

## **2004 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 2 THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN IRELAND JUNE 11 2004**

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### **Key points:**

- Ireland held its sixth European Parliament election on Friday 11 June 2004.
- Helped by local elections and a constitutional referendum held on the same day, turnout increased by almost 10% compared with the 1999 election to 59.7%.
- The result was a significant setback for the Fianna Fáil -Progressive Democrat government, although Eurosceptic parties and individuals did not make any significant gains.

Every few years, with great regularity, a major international event is held. In June 2004, this event was the first time that some post-communist countries had an opportunity to participate, as well as offering the usual chance to assess the performance of traditional European powers, to say goodbye to old hands and welcome new performers, and to keep an eye out for new developments and patterns. The various victories, defeats and stalemates excited and captivated millions of Europeans, though it must be admitted that many were left cold by it as well.

And how the European Union must wish that the European Parliament (EP) elections offered anything even remotely akin to the excitement and engagement that the European Championship football tournament generates. Euro 2004 kicked off in Portugal on 12 June, right in the middle of the four days of polling across the EU, and the day after Ireland had gone to the polls. At least Ireland was participating in the EP election; its national team had failed to qualify for the football jamboree. This report examines the context of the election, looks at the conduct of the campaign and provides an initial interpretation of the results.

The election was particularly interesting given the fact that in 2001, Irish voters had rejected the Treaty of Nice in a constitutional referendum. Although this result was overturned in a subsequent referendum in 2002,<sup>1</sup> nonetheless it raised questions about Ireland's commitment to and enthusiasm for the European integration project. The 2004 EP election was therefore a means of assessing Ireland's relationship with Europe. Would Eurosceptical candidates do well or badly? Would turnout indicate heightened interest or disinterest? Or would the EP election simply fulfil its usual role, as a vehicle for pursuing domestic politics by other means?

## **Context of the election**

Despite the flutter occasioned by Ireland's No vote in the first Nice referendum, the Treaty of Nice was eventually ratified and had come into effect. This meant in turn that the goalposts were moved for the 2004 elections, since the treaty reduced the Republic's EP allocation by two seats to 13. To accommodate this, there was a slight adjustment to Ireland's four Euro-constituencies. Dublin was the only one to remain unchanged, either in terms of name, boundaries or its allocation of four seats. Leinster became the East constituency, and was reduced from four to three seats. Munster was renamed the South constituency. It dropped from four seats to three, as well as losing County Clare. Clare was re-assigned to the North-West constituency, formerly Connacht-Ulster, which retained its three seats. The reduced number of seats put additional pressure on many sitting MEPs, and eight of the fifteen outgoing ones chose not to run again. This offered both an opportunity for new candidates to emerge and a challenge to the parties to find ways of making new faces known to the electorate.

The team selections for the election reveal some interesting features. By the time nominations had closed on 17 May, a total of 44 candidates had put themselves forward for election (see table 1). The junior partner in the coalition government, the Progressive Democrats, had failed to find any suitable candidate and remained on the sidelines of the EP election. Four parties ran candidates in every constituency, and over a third of the candidates were independents. Although the campaign was often described as personality-driven, the Irish candidates seem less exotic than their counterparts in some other European countries. Perhaps not surprisingly, the candidates of the three main parties all had considerable degrees of political experience, boasting between them five sitting MEPs, eleven current or former MPs and eight with ministerial experience. But even candidates without such direct parliamentary and ministerial pedigrees had extensive political experience through pressure groups and interest campaigns. The importance of personality in Irish terms was more in terms of finding candidates whose potential appeal spread across the large (by Irish standards) Euro-constituencies rather than just being confined to one local area.

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<sup>1</sup> See: K. Gilland, 'Ireland's Second Referendum on the Treaty of Nice, October 2002', *Opposing Europe Research Network Referendum Briefing No 2*, Sussex European Institute, University of Sussex at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/irelandno1.pdf>.

**Table 1 Candidates by constituency and party**

	Dublin	East	North- West	South	Total
Fianna Fáil	2	2	2	2	8
Fine Gael	1	2	2	1	6
Labour	2	1	1	1	5
Sinn Féin	1	1	1	1	4
Greens	1	1	0	1	3
Other parties	2	0	0	0	2
Independents	3	6	3	4	16

The EP election was not the only game taking place on 11 June. Two other polls provided significant counter-attractions: there were local elections throughout the Republic, and the government also chose to hold a constitutional referendum on Ireland's citizenship regulations. These two competing events offered both a benefit and a threat to the EP election. On the positive side, holding the three polls simultaneously offered a way of maximising turnout (as well as, of course, being cheaper than holding the three separately). On the negative side, there was the danger that the EP election would lose out in terms of attention and publicity to the other two events. Of course, this was a double-edged sword, as the local elections and the referendum could also potentially lose out to the EP election in terms of coverage.

### **Conduct of the campaign**

In fact, the citizenship referendum overlapped slightly with the EP election in terms of issues. The government was seeking to amend a constitutional clause which granted the automatic right to Irish citizenship to anyone born on the island of Ireland. This was at least partly justified by reference to Ireland being out of step with the citizenship regulations of its EU partners, and of being a potential back-door for immigration into the EU. Indeed, the Advocate General of the European Court of Justice issued a preliminary ruling on one case relating to Irish citizenship laws in May. The referendum was supported by the two government parties, Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats, while Fine Gael was calling for a Yes vote but not campaigning on the issue. The other main parties were all calling for a No vote in the referendum.

The EP election campaign raised a number of other issues as well. Party manifestos and press statements provide one way of analysing the issues that were raised and the positions taken by the parties. Three aspects are particularly worth exploring: party positions on European integration in general, party positions on particular EU policies, and party positions on EU institutions and decision-making systems.

In relation to integration in general, there was very broad agreement that some form of co-operation is desirable. Prime minister Bertie Ahern launched his party's manifesto stating unequivocally that "Fianna Fáil is a pro-Europe party", and the manifesto itself asserted that "Europe has been good for Ireland" and "Fianna Fáil believes that Ireland's

place is at the heart of Europe”.<sup>2</sup> This was almost identical to the main opposition party, which stated that “Fine Gael is the party of Europe” and arguing that “Ireland must be at the very heart of this co-operative Europe”.<sup>3</sup> Nor was the third largest party to be outdone, with the Labour Party saying “Labour wants a strong European Union” and “Labour is strongly committed to a positive Irish engagement in Europe”. Since all three parties have been supporters of integration for some time now, this was not too surprising.<sup>4</sup> However, the manifestos of some of the EU-critical parties revealed a similar tale, even though it was worded slightly differently. Thus, you have Sinn Féin stating that it has “a policy of critical but constructive engagement with the EU”, and clarifying that “critical engagement is not an anti-European approach”<sup>5</sup>. The Green Party stated that “the Greens believe in the European community”.<sup>6</sup>

The consensus carried over into some policy areas. Most parties made explicit statements in support of enlargement. Fine Gael stated it was “committed to the process of EU enlargement” and Fianna Fáil called on people to “fully welcome an enlarged Europe”. Even among the traditionally EU-critical parties, similar sentiments were to be found, such as “Sinn Féin supports EU enlargement” and “the Green Party warmly welcomes the addition of ten new EU states”. The only major party not to specifically mention enlargement in their manifesto was Labour, who have a long record of supporting enlargement anyway.

Another policy issue where there was broad consensus was in relation to immigration. Despite their differences on the citizenship referendum, all of the parties were content to call for a common European approach to issues of immigration and asylum. The differences were more ones of emphasis than of outright divergence, with for example Fianna Fáil stressing the need to combat illegal immigration, while Labour called for a campaign against racism and xenophobia.

Some of this policy consensus carried over into areas of economic policy. Most of the parties acknowledged the importance of the EU for the Irish economy. However, each took a slightly different slant on how this should be delivered. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael supported the main aims of the current Lisbon Agenda for growth, Fianna Fáil argued that “a strong and well functioning internal market is necessary” and called for “sound macroeconomic policies and greater competitiveness”, while Fine Gael argued that “entrepreneurial talent and motivation are the lifeblood of our future economic success, and should be fostered in every member state”. But apart from a vague statement from Fianna Fáil to the effect that “we cannot isolate the need for social inclusion from any growth agenda”, these two parties did not display any great emphasis on social features.

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<sup>2</sup> See: Fianna Fáil. *European manifesto 2004*, Dublin: Fianna Fáil, 2004 available at [www.fiannafail.ie](http://www.fiannafail.ie).

<sup>3</sup> Fine Gael. *Fine Gael: on your side in Europe. 2004 European Parliament elections*, 2004, available at [www.finegael.ie](http://www.finegael.ie)

<sup>4</sup> See: Labour Party, *Making the difference in Europe: Labour Party manifesto, European Parliament elections 2004*, 2004 available at [www.labour.ie](http://www.labour.ie).

<sup>5</sup> See: Sinn Féin, *An Ireland of equals in a Europe of equals: Sinn Féin EU election manifesto 2004*, 2004 available at [www.sinnfein.ie](http://www.sinnfein.ie).

<sup>6</sup> See: Green Party. *Manifesto 2004: European and local elections*, Dublin: Green Party/Comhaontas Glas, 2004, available at [www.greenparty.ie](http://www.greenparty.ie).

In contrast, a number of other parties challenged what was seen as an overly business-oriented approach to the economy. While acknowledging the importance of “a competitive European economy”, Labour also called for “a high standard of public services and social protection”, emphasising a “fair European economy” and arguing for “adequate levels of social protection” and for the European ‘social model’. Sinn Féin called for “refocusing the Lisbon Agenda”, arguing it was too narrowly focused on “competitiveness, privatisation and deregulation”. They wanted greater social protection and national ownership of public utilities. The Greens also called for “a new politics of generosity”, and for the EU “to make a significant policy shift in its economic policies, away from corporate driven globalisation towards more localised production and democratic controls”. They picked out social justice, environmental protection and support for public services as important factors missing from the current EU economic model.

Clearly, therefore, there were lines of division between the parties in relation to economic and social policies. However, one other aspect of the economic question did not reveal such overt divisions. Tax harmonisation has become an increasingly controversial issue in relation to Ireland’s membership of the EU. Fianna Fáil led the way in saying that the government would “continue to oppose tax harmonisation”, while Fine Gael highlighted “our opposition to any attempt to dilute the unanimity requirement for tax harmonization”. Labour and the Greens were silent on this issue, but perhaps surprisingly, Sinn Féin were happy to join in, saying that “member governments should retain complete control over taxation policy and strategy”. This reflects the strong degree of economic nationalism in the party.

One other issue which has always posed a dilemma for Ireland in relation to the EU is foreign and security policy, and here party manifestos showed clear differences. Fine Gael was the most forthright, declaring “Ireland should not only be part of the EU security and defence architecture, we should be one of its architects”. While noting that Ireland is militarily neutral, Labour was prepared to envisage “a strong European Union that has a clear voice in international forums”, and accepted that we should “further develop the European Security and Defence Policy to become a credible instrument of conflict prevention and crisis management”. Similarly, Fianna Fáil stated that “we believe in positively working within the framework of a common foreign and security policy”, albeit “in accordance with our constitutional duties”. The Greens were less supportive. While stating that “Green MEPs will fully support an EU ‘peace strengthening’ role”, they also asserted they would “oppose EU militarisation”. Sinn Féin was the most antagonistic, calling for the “active promotion of the demilitarisation of the EU” and for Irish withdrawal from the EU Rapid Reaction Force.

Finally, we can compare the parties in terms of their stance on EU institutions and decision-making. All the manifestos touched on the European Constitution. The most effusive support came from Fine Gael, which “strongly supports the draft Constitutional Treaty”. Labour was not quite so gushing, stating that it “is in principle in favour of a European Constitution”. Similarly, Fianna Fáil simply acknowledged that “the European

Union needs a new treaty”. The Green manifesto avoided any explicit statement for or against the Constitution, perhaps because the party had launched a discussion document on the Constitution earlier in the year,<sup>7</sup> and was still engaged in a process of internal consideration on it. The one party to unequivocally reject the Constitution was Sinn Féin, which declared that “Sinn Féin is opposed to the current draft EU constitution” which “is not worthy of Irish support”. But even Sinn Féin acknowledged that “the EU needs major reform” and stated that “we support streamlining existing treaties”.

Responses to the actual content of the institutional aspects of the Constitution again revealed areas of agreement and of difference. Sinn Féin showed a very strong emphasis on national sovereignty, calling for “an explicit recognition of EU member states’ right to national sovereignty and self-government” and for “full equality in decision-making between EU partners”. The Greens, in their discussion document on the Constitution, emphasised that the party “has always expressed concern about the EU developing into a State”. Both the Greens and Labour called for a stronger European Parliament, while Fine Gael called for direct election of the Commission President. Fianna Fáil had least to say about institutional change, simply noting that “there is a need for the European Union to simplify and streamline its decision making structures”.

But in practice, the campaign unfolded without any great attention to European issues. The comments from various journalists shadowing candidates on the campaign trail reveal this very clearly. Voters were not particularly interested in European issues – one writer noted a ‘sole question about Europe sprung on him [the candidate] in a long day’, another pointed out that “few European issues arise”, a third said that “with the exception of immigration, nothing remotely European is mentioned”. However, nor was it the case that candidates were trying to push European issues. One writer commented that “the candidates speak little of Europe”, another noted “not a word in nine hours about Europe”. Instead, the emphasis was on domestic politics, with opposition parties urging voters to pass comment on the government while candidates from the main government party tended to play down their governmental links and emphasise their personal merits instead (all quotes in this paragraph are taken from articles in the *Irish Times*, May-June 2004).

There were also a number of fascinating internal party battles. Ireland’s Single Transferable Vote (STV) electoral system allows voters to pick and choose between the individual candidates of each party, so wherever a party was running more than one candidate, there was at very least some tension and rivalry. This affected Fianna Fáil most strongly, as few other parties were running more than one candidate in any constituency. A dispute over who should be the candidates led to “open FF war in the North-West”; the party had to deal with an “increasingly acrimonious” dispute in the South, and the relationship between the party’s two candidates in Dublin was described as “poisonous”. However, Fine Gael also had to contend with disputes, and there were threats of “mass resignations” from the party if the sitting MEP in the East, Avril Doyle,

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<sup>7</sup> See: Green Party, *A Constitution for Europe: a Green Party discussion document*, Dublin: Green Party/Comhaontas Glas, 2004 available at [www.greenparty.ie](http://www.greenparty.ie).

lost out to her new running mate (again, all quotes in this paragraph are taken from the *Irish Times*, May-June 2004).

## Results and implications

It took a little bit of time for the scoreboard to actually flash up the final score. The Irish STV voting system involves a very slow and laborious (though also highly exciting and dramatic!) procedure when being counted by hand. The 2002 general election had seen the introduction of a pilot scheme for electronic voting in a few constituencies, and the government had originally planned to make the EP election the first one to be counted entirely by electronic means. However, the scheme ran into some controversy, with debates about the security and confidentiality of the process, and the government had eventually decided to postpone it. The election had been held on Friday June 11; counting could not begin until all EU states had completed their elections on Sunday evening; and final results (see Tables 2 and 3) only emerged on the Tuesday.

**Table 2 Turnout and party support, Irish EP elections 1979-2004, in %**

	FF	FG	LP	GP	SF	Others	Turnout
1979	34.7	33.1	14.5	-	-	17.7	63.6
1984	39.2	32.2	8.4	0.5	4.9	14.8	47.6
1989	31.5	21.6	9.5	3.7	2.3	31.4	68.3
1994	35.0	24.3	11.0	7.9	3.0	18.8	44.0
1999	37.4	23.8	8.5	6.5	6.1	17.7	50.2
2004	29.1	27.6	10.8	4.4	11.3	16.8	59.7

The first feature to emerge was the attendance. Turnout improved noticeably in this election to 59.7%. This was an improvement of over 9% from the 1999 EP election, and was well ahead of the EU average of 45.5%. A number of reasons can be put forward for this. First of all, Irish voters have had a greater degree of exposure to European affairs over recent years than any other EU electorate. The two referendums on the Nice Treaty and the holding of a National Forum on Europe had all contributed to making Irish voters aware of European issues. In addition, the election was taking place towards the end of another period of high-profile Irish involvement with the EU, the 2004 Irish Presidency. There might not necessarily be a great deal of appreciation or understanding of the EU, but the Irish electorate is certainly aware of it.

Secondly, there are various domestic factors. The decision to hold the local election and citizenship referendum on the same day certainly helped to maximise turnout, although there were some reports of confusion when voters were faced with three different ballot papers in the polling booths. However, it should be noted that while the turnout for the EP election was marginally lower than for the citizenship referendum (60%), it was slightly higher than for the local election (59.4%). Perhaps the other more significant domestic factor was that the election offered an opportunity for the electorate to express their dissatisfaction with an increasingly unpopular government. This becomes apparent

if we look at the results in comparison with the 1999 EP election and the 2002 general election (see table 3).

**Table 3 Comparison of results with 1999 EP and 2002 general elections**

	Vote (%)	Seats (change since 1999 EP)	% change (1999 EP)	% change (2002 general)
Fianna Fáil	29.1	4 (-2)	-9.5	-12.4
Fine Gael	27.6	5 (+1)	+3.0	+5.1
Sinn Féin	11.3	1 (+1)	+5.2	+4.8
Labour Party	10.8	1 (no change)	+2.1	0
Green Party	4.4	0 (-2)	-2.3	+0.6
Others	16.8	2 (no change)	+3.3	+1.9

These results kept the football theme going. It was a clear defeat for Fianna Fáil, with the party's Minister for Finance Charlie McCreevy reacting by saying the government got "a bit of a kicking". In both the European and the local elections, Fianna Fáil's vote declined dramatically. In the EP contest, its vote declined by over 9% from the 1999 election and by over 12% from the 2002 general election. In fact, Fianna Fáil recorded its lowest ever percentage of votes in any national poll since the 1920s when the party had just been founded. The party still remained the largest in the state, but its EP representation declined from six to four seats.

The other clear losers in the election were the Green Party. Their vote declined by over 2% and they lost both of their EP seats. This had been widely anticipated in the East constituency, where the sitting Green MEP, Nuala Ahern, had not gone forward for re-election, leaving a new candidate to try to salvage a seat in a constituency which had one fewer place up for grabs. The defeat of sitting Dublin MEP Patricia McKenna was a harder blow, as she had been one of the party's most visible performers.

However, things become a little bit less certain if we try to identify who the actual winners were. Certainly, Sinn Féin continued its political breakthrough, recording the largest percentage increase compared with the 1999 election, over 5%. They succeeded in winning their first ever EP seat, with Mary Lou McDonald being elected in the Dublin constituency, and Pearse Doherty put in a very strong challenge for a seat in North-West. In addition, it should also be noted that Bairbre De Brún won the first-ever Sinn Féin seat in Northern Ireland, making the party the first to win EP representation in more than one EU country.

Fine Gael also had a very good election. Their vote was up by over 3% compared with 1999, but the more interesting comparison is with the 2002 general election. That had been an absolute disaster for the party, and opinion polls since then had not indicated any significant revival. So an increase of over 5% in their vote was seen as a dramatic turnaround of fortune. The party even pulled off the feat of the election by getting both of its candidates elected in the East constituency, an audacious piece of vote management which saw it ending up with a total of five MEPs. Otherwise, Labour saw a slight gain in



votes, but despite a strong challenge from the former head of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Peter Cassells, in East, they failed to improve on their single seat.

**Table 4 Irish MEP's elected, 2004**

	Dublin	East	North-West	South
FF	Eoin Ryan	Liam Aylward	Seán Ó Neachtain*	Brian Crowley*
FG	Gay Mitchell	Máiréad McGuinness; Avril Doyle*	Jim Higgins	Simon Coveney
SF	Mary Lou McDonald			
Lab.	Proinsias De Rossa*			
Ind.			Marian Harkin	Kathy Sinnott

\* outgoing MEP re-elected

The immediate consequences of the election were probably more related to domestic politics than European issues. There was a sharp public spat between the two coalition partners. Fianna Fáil has always been a populist, centrist party with leanings to both left and right, while the Progressive Democrats are much more consistently free enterprise and pro-business. In the wake of the election, some who would be regarded as on the left in Fianna Fáil tried to pin the blame for the defeat on their coalition partner's policies, and suggested that the government ought to adopt a more caring style of policy. Certainly, the party was concerned at its haemorrhage of votes among working class supporters, with Sinn Féin doing particularly well in such constituencies and with the Labour Party also picking up votes there. However, the Progressive Democrats fought back, arguing that policies of privatisation and increased competition had not gone far enough. The Prime Minister, Bertie Ahern, announced immediately after the election that he would re-shuffle his cabinet, which will give some indication of his preferred direction for the government, but the re-shuffle has been put back until the autumn.

In addition, the success of Fine Gael, coupled with the lacklustre displays of Labour and the Greens, re-established the former as the leader of the opposition. After their disastrous showing in the 2002 general election, when analysts had been predicting the implosion of the party, Fine Gael had made a significant comeback in both the European and local elections under new party leader, Enda Kenny. This in turn strengthened his hand for the expected negotiations with Labour and the Greens to try to agree some form of electoral pact between the three parties in the lead-up to the next general election.

In European terms, the election does not suggest any increase in Euroscepticism in Ireland in the wake of the Nice referendums. Certainly, there are two new Irish Euro-critical voices in the Parliament. Sinn Féin's Mary Lou McDonald gained a seat in Dublin. Sinn Féin is a strongly EU-critical party, and has campaigned for a No vote in all of Ireland's EU-related referendums. And the successful independent candidate in the South constituency, Kathy Sinnott, has also been associated with EU-critical stances.

However, both these successes were offset by the loss of seats in other quarters. The election of Sinnott was balanced by Dana Rosemary Scallon losing her seat in the North-West constituency. Similarly, Sinn Féin's success in Dublin came at the expense of another Euro-critical voice, Patricia McKenna of the Greens. Indeed, the Greens lost both of their MEPs, despite being another party that has consistently advocated No votes in Irish referendums. Thus, the number of overtly EU-critical voices amongst Irish MEPs has declined from three to two. At the same time, it was a very successful election for Fine Gael, probably the most pro-European of Irish parties.

As with the European Championship football, it sometimes seems that the main reason for holding the event was as a shop window for transfer deals. Some Irish MEPs will simply rejoin their European teams. Fine Gael's five will slot back in to the European People's Party, and Labour's Proinsias De Rossa will return to the Party of European Socialists. For the other Irish MEPs the picture in terms of party group affiliation is a little more clouded. Fianna Fáil had been a member of the Union of Europe of the Nations (UEN) group, but its future was in some doubt after the election as a number of its key members failed to get re-elected. In addition, reflecting the internal debates in the party in the wake of their defeat, some Fianna Fáil members began to suggest that UEN was too rightwards-leaning.

The issue of party group affiliation was even more awkward for Sinn Féin. The party's nationalist background might have made the European Free Alliance, which contained a number of representatives from other small nationalist parties, a possible home. However, this was unlikely because of the presence of the Scottish and Welsh nationalists in the group. There were some suggestions that the party might apply to join the Socialist Group, but any such approach was likely to be rejected by their existing Irish member, the Labour Party. Sinn Féin also had some ties with the radical United Left group. But the presence of a number of former communist parties in that group make it a slightly awkward partner for the Irish party.

## **Conclusion**

In overall terms, the 2004 Irish EP election provides one very important contrast with the elections in most other EU states. The turnout in the Irish election was an improvement on the 1999 figure, and was well above the EU average. Whether this can be sustained and replicated is another matter. But certainly if the improvement in turnout can be explained by reference to the exposure to EU issues that most Irish voters have as a result of referendums, then the fact that any European Constitution will have to be put to a referendum in the Republic suggests that public awareness of European issues should remain high.

The other noticeable way in which the Irish election diverged from other EU states was in relation to the performance of Eurosceptic parties and groups. Although the EU-critical movement in Ireland had received a huge boost with the rejection of the Nice Treaty in the first referendum in 2001, they were unable to build on that success, either in the second Nice referendum or in these EP elections. The Eurosceptic vote in Ireland is not

negligible, but remains clearly in a minority, and the loss of the two Irish Green MEP seats means that the number of EU-critical Irish MEPs has actually fallen.

In other terms, the Irish election fits into the pattern to be found in most other EU states. First of all, the election saw an emphasis on personalities – not quite in defiance of, more in conjunction with, party politics. Parties were interested in having candidates who would gain the support of the party's core constituents, but who might also have a slightly broader appeal as well. Secondly, the campaign did not involve any significant discussion of European issues at all; instead, it focused more on domestic issues, and in particular became an opportunity for the electorate to have a free shot at the government. The result was a clear anti-government vote.

Undoubtedly, the impact of the EP election is likely to be felt more in domestic politics than in the EP itself. This can be seen in the way in which the defeat for Fianna Fáil caused problems between the coalition partners; in the re-emergence of Fine Gael as the undisputed leader of the opposition; and in the continuing success of Sinn Féin and its movement in to the political mainstream in Ireland. The thirteen MEPs from the Republic of Ireland will go off to Brussels and Strasbourg, and within a few months will no doubt be complaining about how difficult it is for their work to get noticed, while voters lose sight of the EP for another five years. But it is perhaps the same as the way in which people moan about penalty shoot-outs in football tournaments: everyone knows they aren't the most satisfactory way of resolving matches, but no-one has yet come up with a better idea to replace them.

*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>*