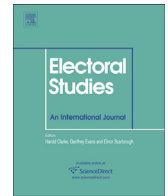




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## An end to “Civil War politics”? The radically reshaped political landscape of post-crash Ireland



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### ABSTRACT

The European debt crisis has impacted on electoral politics in most European states, but particularly in the Republic of Ireland. The severe nature of the economic crash and the subsequent application of austerity policies have brought large fluctuations in political support levels, with the three parties that have dominated the state since its foundation – Fianna Fail, Fine Gael and Labour – all being adversely effected. The extent of these changes is highly controlled both by geography and by class, with political allegiances proving to be highly fluid in certain parts of the state. Growing support levels for left wing parties and groupings, but most notably Sinn Fein, appear to be moving Irish politics away from the old “Civil War” style of politics and bringing it more into line with the traditional class cleavage politics of continental Europe.

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The economic “crash” of 2008 has resulted in a long period of recession and austerity policies in the Republic of Ireland, which has had profound impacts for the Irish political system as well as for economic and social life within the state. Economic austerity policies have reshaped political support patterns in other European states during this time period, with a growing fragmentation of party systems evident, for instance, in states such as Italy (Di Virgilio and Giannetti, 2014) and The Netherlands (Van Holsteyn, 2014). This trend has been counterpointed by a tendency for governments to be formed from the traditionally most dominant parties within those states, as seen in recent Italian, Dutch and German examples (Mader, 2014), although Syriza’s victory in the Greek election of January 2015 offers an example of a new, anti-austerity, party taking power. While government parties have

suffered electoral setbacks in most European states during this period (with the Christian Democrats in Germany proving to be a notable exception), these trends has been particularly evident in the more peripheral states within the European Union (Chari, 2013).

Electoral trends in the Republic of Ireland have mirrored those of other European countries during this period. However, the extent of these changes has been particularly intense in Ireland and threatens to produce the most significant change to the political system since the foundation of the state in 1921. These changes may bring the Irish political system, where the effect of the traditional class cleavage has been relatively muted for much of the state’s history, more into line with its European counterparts, at a point in time when the rise of right-wing populist parties is further undermining the class cleavage in other European states. At the heart of such developments lies a major change in terms of the class composition of support patterns for Irish political parties. This paper will review these changing support trends and assess whether these are pointing to the emergence of a “new politics” in the Republic of Ireland. But this paper will first discuss the nature

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of the Irish political system, as it existed prior to recent political developments.

### 1. The Irish political system and party competition

As opposed to the List systems favoured by most states employing proportional electoral systems, the proportional element in Ireland's single transferable vote (PR-STV) electoral system is based on preferential voting and multi-member constituencies. In this system, voters can give preferences to all of the candidates running in a constituency, or as many as they want. To win a seat in an Irish election, a candidate needs to reach a "quota" at some stage in the series of "long counts" that determine who fills the seats at these elections, or else be one of the last candidates left in the race after all other challengers have been eliminated from the contest. The quota is the smallest number of votes that can be reached only by a sufficient number of candidates to fill the number of seats on offer in a particular constituency contest. If a voter's preferred candidate is eliminated at any stage during these counts, this vote will be transferred to the next highest preference amongst the candidates still remaining in contention for a seat. If a candidate exceeds the quota (and is deemed elected) during the counts, then their "surplus" votes (the number of votes by which they exceed the quota) will also be transferred amongst the candidates still remaining in the race.

Lower preferences can significantly dictate the outcome of election contests in the Republic of Ireland, but vote transfers tend to favour certain types of candidates and parties. Party loyalties often shape these vote transfer patterns, with transfers tending to go to candidates from the same party, although local factors and the effect of personality tend to have a greater bearing on transfer patterns when it comes to second-order election contests, such as local and European elections. Larger parties tend to win a high number of vote transfers as their candidates tend to remain in contention for seats for longer than candidates from the smaller parties do. Certain parties tend to be "transfer-friendly" (attracting high levels of vote transfers), as was the case with the Green Party before entering government in 2007, or "transfer-toxic" (attracting low levels of transfer votes), as is the case with Sinn Féin. The extent to which parties are "transfer-friendly" or "transfer-toxic" does vary across time, however. In certain circumstances, parties may be more transfer-toxic than normal, as was the case with Fianna Fáil and the Green Party at the 2011 General Election.

The degree to which Irish electoral contests are proportional is largely determined by district magnitude levels, with contests tending to be less proportional in constituencies that have smaller number of seats apportioned to them (i.e. three-seat constituencies). In a three seat constituency, a candidate will need to win 25.0% of the valid poll to reach the quota, but a candidate in a ten-seat constituency will only need to reach 9.1% of the vote to exceed the quota. The relatively high proportion of three-seat constituencies for Irish general election contests means that these tend not to be as proportional as contests associated with List systems. However, the absence of a national or regional threshold in this electoral system

means that smaller parties and independent candidates do have a chance of winning representation in this electoral system. Smaller parties can only expect to be successful in their strongest areas, or else in constituencies with very high district magnitude levels. The larger parties and the more "transfer-friendly" parties tend to get "seat bonuses" at most electoral contests. For instance, the largest party at the 2011 General Election, Fine Gael, won 36.1% of the first preference votes, but took 45.8% of the seats in the Irish parliament (Dáil Éireann).

Whyte (1974) portrayed Irish politics as lacking social bases. This over-simplifies the nature of party politics in the Republic of Ireland somewhat, but the political system has lacked the strong cleavage between left-wing and right-wing political parties that characterised politics in most other European states. (In a similar vein to the United States of America, however, the limited class basis to party support patterns in the Republic of Ireland prompted a very strong class dimension to voter turnout patterns, particularly in the more urban areas (Kavanagh, 2002).) The Irish party system has been dominated by two centrist, or centre-right, political parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. These parties emerged out of the opposing factions within the main political division, or cleavage, within Irish politics in the early 1920s, namely the Civil War. The largest left-wing party in the state, the Labour Party, generally won a much smaller share of the vote than that won by these "Civil War parties". As Fig. 1 shows, these "Civil War parties" won at least two-thirds of the votes cast at all general election contests up to 2011, with their combined share of the vote having exceeded the eighty percent level across the period between 1965 and 1982. In what would effectively amount to a "two and a half party" system, once Labour Party support levels were also included, there was little scope left for smaller parties to make any major, or sustained, breakthrough. This scope for smaller parties to develop was further limited by the strength of independent candidates, who often accounted for a large proportion of the votes that were not taken by the three larger parties.

Fianna Fáil was the largest party in the state between the early 1930s and the onset of the economic crisis in 2008, being effectively established as the "natural party of government" over this period (Coleman, 2007: 203). The party was out of government for only twelve full years between the general elections of 1932 and 2011. The electoral strength of Fianna Fáil was largely based on its ability to portray itself as a "catch-all party", which could win relatively high support levels across all areas and all social groups within the state. The party traditionally won its highest support levels in the more rural areas and particularly from areas characterised as having higher proportions of Gaelic speakers, Catholics and small farmers. But Fianna Fáil also succeeded in carving out a significant support base amongst the urban middle classes, while the party also created a large support base amongst the urban working class in the years after its foundation (Sinnott, 1995). By the 1930s Fianna Fáil was attracting the highest level of support from urban working class voters and it would effectively hold this position of dominance amongst the urban working class electorate until the 2009 Local and European Elections.

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