



**European Parties Elections
and Referendums Network**

**EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 35
THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN IRELAND,
5 JUNE 2009**

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Key points:

- There was a better-than-usual turnout for Ireland's seventh round of European parliament elections on 5 June 2009.
- The election was a disaster for both parties in the government coalition, with Fianna Fáil in particular recording a historical low vote.
- It was a particularly good day for left-wing parties, particularly the Labour Party and the Socialist Party, both of whom gained votes and seats.
- For the first time, Fine Gael emerged as the largest party in terms of votes, though they also managed to lose a seat.
- There was a mixed outcome for Eurosceptic parties opposed to the Lisbon Treaty, who lost seats but whose vote held up quite well.

On 12 June 2008, voters in the Republic of Ireland had caused a huge stir in the world of EU politics when they rejected the Treaty of Lisbon in a referendum.¹ In ordinary times, it might have been expected that the European Parliament (EP) elections, almost exactly a year later, would be dominated by discussion of the aftermath of the referendum outcome and the debate about what to do next. But these were not ordinary times. In the intervening period, the world economy had run into a sharp crisis. This hit Ireland especially hard, given its particularly loose systems of financial regulation (in 2005, the New York Times had referred to the country as the 'Wild West of European finance') and the inflation of a huge property bubble. A country once fêted as an economic example that other EU states should follow suddenly went into a very severe recession.

¹ See: Michael Holmes, 'The Referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon in the Republic of Ireland, 12 June 2008,' *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network Referendum Briefing No 16* at http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern_no_16_ireland_08.pdf.

Therefore, the 2009 EP election was held against a backdrop of economic downturn and rising unemployment, and these economic woes clearly had an impact upon the governing parties. Fianna Fáil had retained power in the 2007 general election, renewing a coalition with the small right-wing Progressive Democrat party which had held power since 1997.² The only change was the inclusion of the Green Party as a coalition partner for the first time. But since the general election, there had been significant changes. In May 2008, the man who had held the office of prime minister since the 1997 election, Bertie Ahern, stepped down amidst a cloud of allegations about corruption, with Brian Cowen taking over. And by the end of the year, the Progressive Democrats had decided to disband, although their one remaining cabinet member, Mary Harney, remained in government as an independent.

The approval ratings for Cowen's Fianna Fáil-Green Party coalition had been in steep decline in the months preceding the election, while opposition parties experienced a surge in support. Thus, right from the outset, the EP election promised to be a perfect example of Reif and Schmitt's 'second order' elections.³ In such elections, the ostensible focus of the election (in this case, Europe) is generally ignored, and instead voters tend either not to bother to vote at all or to 'punish' an incumbent government by voting for opposition parties, including particularly new, smaller and protest-type parties.

The candidates

Given the highly personalised voting system used in Ireland (the Single Transferable Vote, or STV), candidate selection is always a lively concern. (See **Table 1** for a summary of candidates by constituency and party). This was further complicated by a reduction in the number of seats allocated to the Republic of Ireland, down from 13 to 12. The Dublin constituency was reduced from four seats to three and a further adjustment of constituency boundaries saw parts of the province of Leinster (the counties of Longford and Westmeath) being re-allocated from the East constituency to the North-West constituency.

The precipitous decline in support for Fianna Fáil perhaps contributed to a noticeable reluctance for party members to put themselves forward for election. In the East constituency, Thomas Byrne hesitated until the week prior to close of nominations before agreeing to be one of the party's candidates, while in the North-West constituency, sitting MEP Seán Ó Neachtain withdrew from the race for health reasons, and it took the party until the morning of the close of nominations before they managed to persuade former MEP Pat 'The Cope' Gallagher to put his name forward once again.

Other parties also had problems in selecting candidates. Irish politics generally tends to be strongly local in orientation. Given the size of the constituencies used for the EP elections (the largest by area, the North-West constituency, stretches over 430

² See: Michael Holmes, 'Europe and the General Election in the Republic of Ireland, May 24 2007,' *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network Election Briefing No 35* at http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern_35_ireland.pdf.

³ See: Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt, 'Nine second order national elections: A conceptual framework for the analysis of European election results, *European Journal of Political Research*. Vol 8, 1980, pp.3-44.

kilometres from north to south, a journey that would take around seven hours by car), that local appeal is much harder to achieve. Instead, the main parties have usually sought to put forward candidates with a high regional or national profile. In previous elections, this has led to parties ‘parachuting’ candidates; in other words, inviting people to stand who are not in the party but who are deemed to have the requisite profile. However, this phenomenon was less pronounced on this occasion, largely because all but two of the outgoing MEP’s sought re-election.

Perhaps the most prominent cases that did emerge were both from the Labour Party. In the East constituency, a former Labour member who had subsequently joined the Greens, Nessa Childers, was persuaded to re-join the party, while in the North-West constituency the campaigning journalist Susan O’Keeffe was nominated and joined the party. In other parties, while ‘parachuting’ was less in evidence, there were problems and controversies over candidate selection.

For one party, the EP election was explicitly seen as a chance to follow up on the Lisbon referendum. Libertas had begun life campaigning against ratification of the treaty, but during the referendum campaign in Ireland, it had made clear its intentions of establishing itself as a party and contesting seats in a number of countries in the 2009 EP elections. The most high profile member of Libertas, Declan Ganley, ran in the North-West constituency, while candidates were also put up in Dublin and East. Libertas did not run its own candidate in the South constituency, but instead tried to endorse the candidacy of sitting Independent MEP Kathy Sinnott, who had also campaigned against the Lisbon Treaty. However, Sinnott sought to distance herself from any affiliation with Libertas.

Table 1 Candidates by constituency and party

| | Dublin | East | North-West | South | Total |
|------------------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------|------------------|-----------|
| <i>Population</i> | <i>1,187,176</i> | <i>994,210</i> | <i>996,072</i> | <i>1,062,390</i> | |
| <i>area (km²)</i> | <i>921</i> | <i>15,906</i> | <i>31,846</i> | <i>21,029</i> | |
| Fianna Fáil | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 8 |
| Fine Gael | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 7 |
| Sinn Féin | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| Labour | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Libertas | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 3 |
| Greens | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Socialist | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Independents | 2 | 3 | 6 | 3 | 14 |
| TOTAL | 10 | 11 | 13 | 10 | 44 |

Sources: Author’s tabulation derived from the *Irish Times*, 12 May 2009; Central Statistics Office *Principal statistics 2006* (<http://www.cso.ie/statistics/popofeachprovcountycity2006.htm>)

Note: all constituencies are three-seaters

The campaign

It might have been thought that the regular mobilisation of Irish voters to take part in EU-related referendums might have produced a more EU-oriented electorate. However, the evidence from the campaign makes it clear that once again Europe was not a significant issue. A number of candidates are on record noting the lack of engagement with EU issues during the campaign, with Fine Gael’s Gay Mitchell

stating ‘when I meet people in the street they tend to raise all sorts of issues rather than European issues’, while the Green’s Deirdre De Burca commented on ‘a shocking lack of knowledge on the doorsteps’ about Europe.⁴ Another commentary on the campaign noted, ‘what is striking is the lack of engagement from people on European issues. Nobody brings up Lisbon. Nobody brings up the European Parliament.’⁵ Even with a second referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon looming, Irish voters were still more concerned with the local, regional and national than with anything specifically European.

Instead, the dominant issue was clearly the economic crisis. This was a key part of every party’s manifesto, with competing plans for how best to respond to the recession. It underpinned the title of the Labour Party’s document, which was ‘putting people, jobs and fairness at the heart of Europe’. The leading section of Fianna Fáil’s manifesto was titled ‘economic growth and recovery’, and sought to emphasise their success in getting approval from the EU for their recovery plans. Fine Gael identified the EU as having ‘a vital role in recovery’ and argued that ‘now, more than ever, Ireland needs the European Union’.

The centrality of the economic crisis turned the campaign into a strong challenge to the incumbent government. Using good Hiberno-English idiom, Fine Gael leader Enda Kenny accused the coalition of having ‘banjaxed the economy’ and called for an early general election throughout the European campaign on the grounds that the country needed firm leadership and a new direction.⁶ Éamon Gimore, the Labour leader, argued that a ‘poor Fianna Fáil government has been central in creating this crisis’,⁷ while the Socialist Party called on voters to use the election to send a message to Fianna Fáil. Even the Green Party sought to distance themselves from their coalition partners by refusing to issue a call for their voters to give lower-preference votes to Fianna Fáil (under STV, such transfers can play an important role in the final allocation of seats).

Of course, the criticisms of the incumbent government masked considerable differences of opinion amongst the parties. There were two major lines of division. The first was a left-right split. The manifestos of the parties of the right – including both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil – tended to call for limited regulation, and basically sought to outline the most expeditious way of returning to the growth of the Celtic Tiger era. Other parties were more prepared to argue that the crisis was at least partially the result of the excesses of that era. Labour, Sinn Féin, the Socialist Party and the Greens all called in various ways for a more radical overhaul of the financial system and indeed the basic principles underpinning the economy, and Sinn Féin went so far as to call for the establishment of a left alliance.

Nothing came of that call, which is hardly surprising given the many other sources of disagreement between the parties of the left. In particular, there is a clear division between pro-EU parties such as Labour and more Eurosceptic parties such as Sinn Féin and the Socialists. This was the second line of division, and it emerged in the EP election campaign in another way. In the North-West constituency, Fianna Fáil called

⁴ See: *Irish Times*, 28 May 2009

⁵ See: *Irish Times*, 15 May 2009

⁶ See: *Irish Times*, 7 May 2009

⁷ See: *Irish Times*, 3 June 2009

for a transfer pact amongst pro-EU parties to try to deprive the Libertas candidate of a seat. But given the already-noted absence of European issues from the campaign, this probably had more to do with saving a Fianna Fáil seat.

It is worth noting that the manifestos of most of the parties indicated continuing very broad support for the idea of European integration in general. This was unsurprising in the case of obviously pro-EU parties, so for example Fianna Fáil declared itself to be ‘an active and committed pro-European party’ while Fine Gael asserted that ‘Ireland belongs at the heart of the European Union’. The Greens’ new-found support for the EU was also in evidence, as they declared their ‘commitment to the development of the European Union’. But similar sentiments could equally be found amongst the more EU-critical parties. For example, Sinn Féin called for Ireland ‘to play a central role in shaping the future direction of the European Union’, while Libertas declared the EU to be ‘one of the most successful projects in world history’.

The key area of difference on the EU came in relation to the Lisbon Treaty. The pro-EU parties supported holding a second referendum and advocated support for the treaty. Fianna Fáil stated ‘we believe very firmly that the Lisbon Treaty is a necessary adjustment to the Union’s rules’, Fine Gael declared that Lisbon was ‘good for Europe, vital for Ireland’ and re-asserted that the party ‘strongly supports the Lisbon Treaty’, and the Labour Party also declared its continuing support for the ratification of the treaty. On the other side, opposition to the treaty could be seen as the *raison d’être* of Libertas, while Sinn Féin asserted that it would ‘oppose any Lisbon Treaty re-run as anti-democratic and a bad deal for Ireland’, and the Socialist Party criticised the treaty for institutionalising a neo-liberal and anti-worker agenda.

But to repeat, while the positions of the parties on Lisbon were readily available in their manifestos, this was not an issue that exercised the voting public to any great deal. Instead, the conduct of the campaign centred on the state of the country’s economy and the extent of the government’s culpability for the recession. Apart from that, the campaign was marked as usual by personal attacks with, for example: Fine Gael trying to deter voters from Labour’s candidate in the East constituency on the grounds that she knew nothing about agriculture, Libertas attacking a rival in the North-West for being ‘soft’ on the issue of abortion, and Libertas’ own candidate in the East coming under fire for calling for a suspension of immigration.

The results

The turnout for the election was 57.6%, which was down on the general election of May 2007 (67.0%). However, as **Table 2** shows, it was not that far off the turnout in the 2004 EP election⁸ and well ahead of the turnout figures for the two EP contests in the 1990s. It should be noted that turnout may have been boosted to some extent by the fact that a full set of local elections and two parliamentary by-elections (both in Dublin constituencies) were being held on the same day. However, a Eurobarometer poll prior to the election had indicated that Irish voters claimed to be highly interested in the election, second only to Greek voters in this respect.⁹

⁸ For more on the 2004 election, see: Michael Holmes, ‘The European Parliament Election in Ireland, June 11 2004,’ *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network European Parliament Election Briefing No 2* at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epernep2004ireland.pdf>.

⁹ Eurobarometer, *European elections 2009* (Standard Eurobarometer EB71)

Table 2 Turnout and party support, Irish EP elections 1979-2009, 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 | 38.6 | 24.6 | 8.7 | 6.7 | 6.3 | 15.0 | 50.2 |
| 2004 | 29.5 | 27.8 | 10.6 | 4.3 | 11.1 | 16.7 | 58.8 |
| 2009 | 24.1 | 29.1 | 13.9 | 1.9 | 11.2 | 19.7 | 57.6 |

Sources: John Coakley (2005) "Electoral data", in John Coakley and Michael Gallagher (eds) (2005) *Politics in the Republic of Ireland* (London and New York: Routledge and PSAI Press, 4th edition) p. 469; the *Irish Times*, 8 June 2009

By comparison with the previous general election in May 2007, the two government parties had a disastrous day – not just in the European contest, but also in the local and by-elections. In the EP election, Fianna Fáil's vote crashed from 41.6% in the general election to 24.1%, the party's worst-ever performance in a national election since its foundation in 1923. Their junior partners, the Green Party, fell from 4.7% in the general election to just 1.9%. However, as **Table 3** shows, this translated into the loss of only one EP seat for the government partners, largely since both Fianna Fáil and the Greens had suffered a similarly bad result in the previous European election.

Table 3 Comparison with 2004 European and 2007 general elections

| | Vote (%) | % change (2004 EP) | Seats (change since 2004 EP) | % change (2007 general) |
|-----------------|----------|--------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Fine Gael | 29.1 | + 1.3 | 4 (-1) | +1.8 |
| Fianna Fáil | 24.1 | - 5.4 | 3 (-1) | -17.5 |
| Labour Party | 13.9 | + 3.3 | 3 (+2) | +3.8 |
| Sinn Féin | 11.2 | + 0.1 | 0 (-1) | +1.1 |
| Green Party | 1.9 | - 2.4 | 0 (no change) | -2.8 |
| Socialist Party | 2.7 | + 1.0 | 1 (+1) | +2.1 |
| Others | 17.0 | - 0.8 | 1 (-1) | +8.3 |

Source: Author's own calculations based on data in Table 2 above and in Liam Weeks (2008) "Appendices", in Michael Gallagher and Michael Marsh (eds) (2008) *How Ireland voted 2007: the full story of Ireland's general election* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 232-5

The election was a success for the two mainstream opposition parties. Fine Gael emerged as the most strongly supported party in Ireland for the first time since it was founded in 1933, while the Labour Party also enjoyed a very successful election, increasing its EP seats from one to three. Paradoxically, due to the quirks of the Irish electoral system, Fine Gael actually ended up losing one of its five EP seats despite its increased vote. The election also saw continuing success for small protest parties and independents on the European stage, at least in comparison with general elections. But this simply re-affirmed the pattern already evident in EP elections, as the figures for the 2004 election are quite similar.

Eurosceptic candidates continued to do reasonably well, but there was certainly no post-Lisbon surge in support for them. First of all, as has just been noted, the main beneficiaries in terms of votes were Fine Gael and Labour, both of whom are solidly

pro-EU. Secondly, Sinn Féin’s vote dipped slightly from 11.3% to 11.2%, and they lost their sole seat in the Republic (they held a seat in Northern Ireland) – although this went instead to the equally Eurosceptic Socialist Party. Probably the main point of interest from the perspective of Euroscepticism was the performance of Libertas. They performed respectably, but failed to make a breakthrough, winning 5.5% of the vote nationwide, and with their leader Declan Ganley failing to get elected in the North-West constituency.

As **Table 4** shows, in overall terms, eleven of the thirteen outgoing MEPs had sought re-election, but only seven succeeded in retaining their seats. Eoin Ryan of Fianna Fáil lost his seat in Dublin, trapped between the reduction of that constituency to a three-seater and the strong anti-government vote. Mary Lou McDonald of Sinn Féin also lost out in Dublin, with her seat going to Joe Higgins of the Socialist Party. In the South constituency, Colm Burke of Fine Gael lost his seat to party colleague Seán Kelly. Burke had been a substitute MEP who had replaced Simon Coveney in 2007 when Coveney resigned from the European Parliament. Kathy Sinnott, an independent, lost out to Alan Kelly of the Labour Party.

Table 4 Irish MEP’s elected, 2009

| | FF | FG | Labour | Socialist | Independent |
|------------|----------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------|----------------|
| Dublin | | Gay Mitchell* | Proinsias De Rossa* | Joe Higgins | |
| East | Liam Aylward* | Máiréad McGuinness* | Nessa Childers | | |
| North-West | Pat Gallagher | Jim Higgins* | | | Marian Harkin* |
| South | Brian Crowley* | Seán Kelly | Alan Kelly | | |

Source: www.europarl.ie (9 June 2009)

Notes: * indicates outgoing MEP re-elected

In terms of the nature of these elections, they provide a good indication of the argument that European Parliament elections are best considered as ‘second-order’ contests. Five features associated with ‘second-order’ elections are clearly in evidence. First, turnout was noticeably lower than in general elections. Second, the campaign was not focused on European issues, and instead was more of a proxy for national issues. Third, there was a very strong anti-government vote, with Fianna Fáil and the Greens suffering. Fourth, smaller parties and independents fared better than they tend to do in national elections. Fifth, the vote for protest parties – particularly Eurosceptic ones – was considerably higher than it would be in general elections.

Conclusions

This was a hall of mirrors election, one where things weren’t quite as they seemed. In a number of ways, a seemingly straightforward initial reading of the results and outcomes needs to be taken a little further. It was undoubtedly a terrible day for the government parties, but Fianna Fáil only lost one European seat – largely because the 2004 EP election had been an almost equally bad performance. It was clearly a good day for Fine Gael in terms of votes, but they also managed to lose an EP seat. Independent candidates and minor parties continued to perform well, but again in net

terms they lost a seat. The only parties to do well in terms of votes and seats were both on the left, the Labour Party and the Socialist Party.

Whilst that might allow a reading of the election to say that it represented a breakthrough for the left, this would also be at least a slightly erroneous conclusion. There are major divisions between the parties of the left, not least on the issues of European integration and the Treaty of Lisbon. Labour's pro-European position is by now firmly established, while the more critical stances of the Socialists – and Sinn Féin, another left-leaning Euro-sceptic party – are equally entrenched. Whilst there might well be scope for selective policy co-operation between them in the not too distant future (particularly if the recession is prolonged), they are certain to be on opposite sides of the most immediate electoral issue facing Ireland – the second Treaty of Lisbon referendum.

Within a couple of weeks of the election result, the Brussels European Council meeting of 18-19 June announced a series of protocols and declarations designed to facilitate the passage of the Treaty of Lisbon in a second referendum, and Brian Cowen indicated that the referendum would be held in October 2009. The EP election did not indicate any electoral breakthrough for parties that had campaigned against the treaty the first time round. Indeed, two prominent 'No' campaigners, Sinn Féin's Mary Lou McDonald and the independent Kathy Sinnott, lost their seats, though this was compensated to some extent by the success of the Socialist Party's Joe Higgins in Dublin.

A further indication that anti-Lisbon campaigners were unable to turn opposition to the treaty into an advantage in the EP election was the failure of Libertas to claim a seat in Ireland. This could be particularly significant for the conduct of a second referendum on the treaty, because the leader of Libertas, Declan Ganley, vowed that if he did not win an EP seat, he would not play a major role in that second referendum. Depending on how he defines the term 'major' in this context, that would potentially weaken one of the strands of opposition to Lisbon. However, it also makes more evident that the more sustained critique of the EU is coming from the left.

The 2009 EP election also showed the extent to which the voting public were concerned about the state of the economy and the recession, and it was possible that fear about the stability and security of the Irish economy might well encourage an increased 'Yes' vote. Perhaps the biggest problem for the 'Yes' camp was the continuing dissatisfaction with Fianna Fáil, which could make it more difficult for Brian Cowen and his ministers to lead the campaign for ratification of the treaty.

In the longer term, although there is a long way to go to the next Irish general election, there were already clear indicators that a change of government would be a distinct possibility when that time comes. It is worth repeating that the two leading opposition parties, Fine Gael and the Labour Party, were both strongly pro-EU. However, it is impossible to predict the exact political dynamics that might pertain, and it is certainly not inconceivable that some of the more Eurosceptic parties might be necessary to make up the numbers for a coalition (whether Fine Gael-led or, if they can turn around their fortunes, Fianna Fáil-led).

If that eventuality were to arise, it is highly unlikely that it would have any impact on Ireland's general approach to the EU – especially if there were no awkward new treaties (and therefore referendums) to be dealt with. However, it could well mean a different policy emphasis being pursued by Ireland in the EU, one reflecting the stronger left-wing strand of opinion that has emerged in Irish politics.

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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>.