

Euroscepticism in Ireland in the 2019 European Parliament Elections

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Ireland is well known for being among the most enthusiastic supporters of the European Union. A recent survey by [Eurobarometer](#) shows that 85 per cent of Irish people believe the EU is a good thing. However, like all EU member states, Euroscepticism is not entirely absent. Looking over the results of the 2019 European Elections, a first run at the results appears to show that a third of first preferences went to candidates with some version of a Eurosceptic platform. But these figures need to be drilled down into. Accounting for the different types of Euroscepticism and factoring in the low salience of Euroscepticism shows that Irish politics does incorporate Euroscepticism, but in a very muted form.

Party	HES/SES	% National Vote	EP MEP
<i>Sinn Féin</i>	SES	11.69	1
<i>People Before Profit</i>	SES	2.01	0
<i>Solidarity</i>	SES	0.3	0
<i>Workers Party</i>	SES	0.22	0
<i>Independents 4 Change</i>	SES	7.39	2
<i>Independents (IREXIT)</i>	HES	0.78	0
<i>Direct Democracy Ireland</i>	SES	0.16	0
<i>Renua</i>	SES	0.41	0
<i>Identity Ireland</i>	HES	0.22	0
<i>Independents (various Right Wing)</i>	HES/SES	4.9	0
<i>Independents (Left)</i>	SES	5.07	1
Totals		33.15	4

In general, it is important to differentiate between different forms of Euroscepticism and particularly between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ versions. While Brexit in the UK has led many to equate Euroscepticism with the advocacy of leaving the EU (or ‘hard’ Euroscepticism), the vast majority of Eurosceptic positions in the EU are ‘soft’ in that they fundamentally critique the European integration process but stop short of advocating exit for their countries.

The ‘Eurosceptic’ vote in Ireland can be broken down into votes for three kinds of parties/candidates: Sinn Féin, left wing parties and independent candidates, and right-wing parties and independents.

Sinn Féin secured 1 MEP seat and finished third nationally in terms of first preference votes (11.7 %) behind the two major pro-EU parties Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. Sinn Féin can be described as left ‘soft-Eurosceptic’ (or, as they prefer, ‘[Euro critical](#)’), even if this would likely not be the first label to come to mind when Irish voters think about the party. [When asked](#), Sinn Féin will tend to argue that European integration has gone too far. They have been vocal in their opposition to the deepening of the EU’s competencies in Common Security and Defence Policy, and particularly opposed to [PESCO](#). The party have long argued that Irish military [neutrality](#) risks being undermined by the EU. Nevertheless, Sinn Féin are clear in their support of continued Irish membership in the EU and are staunchly anti-Brexit. The party argues that the EU needs to change and [advocates](#) a ‘social Europe’, which promotes “peace, demilitarisation, economic and social justice, international solidarity and greater democratic accountability”.

Left Wing parties and candidates other than Sinn Féin include [The People Before Profit Alliance](#) (PBP), [Solidarity](#), the [Worker’s Party](#) and [Independents 4 Change](#). In total, these candidates received close to

10 per cent of all first preference votes. Many of these candidates could be described as members of soft Eurosceptic parties. They tend to be anti-austerity, focus on a critique of neoliberalism, the legacy of the eurozone crisis and the bailout. The EU is associated with the promotion of privatization, and with a bias towards the influence of business lobbyists. [When asked](#), these candidates tended to agree, or neither agree nor disagree that Ireland should remain or not remain a member of the EU, and that European integration has gone too far. In the past, these parties are likely to [have recommended no votes](#) in referendums on EU treaties, and to have been highly critical of how the EU handled Ireland's economic crisis. However, it would be somewhat misleading to over-emphasise the Euroscepticism of these parties. Yes, their views on the EU are rooted strongly in a well-established left-wing critique of the neoliberal direction of European integration. But, these are parties that don't tend to take their views on Europe out for a spin every day. Their position on the EU does not feature prominently on their manifestos and election literature, and it is not likely that voters were primarily motivated to give their first preferences to these candidates based on their EU critical views.

On the other side of the spectrum are a handful of minor parties and independent candidates who could be classified as right wing, including [Renua](#) and Direct Democracy Ireland. These candidates tend to argue that European integration has gone too far and has undermined Irish sovereignty. Of these candidates, only two have made Ireland's exit from the European Union a central platform of their campaign as hard Eurosceptics. Herman Kelly and Delores Cahill are both independents but are associated with the (unregistered at the time of the elections) Irexit Freedom to Prosper party. Their opposition to the EU centres around concerns over Irish sovereignty, eurozone budget and debt rules, membership fees, and wanting more controls over immigration. These two candidates received 0.78 per cent of all first preferences. Other candidates in this broad grouping raise similar critiques of the EU, and while some flirt more openly than others, they tend to stop short of calling for an Irish withdrawal from the EU or euro. These soft-Eurosceptics received about 5.5 per cent of overall first preferences.

Beyond the issue of neutrality, Euroscepticism in Ireland appears to follow very similar templates to Euroscepticism in the UK but without the salience. On the left, it is associated with an anti-austerity agenda, while on the right, concerns around sovereignty and immigration are raised. But there are important differences. First, left-wing candidates with Eurosceptic leanings substantially outperform right-wing candidates. Including Sinn Féin, left-wing candidates returned 4 MEPs compared to zero, and 26.7 per cent of first preference votes compared to 6.5 per cent. Many of the candidates categorised as 'soft-Eurosceptics' would probably not resist the label, but at the same time, would be unlikely to expect to be described as Eurosceptic in the first instance. In other words, soft-Eurosceptic candidates tend not to emphasise the EU issue in their campaigns. Candidates that made the EU issues central to their campaigns tended to fare worst.

In the past decade, Ireland has found itself very much at the centre of what Jean-Claude Juncker labelled the '[polycrisis](#)' facing the EU, affected more than most by both the eurozone crisis and by Brexit. At the same time, it's a truism that the issue of European integration is not a central topic of political contestation between Irish parties. However, what is interesting about the 2019 European Elections is that it is also not an issue that is entirely absent, and Euroscepticism does have a very small foothold in Irish politics. Euroscepticism that does exist in Ireland covers the spectrum and has a variety of ideological sources on the left and the right. It is also mostly soft, relatively muted in manifestos and campaigns, and most clearly of all, hard Euroscepticism is very much a rarity in Irish politics.