

ELECTION BRIEFING No. 64 THE IRISH GENERAL ELECTION OF 25TH FEBRUARY 2011

**John FitzGibbon
Sussex European Institute
Email: Jf70@sussex.ac.uk**

Key Points

- The election provided the effective electoral wipeout of ruling government parties with the historically dominant Fianna Fáil (ALDE) reduced to third party status and complete parliamentary destruction of junior coalition party the Greens.
- Main successful parties were centre-right Fine Gael (EPP) and centre-left Labour Party (PES). Also there were important gains for Sinn Féin (GUE/NGL) and there was the re-emergence of hard left minority parties.
- The resulting coalition of the two largest parties Fine Gael and Labour results, created the largest government majority in the history of the state.
- Immediate challenges for new government were the ending of banking crisis, renegotiation of EU-IMF financial aid package, government deficit, high unemployment, and the restoration of public trust in political process.
- Europe was an important issue in the election but in the specific context of the renegotiation of the EU-IMF bailout package and its implication for Ireland's relationship with Europe.

Context

Ireland went to the polls on February 25th 2011 after four months of the most tumultuous political and economic events since the foundation of the state in 1922. Taoiseach¹ Brian Cowen called the election on 1st February against his stated desire to continue with the “mandate” of his coalition government through to mid-2012. His hand was forced when his junior coalition partner, the Green party, announced on the 22nd of November 2010 that they would be withdrawing their support for the government once the finance bill, which contained the measures agreed to in the EU-IMF financial rescue package, had been passed into legislation. Their official reason for doing this was their belief that a fresh political mandate was needed to provide democratic legitimacy for the implementation of the EU-IMF package. Less explicit was their exasperation at the repeated “miscommunication” between themselves and Fianna Fáil over the EU-IMF financial package². Although the election was

¹ Prime Minister.

² ‘Greens call for general election’, The Irish Times, 22nd November, 2010.

not expected until late March, an attempted cabinet reshuffle by Cowen after a failed leadership challenge against him in late January 2011, was not accepted by the Greens as it was too close to the election. Green leader John Gormley told him, in no uncertain terms, that such a reshuffle was unacceptable and the election would have to be called earlier than March, as soon as possible.

Cowen was keen to avoid an election at all costs as his government (8%) and his own personal (14%)³ approval ratings were the lowest ever recorded in Ireland since polling began; while the poll numbers for Fianna Fáil showed them on course for their worst ever election (see *Figure 1 and Figure 2*). Indeed these numbers were similar to public sentiment towards Irish politics more generally and by early 2011 the Irish public had the lowest level of trust in government in the developed world. The economic collapse of the country from 2008 on and the government's repeated failure to stem the crisis were clearly the pervasive factors causing this unpopularity of government and of Fianna Fáil. It is also vital to point out however, that this economic catastrophe was mirrored by a series of unending (even continuing into the time of the current new government) political scandals that made political reform and trust in public institutions important issues in the campaign. This potent combination of economic and political collapse led to the historic outcome of the election. Historic not for those parties who won the election, but for the electoral 'shellacking' given to the Fianna Fáil party which has dominated electoral politics in the Irish state from 1932 on. In this sense the election campaign was a *fait accompli* with the main unanswered questions being, how much would Fianna Fáil lose by and how quickly could the two largest opposition parties, the centre right Fine Gael and centre left Labour, come to an agreement for government.

This briefing paper will detail the economic and political factors that led to the outcome of the election and draw conclusions on the political punishment meted out to the once dominant Fianna Fáil party in this election, a judgement by voters on the ruling coalition parties of one of the EU member states most affected by the economic collapse.

Background

To understand the substance of the election campaign it is vital to explain the timeframe of both political and economic factors that began to emerge within a year of the June 2007 general election that fundamentally undermined the perceived political trustworthiness of the Fianna Fáil party.

Less than a year after leading the party for his third successful election, the then Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, was forced to resign in May 2008 due to revelations of his financial dealings in a public tribunal of enquiry into payments to politicians. He was unable to give a coherent account of the source of monies lodged on his behalf. Claiming that at this time, 1992-1995, as Minister for Finance he did not have a bank account and cashed all his wages. Other sources for the money were claimed by him to be the result of winnings on horse races and of a "whip around" by friends of his to provide for him financially during his marital breakdown. While no criminal conviction was forthcoming from his testimony, Ahern resigned after the Greens made it clear that they did not believe his account of where he received his money from. Ahern anointed Minister of Finance Brian Cowen as his successor and he was voted in as Taoiseach by the Parliament on 7th May 2008. It was assumed that

³ Damian Loscher, 'From the brightest start, Cowen's decline has been the steepest', *The Irish Times*, 19th January 2011.

such a steady experienced hand on the tiller would calm proceedings after the eventful period of the resignation of Ahern.

Within a month of Cowen's accession however, the Lisbon Treaty referendum was lost in June and the new government had its second major crisis⁴. Though a myriad of factors caused the rejection the impression began to emerge of an uninterested and disengaged Taoiseach who was unable to communicate with the public or work with opposition parties in the national interest⁵. A year later after a much more forceful campaign the Treaty was passed but there was more trouble for the government to follow soon⁶. The Fianna Fáil Speaker of the Parliament, John O'Donoghue resigned on 6th October 2009 due to a public outcry over excessive expenses claimed by him and his wife while he was Minister for the Arts, Sport and Tourism. Following on from this the Minister for Defence, Willie O'Dea, was forced to resign by the Green Party on the 18th February 2010, despite surviving a vote of confidence the previous day, after his evidence in a defamation trial was found to be untruthful. These political events gave the impression of the government, and Fianna Fáil more generally, being unresponsive and out of touch with a public reeling from the economic crash. Compounding this series of resignations was the failure to hold four by-elections for empty Parliament seats, one of which had been vacant for over a year and a half. Sinn Féin took a court case to the Irish Supreme Court to force the government to hold one of the by-elections. The judgement came out strongly in favour of Sinn Féin and it directed specific criticism at the government for ignoring the Constitution over its prevarication in not holding by-elections.

While the Irish economic collapse and seemingly unending bank crisis dominated international coverage of the Irish election, this series of political scandals combined with the failure of the political system to deal with the economic crisis, resulted in political reform becoming a major issue in the election. The economic crisis in Ireland can more specifically be labelled as a banking crisis, one that began with a decision of monumental importance taken by the government in Autumn 2008.

The Bank Guarantee: "Economic Treachery"⁷

As would become increasingly apparent by early 2010, it was the bank guarantee scheme and the complete failure of the Irish banking system that would be the most important issue of the election. Firstly, it sealed the electoral fate of Fianna Fáil as its failure to solve the banking collapse, despite the €30+billion of public cash pumped directly into the banks and €100+ billion of future liabilities it exposed Irish taxpayers to, destroyed any residual perception of economic competence the party had. In the 2007 general election campaign Cowen made a decisive intervention based on the strength of Fianna Fáil's sound management of the economy, and without this card to play the party was severely limited in its electoral appeal⁸.

⁴ See: Michael Holmes, SEI Referendum Briefing No. 16, *The Referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon in the Republic of Ireland, 12 June 2008*.

⁵ This perception reached a nadir with an interview Cowen gave to Ireland's most popular radio show with 426,000 listeners, Morning Ireland, at 8am where he was alleged to have sounded 'tired and emotional' from the previous night at a Fianna Fáil 'think-in'. The event was labelled as "Garglegate" which, in the context of the banking crisis and the announcement of further austerity, played exceptionally badly with the public.

⁶ See John FitzGibbon, SEI Referendum Briefing No. 17, *The Second Referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon, 2 October, 2009*.

⁷ Labour leader Eamonn Gilmore claimed in the Dáil that the Taoiseach had engaged in "economic treason".

⁸ See: Michael Holmes, SEI Election Briefing No. 35, *Europe and the General Election in the Republic of Ireland, May 24 2007*.

Secondly, the campaign debate over the economy raged over whether Ireland should “burn the bondholders” of the banks with the resultant negative effect on Irish sovereign debt or should Ireland focus more on accepting in principle but renegotiating the terms of the EU-IMF financing package with a less onerous rate of interest.

The series of calamitous events began on the night of the 30th September 2008. The previous week had seen the worst performance of the Irish stock exchange in decades. The shares of Anglo Irish bank had been rendered worthless while the two largest, systemic banks, AIB and Bank of Ireland, had seen their values plunge. This was being compounded by a run of deposits on Irish banks by both ordinary and institutional investors. In response to this the government led by Brian Cowen, Minister for Finance Brian Lenihan, and leading figures in the civil service held an emergency meeting to deal with the unfurling crisis; soon after the heads of AIB and Bank of Ireland were called in to formulate a response to the situation. What was discussed that night between the banks and the government has not become entirely clear but the end result was that the next day the Irish government announced a blanket guarantee of all the liabilities of the Irish banking system. This amounted to some ten times the then national debt and twice the then value of the Irish economy. This guarantee would not only ultimately expose the Irish government to scores of billions of Euro of private bank losses but it also had the effect of severely damaging Irish relations with other EU member states and the EU institutions.

Damage to Irish-EU relations was because the bank guarantee decision was taken without consultation with other Eurozone members or the ECB. The morning of the 31st Lenihan phoned Christine Lagarde, then Chairwoman of ECOFIN, and Jean-Claude Juncker, head of the group of Eurozone member states, informing them of the bank guarantee decision, while then British Chancellor of the Exchequer Alistair Darling found out about the guarantee from the radio news⁹. The reaction from the other member states was one of anger. It was believed that the Irish government had gone on a ‘solo-run’ with the bank guarantee and had biased the market in favour of Irish banks with their unlimited government guaranteed deposits against the as yet unguaranteed Eurozone and UK banks. The guarantee had the immediate effect of stemming the flow of bank deposits out of Ireland but the long term repercussion of this hasty bank policy was to alienate other Eurozone members from the Irish economic predicament. The appearance to the Eurozone member states was that Ireland was not taking into consideration the other members of the monetary union. Indeed the first actions of the incoming government were to deal with the negative perception of Irish involvement in the Eurozone, which began with this failure to act collectively.

After the bank guarantee policy, which Lenihan described as the “cheapest in the world” (a phrase that would come back to haunt him and the party in the election campaign), the government had to address the problem of a growing budget deficit. Government finances had collapsed in 2008 following the bursting of the property bubble, taxes from which had fuelled a rapid increase in government expenditure and thousands of jobs in construction industries. This dramatic increase in the government deficit necessitated an emergency budget. The December 2009 budget brought a 9% cut in government spending after which again Lenihan left himself a hostage to fortune by saying “we have turned a corner” in that the budget cuts and bank guarantee had saved the Irish economy from the worst of the global financial crisis.

⁹ Jamie Smyth, ‘The big gamble: the inside story of the bank guarantee’, *The Irish Times*, 25th September, 2010.

In a pattern that would repeat itself through the next two years the worst was far from over and a drip feed of information as to the true extent of the losses at the Irish bank system started to emerge ominously in January 2009. It became clear that Anglo Irish bank could no longer trade as a private institution, the transfer of some €29.3 billion Euros of Irish central bank support had failed to stem the losses of depositors and cover the write downs of now valueless loans to property developers and the bank would have to be nationalised as it was of “systemic importance”¹⁰. All the Irish banks, but particularly Anglo Irish had lent heavily to property developers. Property assets were used as collateral for the loans but with property prices collapsing some 70% from the height of the bubble in 2007 these loans and the assets backing them were only worth a fraction what they once were. International money markets would not lend to the Irish banks as they were technically insolvent with all of these bad property loans. So it fell to the Irish government as guarantor of the bank loans to inject fresh capital into the banks to cover the losses.

On what appeared to be an almost weekly basis, announcements were made by the government that yet more funds would have to be made available to recapitalise the banks. By September 2010 this had climbed to €50 billion of public funds of which some €33 billion was for Anglo Irish alone. Moreover, the austerity measures had failed to stem the deficit (which stood between 11-12%) and Lenihan announced that the new budget in December 2010 would contain even more cuts and tax increases. By this time Greece had already entered into an IMF financial rescue package and the pressure of the international bond markets on Ireland became unbearable. Burdened by the bank guarantee and its explicit government promise to pay off debts that the Irish banks could not, financial markets believed that the government could not afford this and so charged a higher and higher premium to lend to it. By October 2010 the interest rate on Irish debt had grown to unsustainable highs (some 600 basis points above equivalent German bonds) after a series of downgrades by the major credit ratings agencies. At such levels of interest, the Irish government was effectively cut off from borrowing on the international financial markets.

The government however, was in denial to the public of the extent of the crisis and the burden of the bank debt on the solvency of the state. As rumours grew of Ireland’s imminent entrance into an IMF financial package government ministers repeatedly and very publically denied as “fiction” reports that the government were in negotiations with the IMF. Finally on November 18th Cowen and Lenihan admitted that the Irish Central Bank and Department of Finance were in negotiations with the IMF about a bailout package. This was only revealed however, after the new governor of the Central Bank, former academic Prof. Patrick Honohan, stated on the Morning Ireland radio show that the government were in negotiations with the IMF and they were on their way to the country that very day¹¹.

As *Figure 1* shows there was a clear drop in support for both Fianna Fáil and the Greens in Autumn of 2010 from which they never recovered. It was this blanket refusal to be open with the public about the arrival of the IMF that drew the most anger of the public towards the coalition government. A headline in the Daily Star newspaper summed up the public sentiment superbly with their front page title: “Useless gobshites”. The arrival of the IMF dealt a particular blow to the long republican history of Fianna Fáil and their claim to be the true guarantor of Irish sovereignty; ostensibly in relation to the eventual incorporation of Northern Ireland into a united Irish state. With Ireland beholden to the IMF, the charge was

¹⁰ Selected quotes from: Harry McGee, ‘Changing Times: Cowen and Lenihan in their own words’, *The Irish Times*, 18th November, 2010.

¹¹ Daniel McConnell, ‘The blackest day of the blackest week since the civil war’, *The Irish Independent*, 21st November, 2010.

repeatedly levelled at Fianna Fáil that they had given away the economic sovereignty of Ireland which the founders of the party had fought so hard to achieve. As outlined above, this was the environment within which the campaign took place. In such an extreme and unprecedented economic situation the election campaign was dominated by economic policies while the government parties so closely associated with the crisis were placed very much on the sidelines.

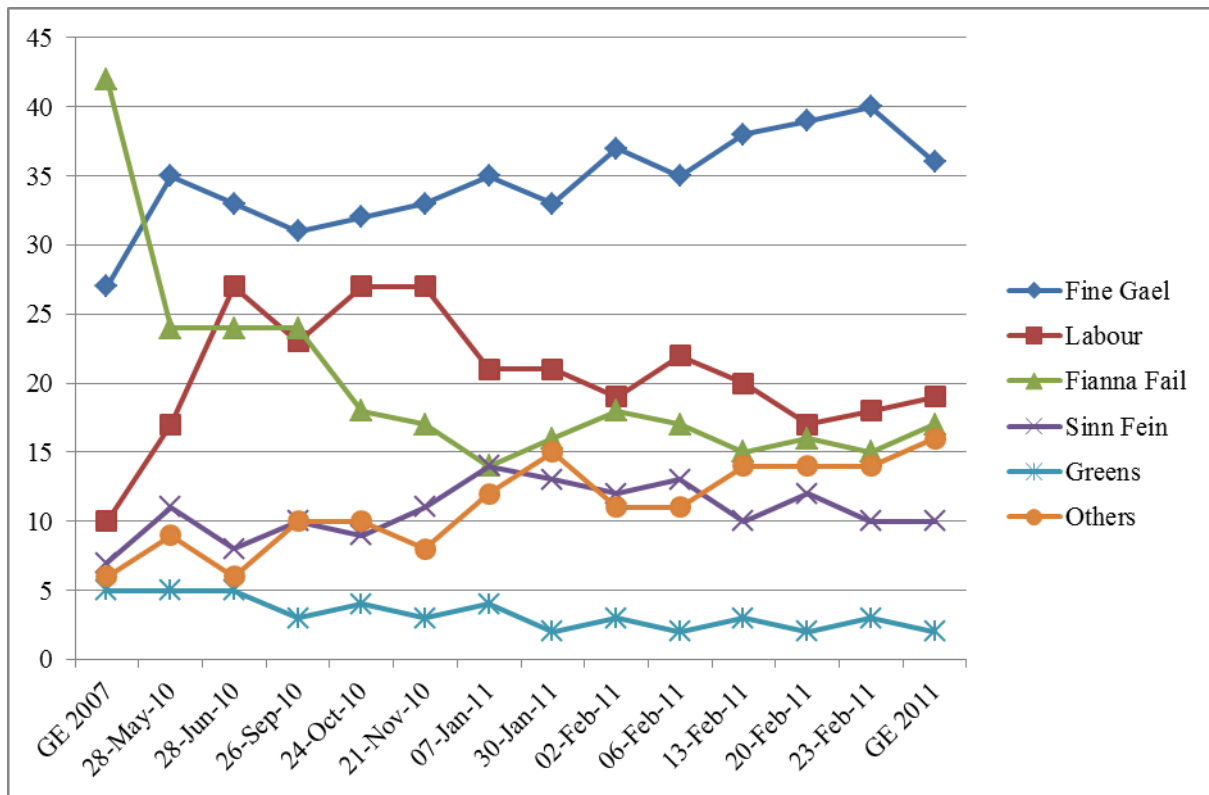
The Campaign

Opinion polls consistently gave Fine Gael a lead (see *Figure 1* below). To a certain degree the election was to determine would they go into government with Labour, with like minded independents or perhaps even with Sinn Féin or a rump of Fianna Fáil. This was despite party leader Enda Kenny being the least popular choice for Taoiseach behind even Fianna Fáil politicians until the final two weeks of the campaign. Indeed Kenny was believed to be such a liability that the party instigated an attempt to oust him in June 2010. While widely believed to be a competent ‘Chairman’ figure he was perceived as wooden in television appearances and in the Parliament. Moreover, coming from a rural constituency he was seen as not appealing to the Dublin electorate where the party was well behind Labour in popularity. Given the failings of Fianna Fáil, the argument was that the party should be in even more of a lead in the polls but Kenny was holding them back. Despite this hindrance Fine Gael were in pole position as they had the largest party organisation, were spending the most money, and quite simply had the largest base of established politicians from which to build on. The focus on Kenny’s leadership qualities became even more entrenched as he refused to take part in the first of the televised leaders’ debates between Fine Gael, Labour and Fianna Fáil. Instead he participated in later debates in the Irish language and in a five way debate with the leaders of Sinn Féin and the Greens. Despite the media attention on Kenny, Fine Gael held a commanding lead in the polls throughout the campaign. They were greatly helped in this as having the largest amount of financial resources they advertised their ‘five point plan’ extensively and were judged the most trustworthy on the economy. One issue that Fine Gael did take a decisive lead on was political reform with their policy of holding a ‘Constitution Day’ of referendums on reforming the political system such as reducing the number of MPs, strengthening Parliament committees, getting rid of the upper House of Parliament (Seanad) and of introducing a limited form of a national list electoral system.

Building on from this policy of political reform, a group of Irish political scientists launched a website, www.politicalreform.ie, to raise public awareness through the media and through various campaigns emphasising the need to make political reform a major issue in the election. The media and party narratives had become dominated by the proposals to dissolve the Upper House of Parliament and to change the electoral system to make politicians focus more on national issues and not on local constituency work. It was this hyper-localism that was perceived to have played a significant role in the economic crisis as the Parliament was filled with local politicians with little relevant skills or experience in running a modern European democratic state. The [politicalreform.ie](http://www.politicalreform.ie) group sought to emphasise the need for radical reform of local government and of Parliament procedures as more relevant. Their influence on the specific issues of the debate while negligible did impact on the broader discourse of the importance of the political dimension of the economic crisis forcing all parties to adopt policies advocating some form of change to the political system. One specific political reform issue that did gain significant traction was the limited representation of women in Irish politics. While no clear consensus on a solution emerged it represented the

emergence of gender politics as an important element of the wider programme of political reform in Ireland.

Figure 1: Opinion Polls and 2007 and 2011 General Election results



Source RedC: only RedC polls are illustrated here as they were the most frequent and consistent over the period of mid-2010 to the election.

In complete contrast to Fine Gael, Labour’s perceived strongest card was their leader Eamonn Gilmore who performed well in articulating the concerns of the public and consistently delivered attacks on the government in both the Parliament chamber and in the media. This gave rise to the party slogan of “Gilmore for Taoiseach” as he was the most popular choice for Taoiseach up until the final few weeks before the election¹². Such a policy was nonsensical as regardless of the undoubted popularity of Gilmore the party simply did not have the political base across the country to elect more MPs than Fine Gael. The party was however, in a very strong position in Dublin due to its large number of councillors and used the election as an opportunity to solidify their position as the largest party in the capital and to spread the visibility of the party beyond Dublin and into more rural constituencies. Its central platform was that the necessary reduction of the government deficit should be 66% tax increases and the remainder expenditure cuts. This was the reversal of the Fine Gael proposal and a policy that set out clear water between the two parties who, in all likelihood, would form the next government. As the campaign progressed and the party failed to make the gains in the opinion polls necessary to lead a government, it changed its narrative to warn of the dangers of electing a Fine Gael majority government and that Labour were needed to restrain the right wing elements in Fine Gael that would sell state assets and cut government services too severely.

¹² Stephen Collins, ‘Support for FF at new record low’, *The Irish Times*, 16th December, 2010

After calling the election Cowen announced that he would resign as leader of Fianna Fáil and not contest the next election. After the debacle over the holding of the election his standing had been fatally undermined in the party, and he was no longer tenable as the leader to rebuild the party. Following a rapid election Micheál Martin, who as a former Minister for Foreign Affairs had managed to largely avoid personal responsibility for the economic crisis, became leader. With the election campaign dominated by policies to change the failures of his government, Martin's sole focus was damage limitation and retaining as many seats as possible. This task was made extremely difficult as candidates had already been selected to contest for votes that were not there for the party any more.

Given the context of the financial crisis brought about by the property bubble and banking collapse it was almost inevitable that left-wing parties would emerge to contest the election with far greater vigour and profile than the previous elections of the 'Celtic Tiger' economic boom era. Sinn Féin were the mainstay of the left as the largest socialist and Eurosceptic party with four seats. Party leader Gerry Adams, then a Westminster MP, announced he would contest a seat in the Louth constituency on the border with Northern Ireland. With such a high profile leader and a party organisation spread relatively widely over the country Sinn Féin were well positioned to take advantage of the strong anti-liberal economic policy sentiment. The hard left also re-emerged in the campaign with three parties forming together under the United Left Alliance (ULA) banner: the Socialist Party, People Before Profit Alliance and the Workers' and Unemployed Action Group. Although the ULA was not registered in time to be placed on the ballot papers, they nonetheless positioned themselves firmly to the left of Sinn Féin saying that Sinn Féin would only "prop up" the three mainstream parties in government and that the ULA were the only alliance who were totally committed to reversing the austerity programme. Using the resources both financial and media of high profile MEP Joe Higgins the ULA brought a hard left discourse into the campaign but their strength lay in their community activism. Their policies were classically socialist with an emphasis on high taxation for the richest in society, reversal of government spending cuts and a large scale government infrastructure development programme to stimulate the economy and create employment.

The EU-IMF deal was the watershed moment of the election, as the trend in public opinion clearly shows it was this event that signalled the end of Fianna Fáil's chances of retaining their support in the election. Aside from questions over the suitability of Enda Kenny for the office of Taoiseach, the campaign in essence was subdued as the only uncertainty was whether Fine Gael would be able to form a single party government, a government made up of like-minded independents or, as was the most expected outcome, a coalition government with the Labour party. The other unknown was how low Fianna Fáil's vote would go. When their core support started to fall below 20% after the EU-IMF bailout agreement, there was a belief amongst both commentators and academics that a 'shy Tory' effect was in evidence and that their vote share would be several points higher on polling day.

The Role of Europe in the Election

All too frequently EPERN briefing papers note the failure of Europe to resonate as an issue in the national election in question. The 2011 Irish election is most certainly not one of those elections. Europe was perhaps the most important issue of the campaign, but its dimension was fundamentally different to that of the recent Lisbon Treaty referendums in 2008 and 2009. The focus was on the terms and conditions applied to Irish participation in the EU-IMF bailout package. In total the financial package was worth €85 billion, with €22.5 billion

coming from the IMF, another €22.5 billion from European Financial Stability Fund, €22.5 billion from the European Commission's European Financial Stability Mechanism, with the rest sourced domestically and from bilateral loans from the UK, Sweden and Denmark¹³. Two elements of the applied conditions were the subject of lengthy and conflicting debate, the high interest rate at which the repayments were charged at (5.8%, well above those charged to Hungary and Latvia in their IMF financial packages) and the repayment of bondholders of the rescued Irish banks. This gave the election its most pervasive phrase: "burning the bondholders". From the perspective of the opposition parties, the Fianna Fáil/Green government had failed to secure the best possible deal for Ireland from the EU as it was discredited from years of financial mismanagement and the unilateral bank guarantee, and that only a new government could secure a better deal for Ireland.

The debate then moved on to which party was in the best position to negotiate a better deal. Labour leader Eamonn Gilmore described Jean-Claude Trichet as a "civil servant" who would stick to whatever plan his political masters gave him. The assertion was that once elected to government Labour would seek an immediate renegotiation of the terms of the EU-IMF financial aid package regardless of what the ECB or the European Commission thought. Labour insisted that they would secure a renegotiation based on a democratic mandate for them. References to "burning bondholders" and wholesale renegotiations of the interest rate forced Trichet to respond publically that there could be no such renegotiation of any element of the EU-IMF deal. As the campaign went on, the language of Fine Gael and Labour, but not of Sinn Féin and the ULA, was toned down in relation to their attempts to change the terms of the EU-IMF deal. Throughout the campaign there was a sense of consternation by many as to why the EU had agreed to place such an unbearable financial burden on the Irish people. Attention was centred on Germany and France and the belief that these states had forced the financial package on Ireland in order to protect the interests of German and French banks in the Irish financial system. This belief was given further credence when it emerged from both Chancellor Merkel's CDU party and President Sarkozy that the terms of the package could be renegotiated should Ireland increase its low rate of corporation tax (12.5%) to the European average.

The European element of the campaign was focused on an apparent Franco-German desire to mould the Eurozone to their interests by punishing Ireland as an example of what happens to the financially irresponsible. Fine Gael portrayed their membership of the EPP, and Enda Kenny's Vice-Presidency of the group, as important in that the party was well placed to use this European party level relationship with Merkel, Sarkozy and other leading centre right politicians and parties in the EPP to renegotiate on the Irish behalf. Sinn Féin put forward a very tough policy advocating a withdrawal from the EU-IMF deal, a reversal of the austerity programme and the burning of all bank bondholders should renegotiation not take place. The party emphasised their opposition to the Lisbon Treaties and how they flagged the dangers to Irish sovereignty that were now apparent in their anti-Lisbon campaigns. While the ULA highlighted the austerity programme as evidence of the inherent neo-liberal bias within the EU and that European integration needed to be radically reformed to represent workers across Europe.

¹³ Philip Lane (2011). *The Irish Crisis*, Centre for Economic Policy Research, Discussion Paper No. 8287. <http://www.voxeu.org/sites/default/files/file/DP8287.pdf>.

The Result

There was a degree of discrepancy of 4% between the opinion polls and the actual support for Fianna Fáil. This can be put down to a ‘shy Fianna Fáil’ effect whereby the unpopularity of the party meant that respondents to opinion polls did not want to publically admit their intention to support them at election time. This effect prevented the complete destruction of Fianna Fáil and allowed them to claim the position as leaders of the opposition. Looking at *Figure 2* (below) however, shows that 2011 represented a historically unprecedented outcome for the party. Fianna Fáil has always either dominated government or was a handful of seats shy of forming a new government from opposition. The outcome of the 2011 Irish general election removed the party that has dominated Irish electoral politics from 1932 to 2011 from being the largest party in the Irish political system.

Table 1: The results of the February 2011 Irish General Election (Turnout 70.0%)

Party	% Vote 2011	Seats 2011	% Vote 2007	Seats 2007	Change % (Seats)
Fine Gael	36.1	76	27.3	51	8.8 (25)
Labour	19.4	37	10.1	20	9.3 (17)
Fianna Fáil	17.4	20	41.6	77	-24.1 (-57)
Independents	12.6	15	5.8	5	6.8 (10)
Sinn Féin	9.9	14	6.9	4	3.0 (10)
Greens	1.8	0	4.7	6	-2.9 (-6)
Progressive Democrats ¹⁴	0	0	2.7	2	-2.7 (-2)
Socialist Party	1.2	2	0.6	0	0.6 (2)
People Before Profit Alliance	1.0	2	0	0	1.0 (2)
Others	0.2	0	0.5	0	-0.3

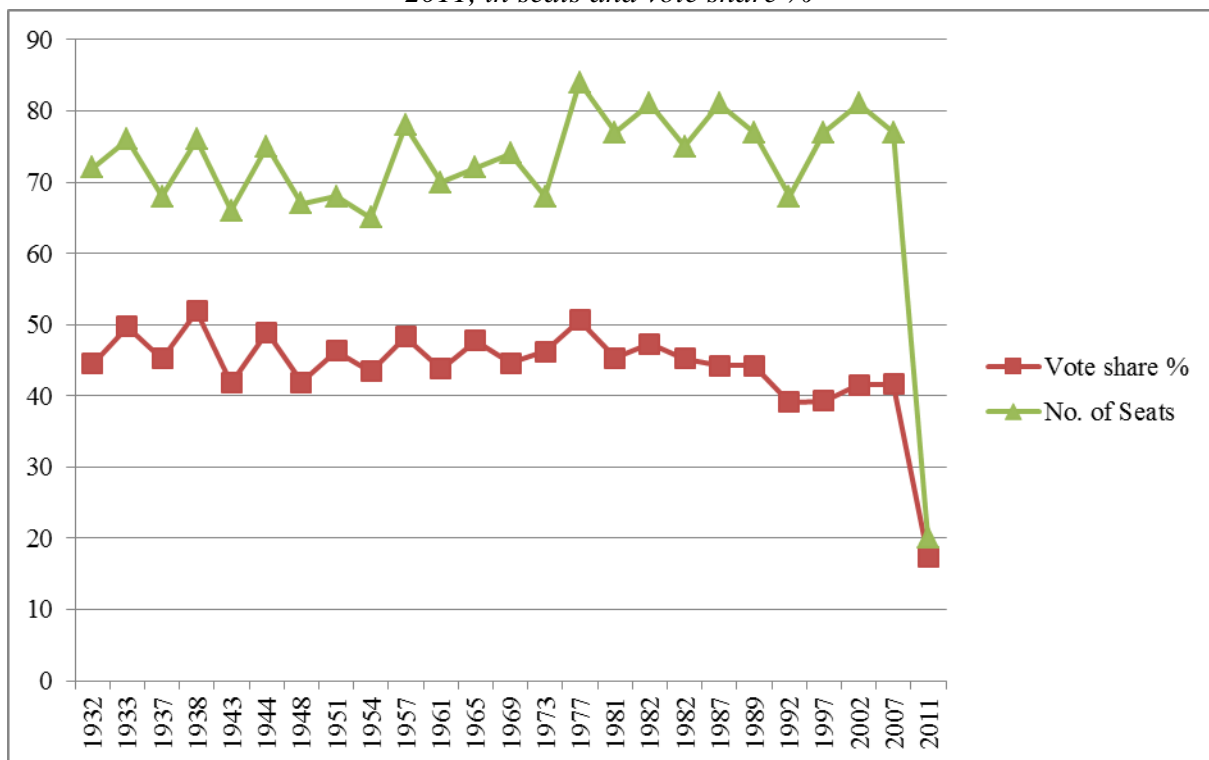
Source: RTÉ (national broadcaster) <http://www.rte.ie/news/election2011/results/index.html>

The 2011 general election represented a 74% collapse in their seat share from the average of the last ten elections. The party actually received more votes than their share of seats should have given them, receiving 20% of the vote but just 12% of the seats. Ireland’s PR system of Single Transferable Vote punished them severely as the party ran too many candidates splitting a much diminished share of the vote between sitting MPs. Added to this was the party’s failure to attract transfers from voters of other parties, which in the Irish electoral system were needed to win in multi-seat constituencies. What both tables show is the punishment meted out by voters to Fianna Fáil as roughly six out of ten voters who had

¹⁴ The Progressive Democrats who were in coalition with Fianna Fáil from 1997 through to 2007 dissolved themselves after retaining only two seats in the 2007 general election in November 2009 with their two TDs staying on as independents, one as Minister for Health.

supported the party in 2007, abandoning them in 2011. Moreover, high profile losses such as Deputy Prime Minister Mary Coughlan, Minister for Social Welfare Mary Hanafin and a spate of retirements by senior members meant that the party was left with only one MP in Dublin and not one female MP. This left the party with an almost impossibly small base from which to regain their losses. The Greens as the other party of government were decimated. There was a degree of inevitability of the loss of all their seats as opinion polls and heavy losses in the 2009 local elections had flagged this well in advance. In the past the party had been transfer friendly but the public now viewed them as having propped up a corrupt and failed government for far too long and apparently punished them accordingly.

Figure 2: Fianna Fáil election results at each election from party foundation in 1932 to 2011, in seats and vote share %



Note: from 1922-1937 there were 153 members of the Parliament, from 1937-1961 it was reduced to 147, from 1961-1981 it was reduced again to 144, finally from 1981 to the present day it was increased to 166.

The results of the election can therefore be seen as the collapse of the dominant force in Irish electoral politics but without the emergence of a new countervailing political force or of a single opposition party to take Fianna Fáil's place. Fine Gael won the election in the most rudimentary sense by taking the largest number of seats with its best ever election result in both seat numbers and vote share. Similarly the Labour party received its best ever result in becoming the second largest party in the state for the first time. The emergence of a two party system along a classical left/right cleavage with Labour leading the left has long been the long term strategic goal of the party. Emerging as the second largest party moved Labour closer towards achieving this. In this sense the election was historic as it broke the post 1922-23 Civil War dominance of the two parties (Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael) that emerged from that conflict. That dominance was maintained by strong familial ties to the two parties and an associated political culture of clientalism. The dealignment of the party system was represented by the division of seats formerly held by Fianna Fáil between Fine Gael, Labour,

Sinn Féin, hard-left parties and independents. Whether this pattern presages a full realignment with Fianna Fáil falling further and Fine Gael and Labour as the centre right and centre left loci of the party system will be made clearer in subsequent elections.

The other big winner from the election was Sinn Féin who positioned themselves for a more influential role in the politics of the Republic of Ireland to complement their centrality to politics in Northern Ireland. Their emergence as a credible electoral force was a development of the party's long term goal of attaining power in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland so as to bring their totemic policy of a united Ireland to fruition. Having won 14 seats at this election and with party leader Gerry Adams put into parliament their subsequent focus was on challenging Fianna Fáil as leaders of the opposition.

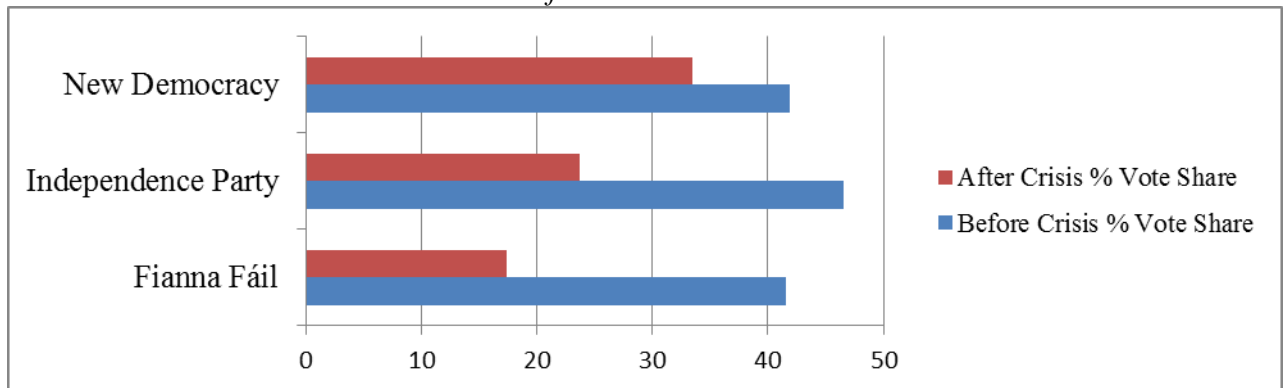
One group fully versed in the exploitation of protest votes was independent candidates. They increased their share of the vote from 5% in 2007 to 17% in 2011 but only increased their number of seats from 5 to 13. A particular feature of the Irish political system is that of independent MPs. With no threshold for entering Parliament and an electoral system of PR: STV combined with multi-seat constituencies, independents have been a frequent feature of the Irish political system. With support for the political system at such lows it was inevitable that non-party candidates would perform well. This they did and a wide variety of ideologies, regions and characters were elected to the Parliament. These included former Fianna Fáil MPs who resigned from the party, regional candidates, but with this election a new breed of independent MP emerged, who focused on national level issues and not on local concerns.

As was widely expected and was the preferred option of the electorate, a new government a Fine Gael-Labour coalition was quickly formed with a programme for government agreed to on March 6th. The speed of the drafting of a programme for government was achieved by both parties being involved in negotiations together before the election had been held. The new government was elected on by the largest majority in the history of the state: by 117 votes to 27 on March 10th. The day after his election as Taoiseach by the Parliament, Enda Kenny was in Brussels for the European Council summit meeting. While there was much disquiet over just two women in cabinet positions and perceived 'soft' positions in Social Protection and Children at that, the new government has been consumed by their attempts to finally resolve the banking crisis and renegotiate the terms of the EU-IMF financial package. With this immediate focus the medium term goal is for an extensive job creation programme through a mixture of tax incentives and the creation of a strategic investment fund from the sale of state assets to develop much needed infrastructural projects. It appears that the promised radical reforms of politics by both parties are more long term priorities and so it will be sometime before it becomes clear what changes the government will make to reform politics in Ireland.

Conclusion

In the context of general election results of parties who were in power at the time of the financial crisis in the three worst hit European states, Iceland, Ireland and Greece; Fianna Fáil fared the worst (see *Figure 3* below). Though the Irish people did not engage in violent protests as in Greece or mass street demonstrations as in Iceland, they waited in the electoral long-grass for Fianna Fáil and the Greens. In doing so they used the political system to punish those politicians they believed most responsible for the economic crisis and left their parties with little hope of returning power within the next few electoral cycles.

Figure 3: Election results of ruling parties in Greece, Iceland and Ireland after the 2008 financial crisis



The most interesting aspect of the election is that the Irish 2011 general election saw the dramatic dealignment of the Irish party system without the emergence of a new political force¹⁵. While the shift in Irish electoral patterns was indeed decisive with this election, the beneficiaries were two well established parties who counted former party leaders and cabinet members amongst their ranks. Facing the twin challenges of economic collapse and shattered public trust in the political system, the new government has to enact a revolution in economic policy and political change if the Irish state is to recover in time for the hundred year anniversary of the 1916 rising against British rule.

Of wider interest is how this dealignment took place when Europe and the EU's reaction to the financial crisis became a central issue in the election. It is difficult to ascertain to what extent the 2011 Ireland general election can be used as a basis for further extrapolation on the impact of Europeanisation on domestic politics given the uniqueness of the events. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note the failure of Eurosceptic political parties to translate their opposition to the EU into more votes and seats in such a favourable climate. A possible explanation for this was that the narrative around the European issue in the election was not determined by the Eurosceptic alternative offered by Sinn Féin and the ULA but rather by the pro-EU credentials offered by Fine Gael and Labour. There was no real substantive difference in the EU policies of Fine Gael and Labour compared to that of Fianna Fáil's, rather their policy was based on having a more positive relationship with the EU and other European leaders that they would utilise to negotiate a better deal for Ireland. The majority of the electorate appeared to accept the necessity of the EU-IMF financial package and reject the position of Eurosceptics that it should be abandoned. Studies of the Irish 2011 general election will prove valuable to future research on the effect of Europeanisation on domestic politics given the importance of the EU issue to the election as a whole and its crucial role in the outcome of the election itself.

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¹⁵ See: Peter Mair, 'One of Europe's Most volatile election', politicalreform.ie. This is a calculation using the Pedersen index. See: <http://politicalreform.ie/2011/02/28/one-of-europe%E2%80%99s-most-volatile-elections/#more-2325>

This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html>.