Europe.

Independents, a long-standing and distinctive feature of Irish politics, returned in their highest numbers since 1951; some are simply hard-working local ‘friends and neighbours’ politicians, but several could be placed on the left of the political spectrum. It is also worth making the point that these high levels of volatility came about despite the absence of any new party; seats shifted among the existing parties rather than being won by new forces. The number of female TDs advanced from 22 in 2007 to 25, though with only 15 per cent of its membership being female the Dáil is still one of the most male-dominated parliaments in Europe.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Ireland’s small district magnitude, mentioned above, is the explanation for the record high level of disproportionality (8.69 on the least squares index). With 36 per cent of the votes, Fine Gael won 46 per cent of the seats, while Fianna Fáil’s seat share was six percentage points below its vote share. When district magnitude is small the largest party stands to receive a significant seat bonus especially when, as in 2011, it is around twice as strong as any other party (Gallagher 2011). Coupled with good vote management (the distribution of its votes among its candidates) it achieved a greater over-representation than any party had ever managed before, and fell only 8 seats short of an overall majority.

5. Government formation

Once the results were known, it was clear that there were only two possible governments. Either Fine Gael could try to form a minority government with support from eight or more independents, or it could form a coalition with Labour. There was no possibility that Fine Gael would coalesce either with Sinn Féin, which is not yet regarded by the other parties as

coalitionable (in the Republic of Ireland, anyway), or with Fianna Fáil, whose removal from office had been a prime objective of the opposition.

In the event, Enda Kenny moved rapidly to open coalition negotiations with Labour. It may be that there had been liaison between the two parties during the election campaign, and some preliminary work on a programme for government. Certainly, once the votes had been counted negotiations were swiftly completed. On 6 March, just nine days after the election, both parties ratified an agreement under which Fine Gael would have ten of the fifteen government posts and Labour the other five. On policies, the programme split the difference between the two parties on some issues – for example, the budget deficit was to be reduced to 3 per cent by 2015, a compromise between Fine Gael's aim for 2014 and Labour's preference for 2016 – while on other contentious issues the hard decision was, in effect, fudged or deferred. The government would command 113 of the 166 seats, the largest majority in the history of the state. This, together with the commitment to pragmatism demonstrated by Fine Gael and Labour in the wake of the election, led observers to expect that this Dáil would run its full term – but then, the same was said after the 2007 election.

The implications for the party system of this election are profound. The dominant position of Fianna Fáil in the system has come to an end, and the remarkable stability of the Irish party system, which in many ways changed little from 1932 to 2011, is no more. It remains to be seen whether Fine Gael will replace Fianna Fáil as the dominant party, or whether the next election will see something like an even distribution of seats between the largest three parties, making each subsequent election a contest to determine which two of the three will be in government and who will lead it. There could be an even greater upheaval, with Fianna Fáil fading away to be replaced by a stronger Labour or Sinn Féin and a re-alignment of the Irish party system on left–right lines. Predictions made in the wake of the 2007 election proved so

inaccurate that further speculation would be unwise. But, for once, the cliché is true: the Irish party system will never be the same again.

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Not applicable in election notes

Table 1: Votes and seats won in the Irish general election, 25 February 2011

	Valid votes	% vote	Change since 2007	Seats	Change since 2007
Fine Gael	801,628	36.1	+8.8	76	+25
Labour	431,796	19.4	+9.3	37	+17
Fianna Fáil	387,358	17.4	-24.1	20	-58
Sinn Féin	220,661	9.9	+3.0	14	+10
United Left Alliance	59,423	2.7	+1.6	5	+5
Green Party	41,039	1.8	-2.8	0	-6
Workers' Party	3,056	0.1	0	0	0
Christian Solidarity Party	2,102	0.1	0	0	0
Progressive Democrats	0	0	-2.7	0	-2
Independents and others	273,296	12.3	+7.1	14	+9
Total	2,220,359	100.0	0	166	0

Note: One of Fianna Fáil's seats was uncontested (automatic re-election of the speaker of parliament).

Electorate 3,209,244; invalid votes 22,817; turnout (valid votes as proportion of electorate) 69.2 per cent.

Source: *31st Dáil, General Election February, 2011: Election Results and Transfer of Votes* (Dublin: Houses of the Oireachtas, 2011)