

ELECTION BRIEFING NO 2: EUROPE AND THE MAY 2002 IRISH GENERAL ELECTION

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Key points:

- The outgoing Fianna Fáil – Progressive Democrat coalition was returned to office, each with an increased seat share;
- Small Eurosceptic parties Sinn Féin and the Green Party increased their parliamentary representation, while the historically second largest party, pro-European Fine Gael, experienced an electoral meltdown;
- Europe hardly featured in the election campaign, not even the question of what, if anything, to do about the un-ratified Nice Treaty;
- Both Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats had committed themselves to holding a second referendum on the Nice Treaty in returned to office.

Table 1. First Preference Votes and Seats, 1997 and 2002.

Party	First Preference		First Preference	
	Votes 1997 (%)	Seats 1997	Votes 2002 (%)	Seats 2002
Fianna Fáil	39.3	77	41.5	81
Fine Gael	27.9	54	22.5	31
Labour	12.9	21	10.8	21
Prog. Dem.	4.7	4	4.0	8
Green Party	2.8	2	3.9	6
Sinn Féin	2.5	1	6.5	5
Other, Ind.	9.4	7	11.0	14
Total	100	166	100	166

Sources: Marsh, M. and P. Mitchell (eds.). 1999. *How Ireland Voted 1997*. Boulder, Co.: Westview Press; http://www.ireland.com/focus/election_2002/.

Note: Figures for Democratic Left in 1997 have been included in the figures for Labour in 1997, since Democratic Left merged with Labour in 1999.

The outgoing Fianna Fáil – Progressive Democrat government was returned to office in the Irish general election that took place on 17 May, 2002 (Table 1). ‘Europe’ was the dog that did not bark in this election. On the one hand this might be somewhat surprising, given that one of the most pressing issues that any incoming government would have to deal with is what, if anything, to do about securing Irish ratification of the Nice Treaty. (The Treaty must be ratified by referendum, and on 7 June, 2001, the Irish people had voted ‘No’ by 53.87 to 46.13 per cent (turnout: 34.79 per cent) to the Nice Treaty).

The outgoing government, a Fianna Fáil – Progressive Democrat coalition, which was in office at the time of the 2001 referendum immediately signalled it’s the intent to hold a second Nice referendum to reverse this result (which, moreover, enticed certain members of the Fianna Fáil parliamentary party to make distinctly ‘off message’ statements about Ireland and Europe).

It was quite clear that reversing the Nice result would depend greatly on an increased turnout in a second referendum, and one way of ensuring this would have been to let ‘Nice II’ coincide with the general election. However, the government promised that if returned to office they would hold ‘Nice II’ in October 2002, probably out of fear that ‘No’ voters may not vote for parties campaigning for a ‘Yes’. In the event, the promise of a referendum ‘later’ probably defused the Nice issue in the general election.

The Campaign

The small amount of space allocated to Europe in the parties’ election manifestos also suggests an unwillingness to make it an election priority. In Fianna Fáil’s 94-page manifesto two and a half pages were allocated to ‘Ireland’s role in the European Union’, where the party promised to submit a ‘suitable’ declaration (on Irish neutrality) to be attached to the Treaty, and subsequently to hold a second Nice referendum in the autumn of 2002 and (importantly) to campaign vigorously for a ‘Yes’ result. Every other issue on the European agenda for the years ahead that appears in this manifesto (including enlargement, Commission reform, UN-sanctioned St. Petersberg tasks, subsidiarity and the ‘community method’, and the Euro) receives Fianna Fáil’s support. Moreover, in its contribution to the Constitutional Convention Fianna Fáil will ‘insist on a model [of the EU] that respects as well as pools the sovereignty of Nation States’. Strengthened parliamentary scrutiny of EU business was also promised. The junior coalition party, the Progressive Democrats, also favoured a second Nice referendum, promised parliamentary scrutiny of EU business, eulogised the Euro, and in general advocated strong Irish participation in all aspects of integration.

Fine Gael devoted two of 38 manifesto pages to ‘Playing a full part in Europe’. With a dig to the outgoing government, a Fine Gael-led Ireland would ‘once again play a full and active role in Europe, both in day-to-day matters and in shaping the EU’s future development.’ A key part of Fine Gael’s statement refers to the need to secure a ‘Yes’ vote in a second Nice referendum. Further issues raised include democratising the European Commission, some institutional innovations, pursuing European economic,

social and political solidarity, and support for ‘full Irish involvement in EU decisions on peace and security, participating in appropriate missions but reserving the right to decide on a case by case basis whether to participate’. Labour, the only sizeable party in Ireland with a ‘natural’ European party family, only mentioned the EU briefly twice: once to say that if elected, Labour would ‘strengthen Ireland’s international commitment – within Europe, by facilitating enlargement of the EU and contributing to the reform of its institutions’, and once to say that they would also ‘work with our EU partners to promote corporate responsibility in developing countries’.

Two smaller parties, Sinn Féin and the Green Party, provided the only audible Eurosceptic voices. Both opposed the holding of a second Nice referendum, branding this a corrupt attempt to manipulate the Irish people. Sinn Féin’s further election promises regarding Europe consisted of enshrining Irish neutrality in the constitution to ward off any threat to it from the ‘EU army’, retaining a Commissioner per member state and the right to veto (e.g., unanimity decision-making), as well as ensuring that member states ‘be able to relate to the rest of the world on their own terms and not as part of a giant EU state’, and ending the democratic deficit. In a similar vein, the Greens (who acknowledged that ‘the greatest achievement of the EU has been the creation of structures for the development of peaceful, mutually beneficial relations between states’) also singled out the EU’s foreign, security and defence capabilities for particular criticism, with reference to the perceived negative impact on Irish neutrality. The Greens favour enlargement, demand greater Oireachtas powers for scrutinising EU business, and oppose flexibility provisions in European-level decision-making.

Some further parties, so small that they are almost ‘micro’ parties, also tend to be strongly critical of the EU. These include the Socialist Party (the only one of these parties with any parliamentary representation – a single seat both before and after the 2002 election), the Socialist Workers’ Party, the Workers’ Party and the Christian Solidarity Party. These parties all campaigned against the Nice Treaty in 2001 and oppose it being put to the people in a second referendum in 2002. The Socialist, Socialist Workers’ and Workers’ parties combine Marxism/socialism and Irish republicanism in different ways, while the Christian Solidarity Party is primarily concerned with Catholic doctrine on the four issues of supporting natural life from birth to death, supporting the traditional model of the single income family, regeneration of the West of Ireland, and democracy questions including the question of how the EU impinges on national democracy.

The campaign combined verbal mud-slinging and actual pie-flinging (at least two party leaders adorned newspaper front pages ‘wearing’ desserts on their heads). In terms of issues public finances dominated the campaign, especially major spending areas such as health, infrastructure and education, as well as crime. The parties traded complex arguments about economic management and their manifestos were full of complex plans for how to maintain economic growth and stability. (Most of this must have been above the heads of most voters, who - to the extent that they made their vote decision on economic management - presumably simply voted for the party they felt they could trust in this respect). The outgoing government’s strong record in economic management notwithstanding, complete with five years of ‘give-away’ budgets, opposition parties

claimed that Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats had been ‘spending the boom’ unwisely. In addition to these national issues, independent candidates with high local profiles campaigning on distinctly local issues added a different flavour to the campaign in each constituency.

Results and Impact

The election returned to office the outgoing centre-right coalition between Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats, not surprisingly perhaps in light of the relatively pervasive economic feel-good factor that remains despite the fact that the heyday of the Celtic Tiger seems to have passed. The personal appeal of Fianna Fáil leader and outgoing Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, who has made a personal image journey from ‘anorak man’ to ‘Hello!’ type celebrity with the common touch, almost certainly explains a good deal of Fianna Fáil’s appeal, too. Meanwhile, the Progressive Democrats, who were almost wiped out in the 1997 election, doubled their seat share probably in no small part because of the perception that they have ‘kept tabs’ on Fianna Fáil, ensuring that shady dealings on the part of prominent Fianna Fáil politicians (which has kept turning up in the tribunals established to investigate donations from big business and ‘conspicuous’ decisions about land rezoning, etc.) is a thing of the past.

Apart from the actual election outcome, there were several more interesting, unexpected and perhaps in the long term more important ‘stories’ to tell about this election from the perspective of how European issues will play out in Irish politics for the foreseeable future. To begin with, Fine Gael, historically the second largest party in Irish politics and arguably the Irish party with the most genuine, long-term commitment to European integration, suffered an electoral meltdown. It not only lost 23 seats, but this included ten out of 16 members of the Fine Gael front bench (consisting of the party’s most senior and experienced parliamentarians). This development might mean that one of the strongest and most persistent forces for European integration in Ireland is significantly undermined and weakened.

Another major point of note in this election was the success of Sinn Féin, who increased their representation from one to five seats on the basis of a platform based in the ideal of a united, independent, socialist Irish republic. Sinn Féin’s perception of Irish independence makes it a ‘soft’ Eurosceptic party, recognising the European arena as one where the party’s objectives can be advanced but nonetheless rejecting supranational developments especially in any area of policy with perceived implications for Irish military neutrality.

From the perspective of European issues, the rise and rise of Sinn Féin is nevertheless only one of two potentially crucial developments arising out of the 2002 election, the second one being the success of the Green Party. The Green Party increased its seat share from two to six, thereby becoming potentially ‘coalitionable’ from a strictly arithmetic point of view. However, the Greens had in effect ruled themselves out of a potential coalition by making a pre-election commitment to only entering a coalition if the major coalition party (most likely Fianna Fáil) undertook to reopen the Nice Treaty –

something which would be beyond the control of any Irish party (assuming they would wish to do so in the first place), since doing so would require the acquiescence of the other EU14 governments.

The final major story of the 2002 election was the dramatic increase in independents. The 28th Dáil had witnessed the disproportional influence a pivotal independent can wield and the 29th Dáil contains 13 independents elected on issues ranging from health and disability rights to the location of mobile phone masts. From the perspective of European issues it is difficult to foretell what the effects of the increase in the numbers of independents will have, but there is at least the potential that some of them might be effective Eurosceptic voices, in contrast to the larger parties' desire to ratify the Nice Treaty. (Potentially, of course, Nice might become an issue on which independents lend support to the government in exchange for other favours).

The combination of a weaker than ever pro-European Fine Gael, two stronger than ever Eurosceptic parties, Sinn Féin and the Green Party, as well as a larger than ever group of relatively unpredictable independents has the potential to bring an end to what the almost completely unquestioning way of dealing with European issues domestically.

Nice II

In the first weeks after the elections there were newspaper reports indicating that legislation facilitating a second Nice referendum would be the first major debate in the incoming parliament (to sit for the first time on 6 June 2002). The new electoral arithmetic does not suggest that passing this legislation will be difficult (assuming that the parties stick to their manifesto pledges on this point). What will surely be more difficult is to persuade the Irish public to (a) vote, and (b) vote 'Yes'. The re-elected Irish government is pinning its hopes in this respect to the declaration (referred to in Fianna Fáil's election manifesto) it will bring to the Seville Council (21-22 June, 2002). The hope is that the other 14 governments will agree to annex the declaration, whose wording is not yet known, to the Treaty, and that this will persuade Irish voters not to vote 'No' out of fears that Ireland would no longer be neutral if the Nice Treaty was ratified. However, given that only 12 per cent of 'No' voters in the 2001 referendum cited neutrality as the reason for voting 'No' (Gilland 2002),¹ one can wonder whether the declaration will be enough to reverse the 'No' result. In an *Irish Times*/MRBI opinion poll reported the day before the election respondents were evenly divided on the question 'if a referendum on the Nice Treaty was held in the morning, would you vote 'Yes' in favour of the Treaty, or 'No' against the Treaty?' 32 per cent replied that they would vote 'Yes' and 32 per cent replied that they would vote 'No'. A further 32 per cent did not know how they would vote. To avoid losing Nice II the parties favouring The Treaty must ensure that the declaration or some other argument will persuade this last category of voters

¹ See: Gilland, K. 'Ireland's (First) Referendum on the Treaty of Nice' *Journal of Common Market Studies* (2002, forthcoming).

Conclusion

To conclude, in some ways it was a pity that Nice II and the general election did not coincide. This would presumably have enhanced public interest in Nice in particular and in Europe in general (compared to if the referendum is held on a separate occasion, which will now be the case). Also, and perhaps more importantly in the long term, holding the referendum and the election on the same day might have enticed politicians to spell out more clearly than they usually do the connection between national and European politics, which might have made voters aware that what happens at the European level impinges on seemingly 'national' policies and problems that affect people's everyday lives. As we know, this did not happen and in fact Europe was hardly mentioned in the election campaign. A brief analysis of the seat allocation that was the outcome of the election nevertheless has nevertheless revealed some possible long-term trends that may fundamentally change what has hitherto been more or less an inter-party pro-European consensus in Ireland.