

Irish General Election 2011

25 February 2011 | Written by Prof Yvonne Galligan

**Report
and
Analysis**



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The context

On 23 January 2011, Ireland's Green Party pulled out of the coalition government it shared with Fianna Fáil because 'the patience of its members with their Fianna Fáil partners had reached an end'.¹ The action terminated one of the most unpopular governments in the country's modern period. It had overseen economic meltdown, presided over an unprecedented banking crisis, and was rocked by personal scandal and corruption. The ensuing election was infused with public anger at the government or all who had brought the country to bankruptcy. On 25 February 2011, Irish voters delivered their verdict. They delivered a crushing defeat to Fianna Fáil and the Green Party. They supported Fine Gael to become the largest party in the state for the first time in its history, and favoured other opposition parties and independent candidates with unprecedented levels of support. Following negotiations, Fine Gael and Labour took power with a record 113 seats in parliament – a 30-seat majority. Fianna Fáil's parliamentary share was reduced from 78 to 20 seats and the Greens lost their six seats, election deposits and public funding. In all respects, this was a defining election. ■

1. 'Early election looms after Greens leave government', *The Irish Times*, 24 Jan 2011, p. 1.

Ireland's electoral system and elected institutions

The Irish party system has its foundations in the war of independence (1919-1921), the Anglo-Irish Treaty that negotiated peace between Britain and the newly-emergent Irish state, and the subsequent civil war.² Sinn Féin, formed in 1905, had provided a political focus for Irish nationalist sentiment and became the dominant voice of Irish nationalism when it won 73 of Ireland's 105 seats at the 1918 general election.³ Negotiations between the British government and the republican government, led by de Valera, resulted in the Anglo-Irish Treaty that secured a narrow majority in the republican parliament. The June 1922 election, the first to be held in the new Free State, resulted in a 65% support for the Pro-Treaty faction of Sinn Féin. De Valera and the Anti-Treaty faction refused to take their seats in the new Dáil. A short, violent civil war erupted between the Pro- and Anti-Treaty sides – de Valera aligned with the Anti-Treatyites. The defenders of the Treaty meanwhile formed the first Free State government and in 1923 formed Cumann na nGaedheal, led by William T Cosgrave.⁴ This party went through a series of iterations to become Fine Gael in 1933. Anti-Treaty nationalists retained the name Sinn Féin and abstained from parliamentary politics until 1926 when, with the intention of re-entering parliamentary politics, de Valera moved to found Fianna Fáil. The minority group that did not follow de Valera continued as Sinn Féin. The following year, Fianna Fáil entered the Dáil. In 1932 the first Fianna Fáil government was formed and thereafter the party established a dominant position as a classical, centrist 'catch-all' party in Irish government and politics.⁵

While nationalists struggled for independence from Britain, the Irish Labour Party (formed in 1918) was preoccupied with representing the interests of the relatively small urban and

rural working class. Formally distanced from nationalist politics, it became a marginal voice in the formation of the party system in newly-independent Ireland. It supported Fianna Fáil in forming the 1932 administration (though it did not take government office), and later became a coalition partner of Fine Gael in the 1948-51 inter-party government. Support for the abstentionist Sinn Féin party faded during subsequent decades until the advent of the peace process in Northern Ireland during the 1990s. The party won five Dáil seats in the 2002 general election, marking a comeback in Irish politics.

From the mid 1920s until the mid 1980s, the Irish party system largely consisted of three competing parties – Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Irish Labour Party. In ideological position, there was little to distinguish the centre-right conservatism of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. The main ideological difference was a (waning) adherence to republicanism on the part of Fianna Fáil. Strategically, the party's populist agenda attracted cross-class support, while Fine Gael drew the bulk of its vote from the professional and business sectors, and large farmers. The Irish Labour Party sought to represent a moderate, social democratic constituency. A variety of smaller parties came and went during this time, but none offered a sustained challenge to the three dominant parties. In 1985, the Progressive Democrat Party (PD) was formed. Composed of disaffected members of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, it introduced modern liberal politics into the established populist nationalism of the party system.⁶ The emergence of the PDs marked the beginning of a period of fragmentation in the three-way competition between parties. It brought the possibility of Fianna Fáil single-party governments to an end. However, by becoming open to coalition politics from 1989 onwards (with, on various

2. Liam Weeks, 'Parties and the Irish party system' in John Coakley and Michael Gallagher (eds) *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, 5th edition, PSAI/ Routledge 2010, p. 137-151.

3. John Coakley, 'The foundations of statehood' in Coakley and Gallagher (eds) *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, pp. 19-24.

4. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cumann_na_nGaedheal (last consulted 7 September 2011).

5. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fianna_F%C3%A1il (last consulted 7 September 2011).

6. John Coakley, 'The foundations of statehood' in Coakley and Gallagher (eds) *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, pp. 27-29.

7. Liam Weeks, 'Parties and the party system' in Coakley and Gallagher (eds) *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, pp. 147-151.

8. Electoral Reform Society has an excellent brief history of STV on its website, <http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/article.php?id=40> (last accessed 6 June 2011).

9. David M. Farrell, *Electoral Systems: A Comparative Introduction*, 2nd edition, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 122.

10. Richard Sinnott, 'The electoral system' in Coakley and Gallagher (eds) *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, p. 113.

11. David Farrell, *Electoral Systems*, p. 123.

12. Stephen Herbert, *The Single Transferable Vote in Practice*, SPICe Briefing Paper 03/85, 31 October 2003, p. 11. Available at <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/business/research/briefings-03/sb03-85.pdf> (last accessed 6 June 2011).

13. Richard Sinnott, 'The electoral system', in Coakley and Gallagher (eds) *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, p. 113.

14. For more detailed treatment of efforts to change the electoral system, see Farrell, 123-125; Sinnott, 113-115 and Herbert, 10-12.

15. Constituency Commission, *Report on Dáil and European Parliament Constituencies 2007*, available at <http://www.constituency-commission.ie/docs/con2007.pdf> (last accessed 6 June 2011), p. 8.

occasions, the PDs, Labour and the Green Party) Fianna Fáil continued its primacy in government.⁷ Thus, the key characteristic of the Irish party system, the dominance of Fianna Fáil, was intact from the 1930s until the 2011 election.

Ireland's brand of proportional representation, the Single Transferable Vote (STV), is unique among electoral systems. Developed in the late 1850s separately by Thomas Hare and Carl George Andrae, it became the preferred option of British electoral reform advocates from the 1880s onwards. Their efforts were almost successful when the 1917 Speaker's Conference on electoral reform recommended the adoption of STV. The motion was lost by a mere seven votes in the House of Commons, but by that time the electoral system had strong support in Ireland.⁸ Home Rule advocates saw it as a mechanism for ensuring the representation of Protestant/Unionist minority interests in a growing nationalist Ireland. In 1918, Thomas Scanlon, an Irish Nationalist Party MP, tabled a private members' bill proposing the adoption of STV for municipal elections in his Sligo constituency.⁹ He argued that it would encourage the Protestant minority to engage more actively in local politics. Scanlon was not alone in his enthusiasm for STV. It was also favoured by Irish nationalist leaders, with Arthur Griffith, the founder of Sinn Féin, among the members of the Proportional Representation Society of Ireland.¹⁰ Scanlon's bill was passed and the first STV election in Ireland was held for local elections to Sligo Corporation in January 1919. It delivered a strong result for the Protestant minority and was upheld as a model of fairness. This discussion took place against the backdrop of sweeping gains by the new nationalist Sinn Féin party in the 1918 general election. A combination of motives – securing minority

Protestant/Unionist representation and stemming the electoral tide of secessionist Sinn Féin – prompted the Lloyd George government to propose STV for all local elections in Ireland, which subsequently took place in 1920.¹¹ It was then provided for in the Government of Ireland Act 1920 that envisaged 'Northern' and 'Southern' parliaments in Ireland.¹² By 1921 and the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty creating a 26-county Irish Free State, STV had been endorsed by nationalists and became settled law following its codification in the new state's 1923 Electoral Act.¹³ Its maintenance as the preferred electoral system was endorsed on three occasions thereafter: in the adoption of the 1937 Constitution, and in the 1959 and 1968 referendums.¹⁴

STV operates in multi-member constituencies, of which there were 43 at the 2011 election, to elect 166 members of Parliament (Teachtaí Dála, TDs). Constituency size varies from three to five seats and is determined by population, with county borders and natural physical features also taken into account in delineating constituency boundaries.¹⁵ In 2011, there were 17 three-seat, 15 four-seat and 11 five-seat constituencies.¹⁶ Constituency size and boundaries are determined by an independent statutory body, the Constituency Commission. Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann comprise the lower and upper houses respectively. Together with the President (elected separately for a maximum of two 7-year terms), they constitute the Oireachtas (parliament). The parameters within which the three institutions operate are set out in Articles 12 to 33 of the Constitution. These constitutional provisions guide the workings of the Oireachtas and the relationship between the houses. The constitution is silent on detailed provisions, such as the

formation of coalition governments and the resignation of a prime minister (Taoiseach) following defeat in a vote of confidence.¹⁷ The functions of the Dáil and Seanad are similar to those of other Westminster-style parliamentary democracies: the lower house is the primary legislative body while the upper house can propose, delay and amend laws. The government is formed from the majority party, or majority coalition, returned after an election, and requires parliamentary assent to come into effect.

STV is an electoral system that provides a proportional result and also allows voters to choose their constituency representatives. From the perspective of the voter, STV is quite straightforward. Candidates are listed alphabetically on the ballot paper, and voters mark their first choice candidate with the number 1, and then continue to rank other candidates in order of choice (2, 3, 4 and so on). Some voters indicate their preferred candidate only, ignoring all others on the ballot. Others rank some or all candidates in order of decreasing preference. These preferences are transferred from one candidate to another as the ballots are counted. While each voter has one vote, by indicating a ranking of candidates, the voter is in effect instructing the returning officer what to do with that vote. While voters have the option of ranking all candidates on the ballot paper, in practice the average number of preferences indicated is about four.¹⁸ ■

16. Government of Ireland, *Electoral (Amendment) Act, 2009*, (number 4 of 2009), available at <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/pdf/2009/en.act.2009.0004.pdf> (last accessed 6 June 2011).

17. Michael Gallagher 'The changing constitution' in Coakley and Gallagher, *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, 2010, pp. 76-77.

18. David Farrell, *Electoral Systems*, p. 126-136 explains how an STV count works using examples from the 2007 election; see also Richard Sinnott 'The electoral system' in Coakley and Gallagher, *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, pp.115-124.

Ballot paper 1

Ballot Paper

VOTE IN ORDER OF PREFERENCE
VOTE FOR AS MANY OR FEW CANDIDATES AS YOU WISH

1	Anderson Anita	Fine Gael	1
2	Hepworth Barbara	Labour	2
3	Jones Alan	Fianna Fáil	6
4	O Driscoll Anthony	Independent	7
5	Smith Emily	Fine Gael	4
6	Smithson Michael	Sinn Féin	3
7	Sydney James	Fianna Fáil	5

Ballot paper 2

Ballot Paper

VOTE IN ORDER OF PREFERENCE
VOTE FOR AS MANY OR FEW CANDIDATES AS YOU WISH

1	Anderson Anita	Fine Gael	1
2	Hepworth Barbara	Labour	
3	Jones Alan	Fianna Fáil	
4	O Driscoll Anthony	Independent	
5	Smith Emily	Fine Gael	
6	Smithson Michael	Sinn Féin	
7	Sydney James	Fianna Fáil	

Background to the 2011 election

1. <http://www.rte.ie/news/2008/1221/banks.html>

2. For a comprehensive overview of the Irish economic crisis, see Michael Lewis, 'When Irish Eyes are Crying', *Vanity Fair* March 2011, available at <http://www.vanityfair.com/business/features/2011/03/michael-lewis-ireland-201103#gotopage1>

3. Brian Dowling, 'Payback time' in Deirdre McCarthy (ed.) *The Week in Politics Election 2011 & the 31st Dáil*, Dublin: RTE Publishing, p. 24. Reporting resistance to the presence of IMF and ECB officials, see Kitty Holland 'Echoes of Swiftian proposal on streets outside' available at <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/ireland/2011/0715/1224300763599.html>

4. 'Statement by Green Party leader John Gormley announcing that the party can no longer remain in government', RTE News 23 January 2011, available at <http://www.rte.ie/news/2011/0123/statement.html>

5. 'Taoiseach Brian Cowen calls time on political career', *The Daily Telegraph*, 1 February 2011, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/ireland/8294942/Taoiseach-Brian-Cowen-calls-time-on-political-career.html>

6. 'Willie O'Dea accuses Limerick running mate of "dishonest tricks"', *Limerick Leader*, 25 February 2011, available at http://www.limerickleader.ie/news/local/willie_o_dea_accuses_limerick_running_mate_of_dishonest_trick_1_2447173; 'Irish general election turns into slanging match with parties divided', *The Guardian*, 25 February 2011, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/25/irish-general-election-parties-divided>

The 2011 election was called in an atmosphere of economic crisis, government instability and a hostile public mood. Although an election need not have been held until 2012, an economic recession since 2008, a sharp rise in unemployment, a severe slump in the property market and a series of banking scandals made continuation in government untenable for the Fianna Fáil-Green coalition. A critical moment in this unfolding drama was on 29 September 2008, when, following a run on Irish bank deposits, the government took a decision to guarantee all deposits and liabilities in Irish banks. The recapitalisation or 'bailout' of Ireland's three major banks was initially set at EUR5.5 billion.¹ Within two years, the bill was over EUR46 billion, tax receipts declined and a deficit of EUR20 billion opened in public finances. The state was effectively bankrupt.² Amid repeated public denials, the government began negotiations on a EUR85 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank. When Ajai Chopra led a delegation of international financial officials into the Department of Finance, he was warmly greeted by passers-by.³ With an opinion poll rating of 15%, Fianna Fáil was blamed for crony capitalism and profligate spending during the Celtic Tiger years.

A portend of the public mood was evident in late November 2010 in a by-election in Donegal South-West, a traditional Fianna Fáil stronghold. Sinn Féin won the vacant seat, while Fianna Fáil's share of the vote fell from 50% to 21%. Taoiseach Brian Cowen's leadership of Fianna Fáil and of government was increasingly questioned, and the opposition Labour and Fine Gael parties sought to collapse the government and precipitate an election. In late January 2011, Green Party ministers resigned from office, claiming that 'continuing doubts [about the FF party leadership], the lack of communication,

and the breakdown in trust' had led them to finally run out of 'patience' with their coalition partner.⁴ On February 1, Brian Cowen requested President McAleese to dissolve the Dáil, having announced his own retirement from political life the previous day.⁵ The election date was officially set for February 25.

Parties moved quickly to select candidates, and by close of nominations on 9 February, 567 candidates declared an interest in seeking a Dáil seat. In a desperate effort to maximise seat retention, Fianna Fáil fielded single candidates in 19 of the 43 constituencies. The strategy resulted in highly-publicised rows between incumbent competitors in a number of constituencies and reflected the extent of disarray in the legendary Fianna Fáil electoral machine.⁶ In contrast, Fine Gael put forward 104 candidates so as to capitalise on the unpopularity of the outgoing government. Labour also increased its candidate numbers, while independent candidates and political aspirants from other parties constituted over 200 candidates, more than double that of 2007 (Table 1).

Table 1 Candidates in 2007 and 2011 elections (n)

	2007	2011	Change 07/11
Fianna Fáil	106	75	-31
Fine Gael	91	104	13
Labour	50	68	18
Green	44	43	1
Sinn Féin	41	41	0
Others	50	33	-17
Independents	90	202	112
Total	470	567	96

Source: Constituency turnouts 2011 in RTE *The Week in Politics Election 2011*, p. 15.

The parties' constitutional reform proposals

Scandal has proved a crucial driver to far-reaching reform. Constitutional, or more widely political, reform featured in the proposals of all main parties in 2011. As in Britain's General Election the previous year, the theme was an effort by politicians to acknowledge and respond to public disillusionment with elected representatives and political processes.

In addition to the exposure of poor government in economic and financial matters, Irish politics had thrown up a long string of scandals. These ranged from TD expenses scandals –which precipitated the resignation of the Ceann Comhairle (Speaker) in 2009¹ and embroiled a Fianna Fáil Senator in controversy² – to a former government minister being accused of tax evasion and political corruption.³ These individual instances of corrupt political behaviour fuelled public disillusionment with politicians and the political process that found expression in calls for reform of the electoral system, scrutiny of TDs' expenses claims, and constitutional reform more generally. The idea was taken up by the general public through phone-ins to popular radio programmes. Among the most frequently endorsed reforms by the public were an electoral system change, alterations to politicians' terms and conditions of service, and a new constitution.

Constitutional review was a recurrent theme in political party manifestos, varying from a full-blown reform of the Constitution put forward by Labour and Sinn Féin, to Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil's more modest proposals to reform some political and institutional processes. Fianna Fáil put forward the view that radical reform of the procedures for choosing and operating parliament and government was essential for sustaining the political system and the most important reforms 'relate to the roles of members of parliament and government,

their work, and the system for electing them'.⁴ In terms of the electoral system, Fianna Fáil was critical of STV for encouraging perpetual campaigning and distracting TDs from the tasks of legislating and scrutinising government. The party suggested the introduction of a mixed system of single-seat constituencies elected through STV, and a top-up national list to ensure proportionality – a variant on the Additional Member System used to elect the Scottish Parliament. This proposal, according to the party's manifesto, had the merit of retaining a direct link between TDs and their constituencies, while ensuring that parliamentary politics was not dominated by local considerations. Fianna Fáil was attempting, then, to retain the STV advantage of localist representation (a traditional party strength) balanced with a national politics brief for other elected members. The party also proposed to gender balance the national list, though it did not mention gender-balancing constituency representatives. It promised to submit all constitutional reforms, including electoral system change, to a Citizen's Assembly for consideration. In addition to fundamental electoral system reform, Fianna Fáil offered to introduce extensive immediate

parliamentary and cabinet changes so as to improve oversight of the public sector, increase the level and quality of TD engagement in legislative and budgetary processes, and ensure more constructive Dáil debates. Reforms of the budgetary system, public sector, local authority and state boards, and freedom of information were also mooted. Finally, it committed to introducing a ban on corporate political donations and promised to create an independent electoral commission to run elections, maintain the electoral register, and encourage maximum electoral turnout.

Fine Gael's political reform policy, entitled

1. 'O'Donoghue to quit in expenses scandal', *Irish Independent*, 7 October 2009, available at <http://www.independent.ie/national-news/odonoghue-to-quit-in-expenses-scandal-1905981.html> (last accessed 6 June 2011).

2. 'Ivor Callely file sent to DPP', *The Irish Times*, 28 April 2011, available at <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/breaking/2011/0428/breaking55.html> (last accessed 6 June 2011).

3. The Moriarty Tribunal, was a public inquiry into the financial affairs of former Fianna Fáil Taoiseach Charles J. Haughey and former Fine Gael government minister, Michael Lowry. It established that these men, along with other politicians and leading businessmen, had engaged in significant tax evasion. Its final report was issued in March 2011, after the election. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moriarty_Tribunal for an overview (last accessed 7 June 2011).

4. Fianna Fáil *Real Plan, Better Future: Part 3 Reform of Politics and Government*.

A New Politics, was heralded as its 'most ambitious programme for political reform since the 1930s'. It suggested that the failures caused by a cosy, cartel, political culture of politicians, bankers and developers were facilitated in part by political system weakness. It identified four aspects: a highly centralised state with little oversight, an over-powerful Executive that ignored the Dáil, a proliferation of unaccountable state agencies along with a social partnership model that excluded a role for parliament, and finally, an outdated budgetary and fiscal system. In its *New Politics* programme, Fine Gael promised to introduce five essential reforms: a single chamber parliament; reducing the number of TDs to 146; a significantly strengthened Dáil committee system empowered to hold the government to account, with a reformed legislative system; a vote in presidential elections for Irish citizens living abroad along with a transparent system of political funding and a petitions system; and an Open Government Bill. In addition to these fundamental reforms, Fine Gael offered a stronger local government system, and a decentralised public sector.

The cornerstone of the party's reform proposals was a package of major constitutional changes to be voted upon in a referendum on Constitution Day, within a year of assuming office. This multiple referendum would ask voters to approve a single chamber legislature along with other constitutional changes affecting all institutions of the State – the Executive, Dáil, Presidency and judiciary. Prior to voting on constitutional reform, Fine Gael promised to establish a Citizens' Assembly within its first one hundred days of government, to consider what additional changes to those already proposed by the party should be introduced, and to make recommendations on electoral system reform,

with particular attention to the suitability of a mixed member system. In addition, the Citizens' Assembly would be invited to consider how the representation of women in politics might be increased, though it stopped short of advocating gender quotas. Finally, an extensive reform of the public sector, including timetables for delivery of services, was presented as an effort to combat the localism prevalent in Irish politics. The commitment to creating a Citizens' Assembly with a brief to advise the government on political and electoral reform was reiterated by Taoiseach Enda Kenny in the Dáil shortly after the election.⁵ In the meantime, an independent initiative, 'We the Citizens' held regional civic meetings culminating in a national Citizens' Assembly in late June 2011 that deliberated on economic, social, educational and political reform issues.⁶

Labour's election manifesto heavily featured reform, and opened with the promise that 'Ireland will never again be vulnerable to the kinds of abuses of corporate and political power that have risked our country's sovereignty'.⁷ It sought to end the link between money and politics, and the culture that bought access to power. In reforming government, it offered a Constitutional Convention to draft a new constitution for Ireland. In addition, it mooted the prospect of a single-chamber parliament with strong legislative and oversight powers, removing the need for the Seanad. Alongside these constitutional reforms, Labour also proposed measures to ensure greater accountability of government ministers and senior civil servants, reform of local government, more effective public service management and reform of social protection and policing. Sinn Féin also picked up the theme of 'crony capitalism' and public disillusionment in a section of its manifesto entitled 'Towards a New Republic'.⁸

5. <http://debates.oireachtas.ie/Dail/2011/05/25/00007.asp> (last accessed 7 September 2011).

6. http://www.wethecitizens.ie/news/article/national_citizens_assembly_underway (last accessed 7 September 2011).

7. Labour Party, *One Ireland: jobs, reform, fairness. Election Manifesto 2011*, p. 42. Available at <http://www.labour.ie/manifesto/> (last accessed 7 June 2011).

8. Sinn Féin, *There is a better way. Sinn Féin General Election Manifesto 2011*, pp. 33-34. Available at <http://www.sinnfein.ie/contents/20087> (last accessed 7 June 2011).

Similarly to those of Labour, the Sinn Féin proposals offered a constitutional forum, this time on an all-island basis, to draft a new constitution for a 32-county Republic. It suggested reform of the electoral system along the lines of one-third of TDs to be elected by means of a list system, and two-thirds from six-seat constituencies using the current electoral method, STV. It also suggested abolition of the Seanad, greater accountability of the government to parliament, and automatic membership of the Oireachtas to the 18 MPs from Northern Ireland.

The constitutional and political reform proposals by political parties were broadly similar in responding to the popular mood. Consistent themes included formal citizens' engagement in a constitutional review process, strengthening legislative oversight of the executive, changes to the electoral system, enhancing local government, regulation of lobbyists and reform of the public sector. Abolition of the Seanad was mooted by all parties, as was reducing the number of TDs in the Dáil while increasing women's representation. Reducing the number of state boards and quangos was another recurring theme. Overall, the unusual interest in political and constitutional reform shown by parties was a response to the general public view of politics as corrupt and dysfunctional. Indeed, this desire by citizens for public participation in reform was evident in the plethora of civic groups advocating political and constitutional change – *We the Citizens* movement, *50/50 Campaign*, *Political Reform* and business magnate, Dermot Desmond – to name but a few. All had a significant Internet presence, ■

Election results and outcomes

The public anger directed at the outgoing government was such that the electorate turned out to vote in greater numbers than in 2007, up from 67% to 70%. The highest turnout since 1987, it represented an increase of 157,901 voters, even though the electorate as a whole had grown by only 87,851. The three-seat, mainly rural Roscommon-South Leitrim constituency recorded a record 79% turnout, while the lowest poll going was in the urban four-seat Dublin South East constituency, where 61% of the electorate cast their ballot.

In this election, voters broke the eight-decade dominance of Fianna Fáil on Irish politics and brought about the electoral demise of the Green Party. The beneficiaries were the opposition parties and independents, all recording unprecedented levels of support and seat gains. Table 2 shows the extent of party seat change at the 2011 election

Table 1 Seat results of 2007 and 2011 elections compared

	2007	2011	Change on 2007
Fianna Fáil	78	20	-58
Fine Gael	51	76	25
Labour	20	37	17
Sinn Féin	4	14	10
Green Party	6	0	-6
Progressive Democrats	2	0	0
Others	5	19	14
Total	166	166	

Source: *The Irish Times*, Verdict 2011, 28 February 2011, p. 48 and Coakley and Gallagher, *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, p. 440.

Voter disillusionment with Fianna Fáil resulted in its placement as the third party in the

state, after both Fine Gael and Labour.

This outcome, though foretold with some consistency in opinion polls from November 2010 onwards, shocked the party. Fine Gael unseated Fianna Fáil as the dominant party in the political system for the first time in its history, increasing its representation from 51 to 76 seats. Labour, too, had a good election, returning with 37 seats, 17 more than in 2007 and four more than its previous best record in 1992. Sinn Féin ran a strong campaign based on opposition to the bailout that appealed to the disaffected public mood and won 10 additional seats, bringing its representation in the Dáil to 14. Of the 'Others', a number of parties fought the election under the banner of the United Left Alliance, with the People Before Profit Alliance and Socialist Party winning two seats each, and the Workers and Unemployed Action Group regaining the seat it had lost in 2007.

The returns for Dublin emphasise the extent of Fianna Fáil's annihilation. Labour displaced it as the pre-eminent party in the city, and with 18 seats, consigned Fine Gael into second place in terms of seat share in the capital city's 12 constituencies. Indeed, the trend in Dublin was distinctly left-leaning after this election. Of the capital's 47 seats, Labour, Sinn Féin, the United Left Alliance and two left-inclined independents hold a clear majority of 28 seats. Fianna Fáil's dramatic loss of vote, plummeting from 39% in 2007 to 13%, resulted in the party losing 18 of its 19 seats. Some months later, with the death of former Minister for Finance, Brian Lenihan, the party lost all of its Dublin representation.

It was a good election for independent candidates, aided by the swing away from Fianna Fáil and thanks to the scope for preferential voting that STV allows. High-profile independent politicians returned to

the Dáil, including Michael Lowry (Tipperary North)¹, Finian McGrath (Dublin North Central) and Maureen O'Sullivan (Dublin Central). Newcomers included the colourful Luke 'Ming' Flanagan (Roscommon-South Leirim) and equally flamboyant developer Mick Wallace (Wexford) along with former stockbroker and long-serving Senator, Shane Ross (Dublin South).

The extent of change in party fortunes since the previous election in 2007 is evident in party first preference votes (Table 3).

Table 2 First preference vote for parties 2007 and 2011

	2007	2011	Change 07/11
	%	%	%
Fianna Fáil	41.6	17.4	-24.3
Fine Gael	27.3	36.1	8.4
Labour	10.1	19.4	9.2
Sinn Féin	6.9	9.9	3.0
United Left			
Alliance	0	2.6	2.6
Green Party	4.6	1.8	-2.8

Source: *The Irish Times*, Verdict 2011, 28 February 2011, p. 48.

The election result for Fianna Fáil had been predicted in opinion polls from the previous November, when the party consistently registered around 17% support. Proportionally, the party obtained fewer seats than its first preference share would suggest – 20 instead of 29. This disproportional result indicates that in assigning a preferential order to candidates, voters ranked Fianna Fáil candidates in low positions or ignored them altogether. During the count, then, Fianna Fáil candidates were not in a position to pick up preferences from other party candidates, or were too far down

the ballot to turn transfers into seats. This pattern indicates the strength of anti-Fianna Fáil feeling among voters, acknowledged by the new party leader, Micheal Martin, when he admitted that the Fianna Fáil brand was 'toxic' for the public. As a consequence, Fianna Fáil no longer has a representative in every constituency. The depth of the party's loss is evident no matter what dimension is analysed. To begin, the party ran 30 fewer candidates than in 2007, and its 76 contenders were not sufficient, even if given the most propitious circumstances, for the party to win an overall majority.² Thirty-five Fianna Fáil incumbents lost their seats to other parties. Its largest vote drop was in the three-seat Dublin North West constituency, where Fianna Fáil support declined by 37% and the party lost its two seats to Labour and Sinn Féin. The party's political dynasties were also swept away: Mary Coughlan (Donegal South East), Sean Haughey (Dublin North West), Mary O'Rourke (Longford-Westmeath), Mary Hanafin (Dun Laoghaire), and cousins Chris and Barry Andrews (Dublin South East and Dun Laoghaire) – all with a long family tradition of political service – failed to be returned. Regionally, the party registered significant losses across the board. It was reduced to single-digits in the four regions, underlining further the extent of the party's collapse. However, as David Farrell points out, the Fianna Fáil loss was not only a result of low first preferences. It was exacerbated by the decline in supporter votes for all party candidates in a constituency. The extent of internal party loyalty, a defining feature of Fianna Fáil voter behaviour, declined from 67% in 2007 to 58% in 2011 – indicating the scale of division within the party on candidate selections.³ Although this was the first election in which voter attachment to Fianna Fáil weakened significantly, it can be seen as part of an emerging pattern of increased

1. On 31 March, following judicial tribunal findings that Lowry was guilty of gross corruption and tax evasion, members of the Dáil voted unanimously for Michael Lowry to resign his seat. A file on Lowry's financial affairs was passed to the Director of Public Prosecutions, and his financial transactions are also under investigation by the Criminal Assets Bureau.

2. 'Soldiers of Destiny fall victim to voter vengeance', *The Irish Times*, 28 February 2011, p. 20.

3. David M Farrell, 2011 election: transfer patterns reveal more about Fianna Fáil's electoral meltdown, posted 4 March 2011, available at <http://politicalreform.ie/2011/03/04/2011-election-transfer-patterns-reveal-more-about-fianna-fail%E2%80%99s-electoral-meltdown/> (last accessed 7 June 2011).

voter volatility and declining life-long loyalty to Irish parties. The success of independent candidates in this election is further evidence of the loosening of party affiliations among voters.

Turning to Fine Gael, its fortunes were the mirror image of those of Fianna Fáil. Indeed, the scale of the swing to Fine Gael is indicated by its seat bonus. In strictly proportional terms, Fine Gael was due 59 seats, yet the party obtained 76 seats, a bonus of 17. This result brought it within striking distance of an overall majority (84 seats), and there was some early expectation that it could achieve this historic result.⁴ The transfer-friendliness of Fine Gael at this election can be seen when compared with its 1973 and 1982 results. In 1973, the party obtained a similar share of first preferences (35.1%) as in 2011, which translated into 54 seats. In the 1982 (November) election, although the FG first-preference vote reached 39%, this converted into 70 seats.⁵ In the 2011 election, then, Fine Gael was the major beneficiary of transfers from supporters of other parties, particularly Labour and Green Party voters.

Strong transfers and high first-preference votes alone do not fully explain how Fine Gael, with 38% of the vote, won 46% of the seats. The third ingredient in the winning formula was the disciplined vote management practised by Fine Gael candidates. It is well known that the geographical distribution of candidates matters in the Irish electoral system. This is carefully managed by party strategists. Furthermore, as Adrian Kavanagh and colleagues have shown, candidates receive their maximum support from voters in the area closest to their political base – the ‘friends and neighbours’ effect.⁶ The territorial distribution of canvassing can cause a great deal of friction among candidates, and breaches of these

arrangements are not unusual in candidates’ quest for every possible vote. In this election, Fine Gael candidates showed considerable discipline in adhering to the vote-management arrangements. The party benefited accordingly, winning an unprecedented four seats out of five in Mayo, and three seats out of five in Carlow-Kilkenny, Cavan-Monaghan, Dublin South and Wicklow. The Fine Gael electorate was also disciplined, with two-thirds of them supporting other candidates of the party after the first preference vote.⁷

The Labour party also enjoyed the most successful election result in its history. Nonetheless, there was a glimmer of disappointment that the party did not maintain its top poll position of 33% support, ahead of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, recorded at the end of September 2010.⁸ As the election campaign progressed, Labour suffered as the public swung behind Fine Gael. The final poll taken four days before the election recorded Labour at 19%, which accurately predicted its share of the vote. The party won two seats in each of six Dublin constituencies, an unprecedented achievement. Labour candidates benefited from transfers from Fine Gael (28%), Sinn Féin (23%) and Green Party (22%) voters, boosting their seat-take to an extra five seats beyond their proportional allowance.

The other big success featured Sinn Féin, independent and small party candidates. Sinn Féin’s poll ratings in the previous two years hovered in the 9-11% range, and on the eve of the election registered 11%. This closely reflected its 10% share of first preferences. Returned with 14 seats, the result was a triumph for a party that had faced the election with only four TDs, one of whom stood aside to enable party leader, Gerry Adams, to contest in the border constituency of Louth. Adams topped the poll and was elected on

4. ‘Poll boost for Kenny as Fine Gael on course to lead next government’, *The Irish Times*, 3 February 2011, p. 1.

5. Coakley and Gallagher, *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, Appendices 2b and 2c, pp. 439-440.

6. Adrian Kavanagh, Gerard Mills and Richard Sinnott, ‘The geography of Irish voter turnout: A case study of the 2002 General Election’, *Irish Geography* 37:2, 2004, pp. 177-186.

7. ‘Soldiers of Destiny fall victim to voter vengeance’, *The Irish Times*, 28 February 2011.

8. ‘The Irish Times Ipsos MRBI Poll, Table III: Party support levels’, *The Irish Times*, 21 Feb 2011, p. 11.

the first count along with Fergus O'Dowd of Fine Gael. Party vice-president, Mary Lou McDonald, finally won a seat in the competitive Dublin Central constituency, while newcomer to national politics, Sandra McLellan, became the first female TD in Cork East since 1979. Indeed, the theme of oppositional politics worked to secure seats in parliament for many independent and small party candidates. Under the banner of United Left Alliance, 18 candidates campaigned on a platform of opposition to property taxes and welfare cuts, along with an end to developer and banker bailouts. The Alliance secured five seats: Joan Collins (Dublin South Central), Richard Boyd-Barrett (Dun Laoghaire), Seamus Healy (Tipperary South), Joe Higgins (Dublin West) and Clare Daly (Dublin North). The 11 candidates elected as independents represent a wide range of ideological views. Some are disaffected Fianna Fáil members, described as belonging to the Fianna Fáil 'gene-pool', and include Mattie McGrath (Tipperary South), Michael Healy-Rae (Kerry South) and Tom Fleming (Kerry South). Others are clearly of a left-leaning disposition: Finian McGrath (Dublin North Central), Catherine Murphy (Kildare North) and Maureen O'Sullivan (Dublin Central).

The other big loser in this election was the Green Party. It went into the election with six incumbents, all of whom were defeated, leaving the party without any Dáil representation for the first time in 22 years. Its only elected representatives after this election are three county councillors and 10 town councillors. Former TD Eamon Ryan believed that their support of an unpopular government caused their defeat, while his colleague, Paul Gogarty, placed the blame on voters who did not want to hear the environmental message.⁹ However, the more convincing reason for Green Party decline is its association in

government with Fianna Fáil. It is a well-known feature of coalition governments that the smaller partner/s are open to being punished disproportionately at the ballot box when the mood swings against the major coalition party. On this occasion, the minor Green Party suffered disproportionately from being a partner in a deeply unpopular government. The party will face considerable challenges in rebuilding, given its small membership and tiny activist base. ■

9. 'Regroup and rebuild is already the Green mantra after election wipeout', *The Irish Times*, Feb 28, p. 13.

Accountability: Hiring and firing governments under STV

This election was all about calling an unpopular government to account for its failure to govern effectively and for the consequences of Fianna Fáil's profligacy over a longer period. The campaign, during which Fianna Fáil candidates and activists encountered an unprecedented mood of outrage directed against them was a harbinger of the election result – a catastrophic loss of 58 seats. As earlier discussed, this seat loss was accentuated by the operation of STV: Fianna Fáil did not attract cross-party transfers and was therefore not in a position to take more than one seat in just over half of constituencies outside of the Dublin region. In the capital city constituencies, the party's vote collapsed, with only one candidate returned – the Finance Minister, Brian Lenihan. The electorate was 'firing' a deeply unpopular government, and 'hiring' an alternative coalition of Fine Gael and Labour. The trend in voting patterns was so strongly in this direction that it is obvious the electorate wanted Fine Gael to replace Fianna Fáil as the dominant party, and were indirectly endorsing a Fine Gael-led coalition.

The intentions of voters are not always as clear cut as on this occasion, however. In 2007, for instance, the electorate returned Fianna Fáil with 78 seats, after a hard-fought campaign. Although Fine Gael increased its seat take from 32 to 51, it was not given sufficient electoral support to form an alternative coalition. In this instance, Fianna Fáil was in a position to form a coalition with parties of its own choosing and the outcome was an oversized coalition that brought the Green Party and the Progressive Democrats into a government supported by four independent politicians. This government had a slim majority in parliament, and its tenure was marked by instability, leadership changes and renegotiated coalition arrangements.

In 2011, there was a stronger association between the election result and the hue of the incoming government. On this occasion, the Irish electorate definitively 'fired' the Fianna Fáil-led government. In the 1973-1987 period, each election resulted in a change of government as single-party Fianna Fáil administrations alternated with a Fine Gael-dominant coalition with Labour and other minor parties.¹ When, in 1989, Fianna Fáil abandoned its core value of single-party government and became available for coalition, the connection between election results and government formation became less predictable. This experience is similar to that faced by politicians after the result of the 2010 UK general election, which failed to produce a clear-cut single party majority government. Indeed, Gallagher has calculated that since 1948 there have been only five instances when the electorate has given majority endorsement to a single party or pre-declared coalition.² The other 14 governments were formed by parliament as minority governments (6) or by party bargaining post-election to form majority coalitions (8). The coalition government formed after the 2011 election is an addition to this latter category.

It could be argued that the general inability of STV to deliver a parliamentary majority for a single party is a weakness of this particular electoral system. The fault could be attributed to the extreme preferential voting permitted under STV. However, this view fails to recognise the fragmentation of the Irish party system since the mid 1980s that has prevented any single party from securing an overall majority. Indeed, as Gallagher's research shows, overall majorities for single parties are rare occurrences in Irish electoral politics.

With voters spreading support across a range

1. Eoin O'Malley and Shane Martin, 2010, 'The Government and the Taoiseach' in Coakley and Gallagher *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, p. 296.

2. Michael Gallagher, 2010, 'The Oireachtas' in Coakley and Gallagher, *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, p. 204-206. The five voted majority governments were: 1957 – Fianna Fáil (53% Dáil seats), 1965 – Fianna Fáil (50% Dáil seats), 1969 – Fianna Fáil (52% Dáil seats), 1973 – Fine Gael/Labour (51% Dáil seats), 1977 – Fianna Fáil (57% Dáil seats), Appendix 3c Composition of governments, 1922-2009 in Coakley and Gallagher, *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, p. 450.

of parties and independents, government formation inevitably becomes more complicated. The fragmentation also influences campaigns, as parties wish to maximise their electoral support and are therefore reluctant to indicate their preferred coalition options until after the results are known. In 2011, Fine Gael and Labour campaigned as separate parties so as to maximise their respective votes. On this occasion, Fine Gael's seat boost was due to the party attracting a significant amount of transfers (29%), giving Fine Gael candidates enough of an edge on their competitors to secure the final constituency seats. Sinn Féin, in contrast, was not transfer-friendly, winning only 7% of preferences.³ Although it won 10% of the popular vote, this turned into 14 Dáil seats (8.5%). While this was a significantly improved performance over its 2007 four-seat result, the party's failure to secure more transfers meant that it lost out in final seat contests.

STV, then, works in favour of parties that attract lower preferences as well as first votes. Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin are generally less likely to receive preference votes from voters of other parties, and in 2011 this resistance to transfers prevented them from maximising their Dáil seat-take. In contrast, Fine Gael and Labour supporters transferred strongly to one another. However, as Donnelly observes, while transferred votes are important, they are not the crucial determinant of seat outcomes. In 2011, only 11 seat results (7%) were different to the first count order. Thus, as in the SMP system, the first count is the vital one, and transfers only slightly modify the first count candidate ranking. Thus, the order in which the candidates are placed after the first round of votes is counted is usually a strong indicator of the final return for a given constituency.⁴

Ultimately, government formation is a matter

of party negotiation after an election rather than received as a direct mandate from voters. This is generally a systems-related function, as individual candidates of whatever party hue (or none) have every incentive to encourage the maximum turnout of his or her supporters. This incentive is related to Ireland's multi-member constituencies that in turn encourage a high level of competition between candidates. In a study of over 23 countries, O'Malley examines what aspect of politics is favoured by high turnouts, and comes to the conclusion that challengers, rather than incumbents, benefit.⁵ In the 2011 general election, this was the case.⁶ The challenging parties of Fine Gael and Labour, along with Sinn Féin and other opposition challengers, were the real beneficiaries of the 70% turnout. In this particular instance, the voters did 'turn out to turf out', to take O'Malley's phrase, and installed an alternative coalition government with the largest overall majority in the history of the state. ■

3. Sean Donnelly, 2011. 'Transfers 2011' in Deirdre McCarthy (ed.) *The Week in Politics Election 2011 & the 31st Dáil*, Dublin: RTE Publishing, p. 65, 68.

4. Sean Donnelly, 2011. 'Seats changed by transfers' in Deirdre McCarthy (ed.) *The Week in Politics Election 2011 & the 31st Dáil*, Dublin: RTE Publishing, p. 69-70.

5. Eoin O'Malley, 'Turn out to turf out?: Effects of changes in election participation rates on election outcomes', *The Open Political Science Journal*, 1, 2008, pp. 31-37. Available at <http://www.benthamscience.com/open/topolis/articles/V001/31TOPOLISJ.pdf>. (last accessed 7 June 2011)

6. 'Fianna Fáil trounced as Fine Gael and Labour set to form coalition', *Guardian* 26 February 2011, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/26/fianna-fail-irish-general-election> (last accessed 7 June 2011).

Localism: Striking the right balance under STV

Localism – a shorthand description of patronage and clientelistic politics in Ireland – is seen as being a particular feature of STV. Multi-member constituencies encourage vigorous competition for votes between members of the same party, and constituency service is seen as a way of distinguishing oneself from party rivals. As a result, candidates and incumbents become assiduous constituency-nurturers, even when holding ministerial office. By all accounts, representatives and constituents interact: it is calculated that an average backbench TD is contacted by over 4,000 people over a five-year Dáil term, and many of the contacts are multiple rather than single instances.¹ The high level of representative/constituent interaction encourages TDs to maintain local drop-in ‘clinics’ across their constituencies, reinforcing the sense of representatives being in touch with their electorate. Indeed, reflecting on the adage that ‘all politics is local’, one observer noted that in 2011:

‘...In Ireland campaigning can be even hyper-local. On the Roscommon side of Athlone, failed Fianna Fáil candidate, Ivan Connaughton, even had a special poster made up for local GAA club St. Brigid’s, who play Crossmaglen on St. Patrick’s Day in the All Ireland Senior Club Championship. The importance of local issues was lost on few candidates, even if showing concern for them was no guarantee of success.’²

Over time, some politicians become known for their highly-efficient constituency service and this reputation assists in their electoral campaigns. Indeed, one could argue that since the removal of the dual mandate, when national politicians also held local council seats, a TD’s constituency service has become an even more important part of his or her representative function. This

form of public service work is often criticized for creating a dependency culture among the electorate and enhancing a politician’s personal profile. Yet, there is enough evidence to show that politicians offer a genuine service in mediating between the individual citizen and the administration. Although cast in the role of ‘persecuting civil servants’, politicians’ representations can deliver public services more efficiently, and effectively, than if left to individual citizens to pursue.³ This may in part be due to a lack of information by members of the public on how to present a case, or on the correct administrative unit to which to address a query or claim. Asking a politician to intercede on one’s behalf is a way for the voter to access the representative’s greater knowledge of the governing system, the rules under which it operates, and the personnel that can respond to a request. Many have argued that the constituency representations of TDs points to a failure in the delivery of public services, along with a failure in educating the public as to their rights, entitlements and access to services. TDs, too, complain about the burden of constituency work, although they receive an allowance for establishing and staffing a constituency office. However, some aspects of constituency nurturing are slowly falling out of favour: the funeral-attending habits of older TDs are viewed as anachronistic behaviour.⁴ Not surprisingly, this view has more purchase in urban constituencies than in the more rural parts of Ireland.

Thus, the intra-party competition fostered by STV can be seen as encouraging close local contact and attentive constituency service. Yet, it is difficult to disentangle the STV effect from the cultural disposition for face-to-face communication. The fact that Ireland is a small place where personal contact is accorded a high social premium reinforces the message

1. Michael Gallagher and Lee Komito, ‘The constituency role of Dáil deputies’ in Coakley and Gallagher (eds) *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, pp. 232-233.

2. ‘#ge11: the road trip analysed’, RTE, available at <http://www.rte.ie/blogs/election2011/2011/03/01/ge11-the-roadtrip-analysed/> (last accessed 7 June 2011).

3. Michael Gallagher and Lee Komito, ‘The constituency role of Dáil deputies’ in Coakley and Gallagher (eds) *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, p. 237.

4. ‘Will Ireland’s politicians ever stop chasing hearses and kissing chickens?’, available at <http://sluggerotoole.com/2011/02/24/will-irelands-politicians-ever-stop-chasing-hearses-and-kissing-chickens/> (last accessed 7 June 2011).

that constituents 'own' their representatives. Even allowing for constituency service, politicians are expected to maintain a visible presence, attending local events and living in the constituency they represent. In urban constituencies, too, the pressure to reside in the area one represents is strong, and can make a difference between winning and losing a seat in marginal cases. It was not in her favour that Ivana Bacik (Labour) ran for election in the liberal-leaning constituency of Dun Laoghaire, yet resided in the equally well-heeled neighbouring constituency of Dublin South East. These expectations – that politicians will maintain a visible local presence and be actively engaged in a wide range of constituency affairs – mean that elected representatives of all parties keep in close touch with their public. Backbench and opposition politicians use parliamentary question time to voice constituency issues, and government ministers are expected to deliver largesse to the area they represent. Fianna Fáil TD and former minister, John O'Donoghue, exemplifies the attention to locality that has become part of the fabric of Irish political culture. In an interview to a local reporter during the campaign in his home constituency of Kerry South, O'Donoghue spoke of his record of constituency service:

'During my time in the Dáil I have worked harder than anybody else on their behalf to such an extent that I have been described as the Minister for Kerry. I have touched positively on every home of every parish, town and village in the constituency, either directly or indirectly over the past 24 years and my record of service is second to none. As a TD I am delighted to have delivered as much as I did.'⁵

Indeed, it is this latter aspect, 'delivering' for the constituency, that creates friction

between representatives. Unless a TD holds government office, the opportunity to materially address an area's needs is restricted. Yet, election campaigns abound with claims from opposition party TDs that representatives from the governing party or coalition have failed to bring economic benefits to the area. These claims are strongly countered by government TDs, with election material emphasising the benefits a local politician has brought to the constituency by dint of belonging to the governing party or parties. The effect of politicians being expected to take care of the constituency leads to election-time promises for more effective representation among competing candidates. In 2011, though, the mood of the electorate was different. Government party candidates tried to remind voters of their past record for fixing street lights, improving local amenities and sorting out welfare entitlements. Their words were displaced by constituents' larger worries – inadequate health-care services for chronically ill children, the emigration of young educated sons and daughters, workers worried about shrinking pay packets.⁶ For the first time in decades, national, rather than local issues dominated on the doorsteps. One poll showed that three of four voters wanted an end to parish pump politics. Antipathy to Fianna Fáil was expressed in handwritten notices on hall doors and property entrances, warning Fianna Fáil canvassers to stay away. Opposition party candidates seldom referred to their local service: instead they addressed larger public concerns through their party manifesto pledges – Fine Gael promised to reform and reduce politicians' pay and regulate corporate donations to parties, Labour offered a one-stop shop for job-seekers and a graduate work-placement scheme, Sinn Féin sought to introduce free hospital and GP care for all. The economic and financial crises, the austerity measures introduced by the outgoing Fianna

5. 'I have touched positively every home of every parish', *Irish Examiner* 9 February 2011, available at <http://www.irishexaminer.com/election-analysis/i-have-touched-positively-every-home-of-every-parish-144662.html> (last accessed 7 June 2011).

6. 'Fianna Fáil becomes party that dare not speak its name', *Guardian*, 10 February 2011, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/blog/2011/feb/10/fianna-fail-becomes-party-dare-not-speak-its-name>, (last accessed 7 June 2011).

Fáil-Green Party coalition, and the impact on people's lives trumped the familiar politics of local provision.

Nonetheless, the card of local provider was played, though in a more muted fashion. Fianna Fáil election workers concentrated on reminding voters of their candidates' record of local service. As one reporter noted:

'...Never mind the guff about national issues; this is how Fianna Fáil plans to save itself. Going bullishly against the tide, the tactic is play up the local, don't mention the brand, ignore the national...the "only" way is to build the campaign around the candidates with roots in the constituencies...'⁷

Independent candidates, too, emphasised their record as local providers. This was especially the case for two of the three outgoing independent TDs that had supported the government. Finian McGrath (Dublin North Central) lobbied for more policing to combat anti-social behaviour in his constituency, and made representations to the local authority on refuse collections for his constituents. While all politicians are expected to favour their constituencies with job-creating projects as part of the 'spoils' of political office, Michael Lowry (Tipperary North) unveiled the most ambitious, and arguably audacious, plan for his constituency in the run-up to the election. He lobbied for a change in the gaming laws to enable a EUR460 million casino and sports centre based on a replica of the White House in Washington be built in his constituency.⁸ These examples of pork-barrel politics were the exception rather than the rule on this occasion. It remains to be seen if this election marks a turning point in the endemic practice of delivering largesse to the constituency by individual politicians. On the one hand, the austerity economics at national level

would appear to offer few opportunities for TDs from the Fine Gael-Labour coalition to direct public projects and funds towards their own bailiwicks. On the other hand, the pressure generated by STV for competitors to distinguish themselves from other representatives suggests that the temptation to engage in pork politics will continue.

The nub of the question, though, is whether STV actually promotes localism, or whether the localist inclinations of Irish politicians is something that would probably exist irrespective of the electoral system in place. Farrell points to Maltese politicians, elected under the same STV system, and shows that their workload is more equally distributed across all aspects of being a representative (constituency work, legislating, other activities) than that of Irish politicians.⁹ He suggests that the excessive attention of politicians to local constituency needs is a consequence of the poor public service infrastructure, particularly in health care and welfare services, and the under-developed nature of local government. These points are also made by Gallagher and Komito, and came up repeatedly on the doorsteps in the 2011 election. Addressing these institutional shortcomings would do much to alleviate the pressure on politicians to serve constituency needs, and would be a more sustainable alternative to the populist solution of changing the electoral system. ■

7. 'The last lap: inside the campaigns', *The Irish Times Weekend Review* 19 Feb 2011, p. 1.

8. 'Michael Lowry's Christmas wish comes true as super-casinos recommended', available at <http://www.thejournal.ie/michael-lowrys-christmas-wish-comes-true-as-super-casinos-recommended-2010-12/> (last accessed 7 June 2011).

9. David M. Farrell, 'Irish electoral reform: three myths and a proposal', 2010, available at http://politicalreformireland.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/irish-electoral_reform-2.pdf (last accessed 7 June 2011).

Gender equality: is Irish politics open to women?

Proportional representation has been described as a facilitator rather than a guarantor of better female representation¹, as no voting system in and of itself can guarantee gender parity in political life.

The breakthroughs made in the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament demonstrate that a system needs to work in tandem with proactive efforts from the parties. The system can open the door, but ultimately the parties have to field the candidates, and voters have to be prepared to back them.

Indeed Ireland, under STV, shares with Britain's House of Commons a reputation for being one of the least woman-friendly political systems in Europe. With women now making up a mere 22% of MPs in the House of Commons², Ireland lags even further behind. In 2011, 25 women (15%) were returned to the Dáil.³ (Tables 4 and 5).

Table 1 Candidates by gender, 2011

Party	Total	Male	Female	% Female
Fianna Fáil	75	64	11	14.7
Fine Gael	104	88	16	15.4
Labour	68	50	18	26.5
Green Party	43	35	8	18.6
Sinn Féin	41	33	8	19.5
Ind/Other	235	210	25	10.6
Total	566	480	86	15.2

Table 2 TDs by gender, 2011

	Seats Won	Male	Female	% Female
Fianna Fáil	20	20	0	0
Fine Gael	76	65	11	14
Labour	37	29	8	22
Sinn Féin	14	12	2	14
Ind/Other	19	15	4	21
Total	166	141	25	15

Throughout the election, the low presence of women candidates and the need for more women in politics were debated in the media and on the doorstep. The '50/50 Group', launched in September 2010 to lobby for equal representation for women in political life, was to the fore in articulating the case for gender equality in Irish politics.⁴ Women's equal representation in politics also found its way into political reform and democracy renewal proposals, though Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil expressed little support for the introduction of gender quotas. However, local councillor, Rebecca Moynihan (Labour), articulated a strong pro-quota view:

'The effect of this lack of representation has far-reaching political implications. Women are the worst hit by the recession, women are more likely to be lower paid public servants, more likely to be on the minimum wage and more likely to be on social welfare. All areas which were attacked by the Fianna Fáil/Green government. In constituencies such as mine, which has high rates of disadvantage, there are large numbers of women-headed households who solely rely on the state for their income. These women are excluded from the workforce by our high childcare costs...We need radical action to get more women into the system because

1. Sarah Childs, 2008 as quoted in Evans, E & Harrison, L; *Candidate Selection in British Second Order Elections: A Comparison of Electoral System and Party Strategy Effects*, 2011.

2. "'Derisory' increase in number of women MPs", *Centre for Women and Democracy* 7 May 2010, available at <http://www.cwfd.org.uk/news/28/61/Derisory-increase-in-number-of-women-MPs> (last accessed 7 June 2011).

3. 'Women members of Dáil Éireann', *Centre for Advancement of Women in Politics*, April 2011, available at <http://www.qub.ac.uk/cawp/irishhtmls/1D1.htm> (last accessed 7 June 2011).

4. <http://5050-group.com/blog/> (last accessed 7 June 2011).

what we have clearly isn't working.⁵

Yet, as voters went to the polls to choose the next government, they could not vote for a female politician of any hue in nine of the 43 constituencies. Indeed, the poor record of political parties in the west of Ireland Clare constituency for fielding women prompted three women to register their candidacies as independents and fight the election under the campaign slogan 'Balance the Ballot'. Explaining their unusual move, Madeline McAleer said:

'Without us there would not have been a woman on the ballot in County Clare. We could not allow that to happen in 21st century Ireland. There are many serious issues in the community, health and business sectors, locally and nationally that need to be addressed by a range of voices.'⁶

The concentrated attention on women's political under-representation during the campaign largely focused on what women could contribute to political life, and what measures were needed to have more women run for election. The issue of quotas was aired with equal measures of resistance and advocacy. The debate was not framed in the context of STV, but around whether the introduction of quotas would distort the 'meritocracy' of political competition. The distinctive characteristics of STV – multi-seat constituencies and vote transfer – did not emerge in this discussion.

Nonetheless, it is instructive to consider these aspects and the gendered patterns they reveal through the 2001 election. First, district magnitude – it has long been known that constituency size can exert a strong influence on women's electoral opportunities. Parties are more likely to field women in constituencies

with a larger district magnitude (i.e. in five-seat rather than three-seat contests). The follow-on argument is that women are therefore more likely to win in larger constituencies, given the lower threshold, or quota, required for election.⁷ These observations have generally held for Irish elections, and 2011 was no exception (Table 6).

Table 3 Women candidates and constituency size

Party	3-seat	4-seat	5-seat	All
Fianna Fáil	3	4	4	11
Fine Gael	3	7	6	16
Labour	5	9	4	18
Greens	4	2	2	8
Sinn Féin	1	2	5	8
Total	16	24	21	61

Table 6 shows that 16 (26%) female candidates ran in three-seat constituencies, with a preponderance of women contesting in the larger 4 and five-seaters. Only Fianna Fáil had a relatively even spread of women across the three district sizes. In its three-seaters, it ran incumbent women with high profiles. The Green Party fielded one-half of its female candidates in three-seat constituencies. In theory, this strategy gave the maximum opportunity for concentrating the party's small vote share around a single individual in the highly-competitive three-seaters. However, for this strategy to convert to a seat, the party flag-bearer would require a high local profile and a considerable individual following beyond the small support a Green Party candidate would usually attract. Labour's pattern of female candidate placement was more similar to that of Fine Gael, with the majority

5. 'Where women are needed #GE11', Tea and Toast, 3 February 2011, available at <http://www.qub.ac.uk/cawp/irishhtmls/TD1.htm> (last accessed 7 June 2011).

6. 'Clare women sign up to stop male-only ballot', *Irish Examiner* 10 February 2011, available at <http://www.irishexaminer.com/election/analysis/clare-women-sign-up-to-stop-male-only-ballot-144790.html> (last accessed 7 June 2011).

7. Richard L. Engstrom, 'District magnitude and the election of women in the Irish Dáil', *Electoral Studies* 6,2 1987, 123-136

contesting four and five-seat constituencies. The electoral intention was to maximise the prospect of intra- and inter-party transfers, while taking advantage of the lower threshold for election in the higher-magnitude districts. Sinn Féin also followed this strategy for the majority of its women candidates. However, it was not a risk-free strategy, as the women running in four and five-seat districts also had running mates, for the most part male. For women candidates there was the danger of finding themselves used as 'sweepers' – garnering votes that might have gone to other candidates – and then transferring to male party candidates.

The question then is, how many women had a clear run as single party candidates? No Fine Gael or Labour women ran as a single party candidate, reflecting the efforts of both parties to maximise their seat gain. A similar pattern appeared for men in Fine Gael – just about every candidate had at least one, if not two, running mates. Things were different for Labour men, though: one third of them ran alone, with the advantage (no intra-party competition) and disadvantage (no guaranteed block of transfer votes on elimination or election of running mate) that single candidacy brings. The picture was more mixed in Fianna Fáil, possibly reflecting the party's efforts to consolidate its vote in light of plummeting support: 27% of women and 19% of men candidates had solo outings. The consideration of party running mates was a moot point for Sinn Féin and the Greens. Their relatively small activist base, along with party-specific electoral considerations, led them to field just one candidate in all, or almost all, 43 constituencies.

The conclusion to be drawn from this discussion, then, is that the decision to field single candidates in multi-member

constituencies depends very much on the party's perception of its electoral fortunes – if these are positive, women candidates will have male running mates. Men's electoral fortunes are not bound to the same extent. Thus, there is an indication of a male-dominant bias in the party selection process that places women candidates at a potential disadvantage. This is not caused by STV, as bias against women candidates can be found in other electoral systems. For instance, running male candidates in single seat constituencies and placing women low on party lists are similar examples of male-gendered selection bias. The problem with the STV system, however, is that, short of candidate gender quotas, it is much more difficult to put compensatory measures in place that redress the tendency to accord women's candidacies less favourable election opportunities.

If district magnitude cannot explain the poor outcomes for female seat-seekers, then we must turn to alternative hypotheses. One factor that is not often examined is the effect of voter change in party preference on women's political representation. In other words, when voters withdraw their support from their previously-preferred party, what effect has it on women candidates? The results of the 2011 election seem to indicate that women are more severely punished than men when the public mood swings against the party. None of Fianna Fáil's women candidates was returned, compared with a return rate of 30% for male candidates. Even when the public favour a party, there is a gender differential in the conversion of candidacies into seats favouring men. Fine Gael male candidates had a 75% chance of being elected, while their female counterparts had slightly less favourable odds of 69%. The same held true of Labour: male candidates had a 58% chance of being elected, while Labour women's

candidate-seat conversion was 44%.

These findings suggest that vote swings can have a disproportionate effect on female candidacies, which is then accentuated by the absence of women candidates and the unpredictability of vote transfers. Nonetheless, there is plenty of room for improvement of women's candidacies, as former TD, Liz O' Donnell, pointed out in an Oireachtas committee hearing on women's political representation:

'The obstacle for women lies with the nomination process. In smaller parties, because there is space, one does not have to unseat a man to be given a nomination. That is where there are opportunities for women.'⁸

Thus, there is an indication of a male-dominant bias in the party selection process that places women candidates at a potential disadvantage. The new Fine Gael-Labour coalition has indicated a willingness to tackle the issue of women's under-representation. Announcing new legislation reforming political donations and party funding, the Minister for the Environment, Phil Hogan, stated his intention to attach a candidate gender quota condition to party funding. Parties will face a penalty of 50% of their public funding if they do not comply with an initial 30% gender quota for the next general election, rising to 40% in seven years.⁹ This measure could address the negative bias against female candidates in political parties. It remains to be seen, though, if it is sufficiently robust to overcome the individual, party and district magnitude advantages enjoyed by Irish male candidates to date. ■

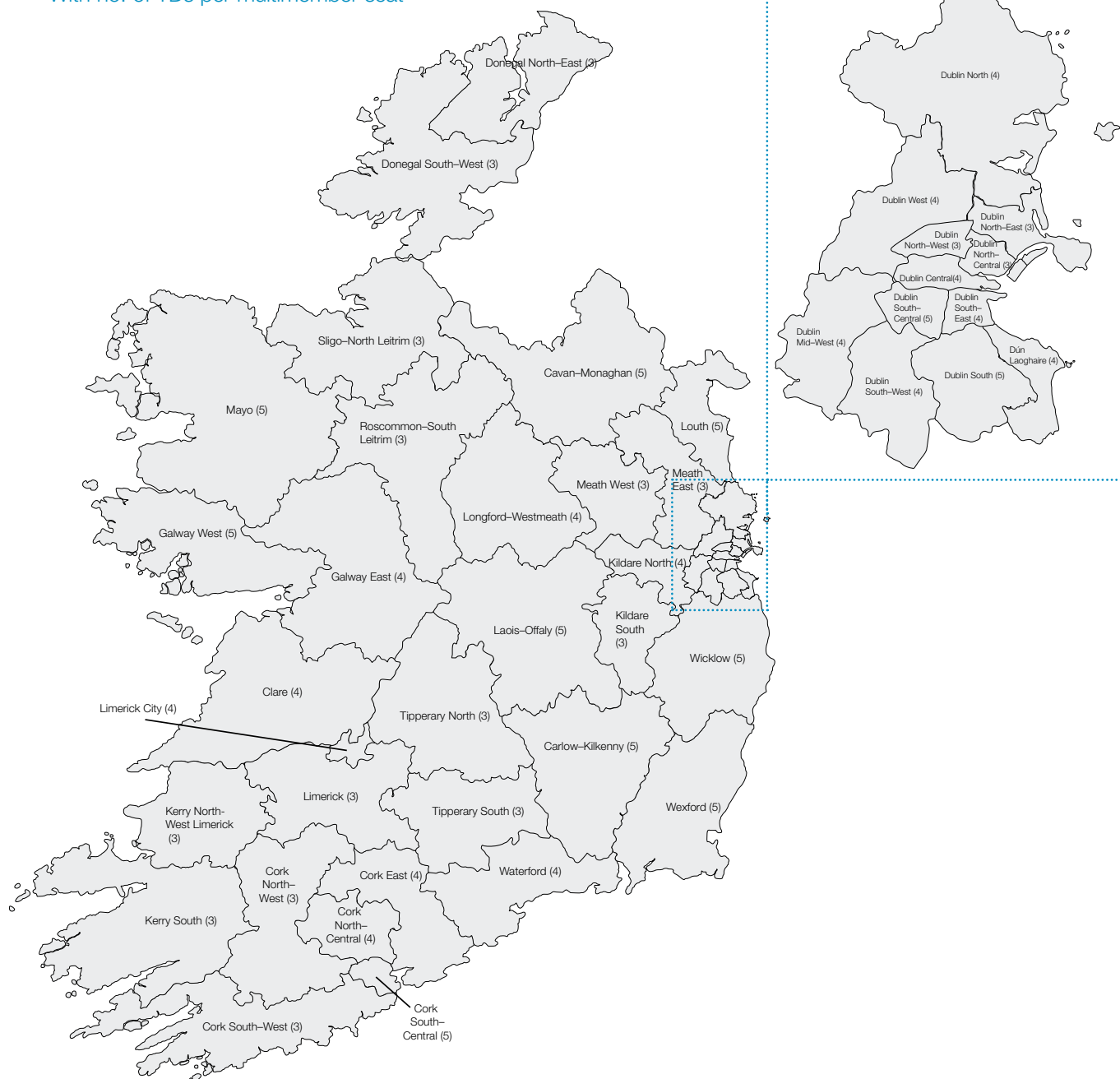
8. Joint Committee on Justice, Equality, Defence and Women's Rights, *Women's Participation in Politics*, October 2009, p. 533.

9. 'Parties to be penalised if number of women does not increase', *The Irish Times* 28 May 2011, available at <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/paperfrontpage/2011/0528/1224297952047.html> (last accessed 7 June 2011); Mary Minihan 'Political gender quota to rise to 40% after election', *The Irish Times* 1 June 2011, available at <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/ireland/2011/0601/1224298207310.html> (last accessed 9 September 2011).























































































Results at a glance

















































































Irish Constituencies 2011

With no. of TDs per multimember seat



Constituency results

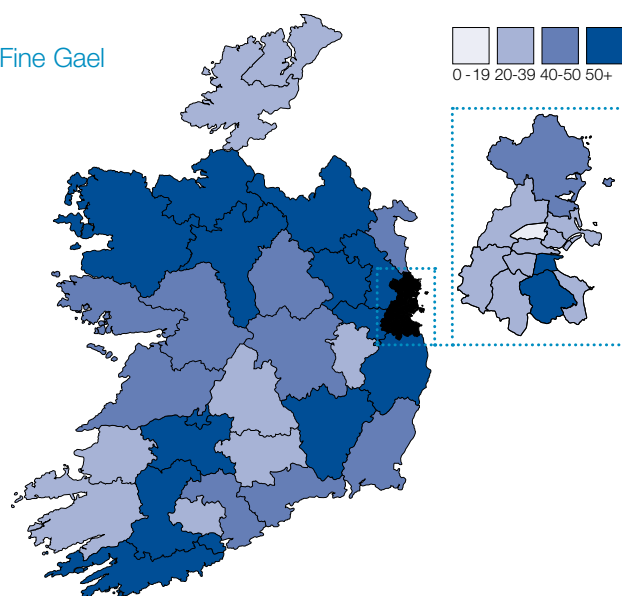
Carlow–Kilkenny	5	    
Cavan–Monaghan	5	    
Clare	4	   
Cork East	4	   
Cork North–Central	4	   
Cork North–West	3	  
Cork South–Central	5	    
Cork South–West	3	  
Donegal North–East	3	  
Donegal South–West	3	  
Dublin Central	4	   
Dublin Mid–West	4	   
Dublin North	4	   
Dublin North–Central	3	  
Dublin North–East	3	  
Dublin North–West	3	  
Dublin South	5	    
Dublin South–Central	5	    
Dublin South–East	4	   
Dublin South–West	4	   
Dublin West	4	   
Dún Laoghaire	4	   

Galway East	4	   
Galway West	5	    
Kerry North–West Limerick	3	  
Kerry South	3	  
Kildare North	4	   
Kildare South	3	  
Laois–Offaly	5	    
Limerick	3	  
Limerick City	4	   
Longford–Westmeath	4	   
Louth	5	    
Mayo	5	    
Meath East	3	  
Meath West	3	  
Roscommon–South Leitrim	3	  
Sligo–North Leitrim	3	  
Tipperary North	3	  
Tipperary South	3	  
Waterford	4	   
Wexford	5	    
Wicklow	5	    

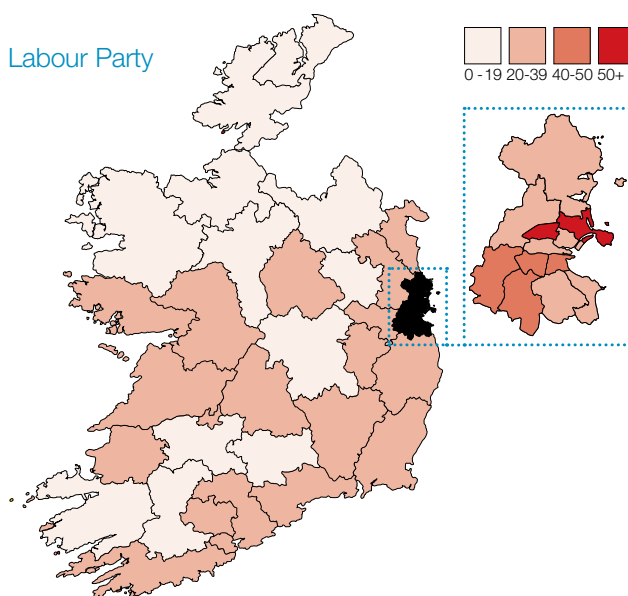


Percentage of seats per constituency, 2011

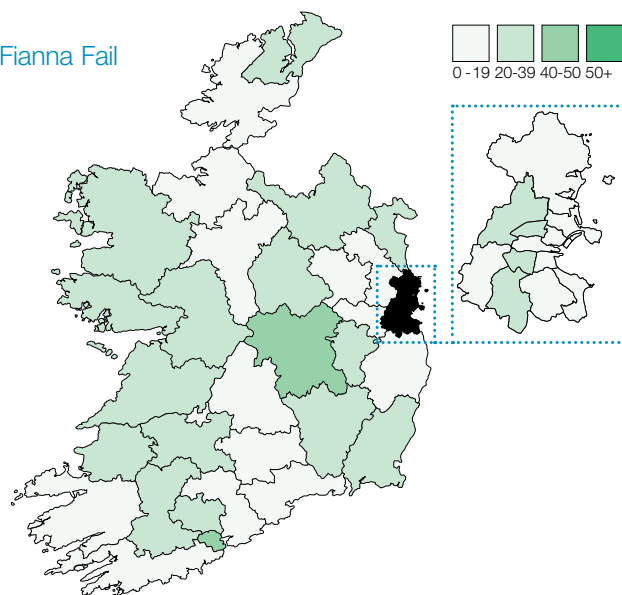
Fine Gael



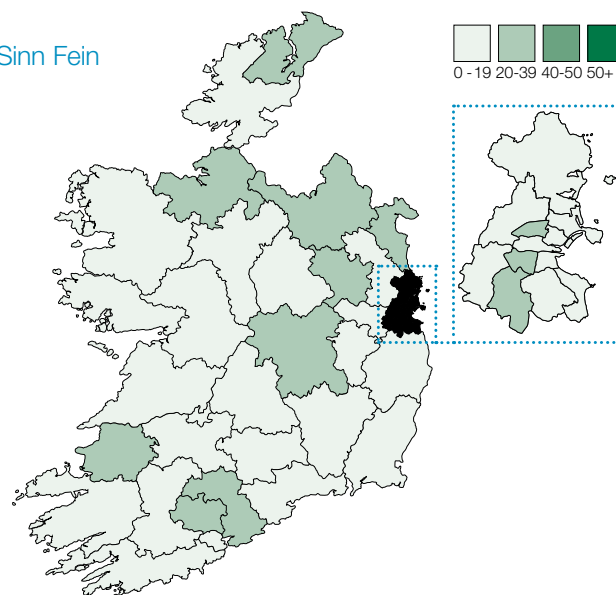
Labour Party

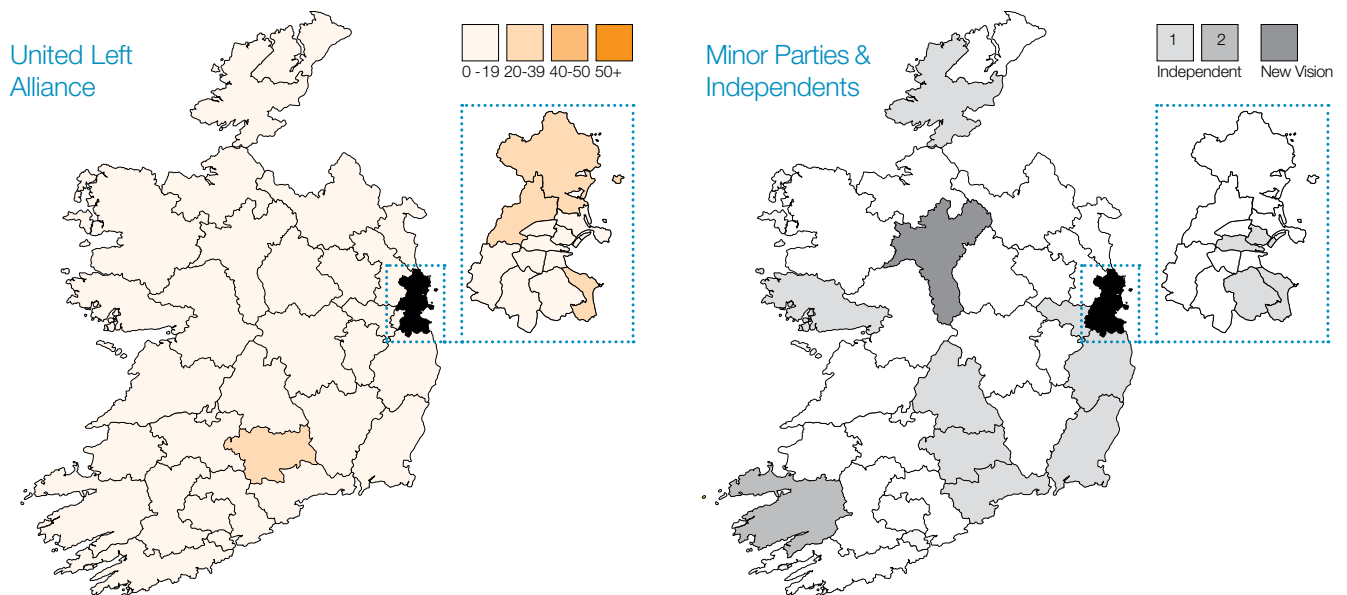


Fianna Fail

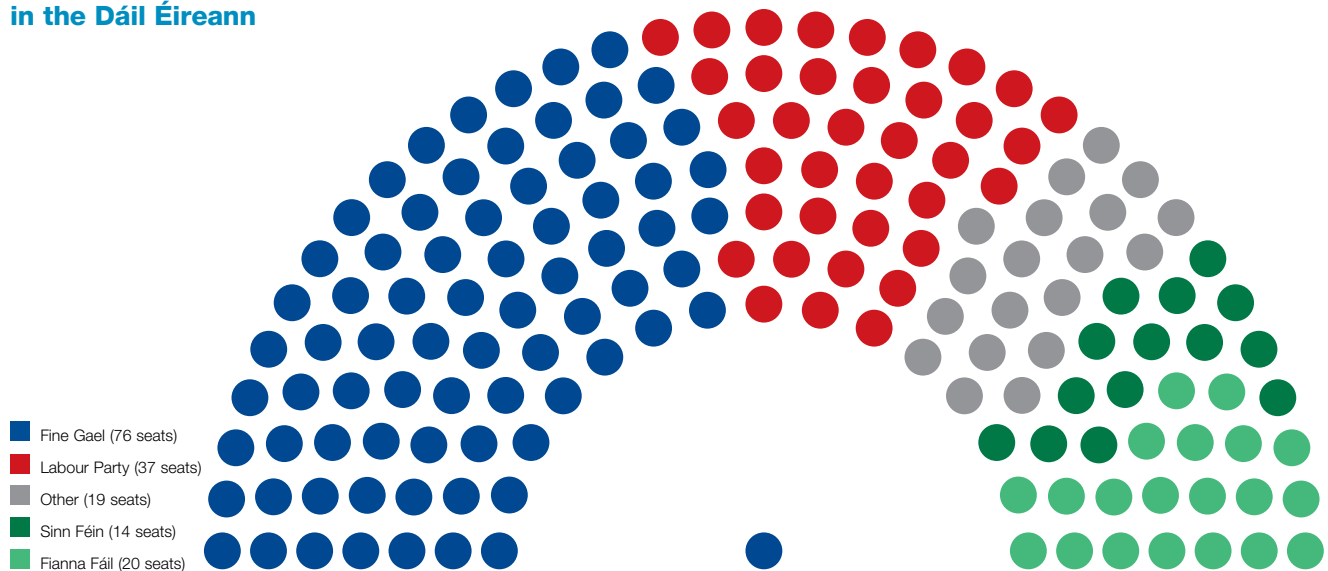


Sinn Fein





The state of the Parties in the Dáil Éireann



STV in Ireland

Seats are allocated under STV on the basis of a 'quota'. This is the number of votes to be reached or exceeded in order to win a seat. The quota is determined by a simple mathematical formula:

$$\frac{(\text{Total Valid Poll} + 1)}{(\text{Seats} + 1)} + 1$$

The total valid poll is the number of votes cast in a constituency, minus the spoiled votes (ballots that do not indicate a clear first choice of candidates, written comments on the ballot paper that could identify the voter, and ballot papers without an official stamp). For this to be determined, all ballots are counted and scrutinised initially, before votes are allocated to the candidates. The quota is calculated as follows:

Total Poll (in a constituency): 60,555

Spoiled votes: 555

Total valid poll: 60,000

Applying the formula above,

$$\frac{(60,000 + 1)}{(5 + 1)} + 1$$

results in a quota of 10,001 votes. This is the threshold that candidates must reach or exceed so as to be elected. In effect, a candidate in a three-seat constituency must secure fractionally more than 25% of the vote to win a seat; in a four-seat constituency the quota is fractionally more than 20% of the valid votes cast; and just over 16% in a five-seat constituency. Successive counting rounds share the excess votes of successful candidates among those remaining in the

field and distribute the votes of eliminated candidates until all seats are filled. The manually conducted process takes about two days to complete, with contentious results taking longer to be resolved. In the 2011 election, protracted recounts were conducted in three constituencies – Wicklow, Galway West, and Laois-Offaly – with the final result known four days after the election.