

What Ireland's Election Chaos Means for Britain

By Andy Liu, (HMC '23)

For nearly eighty years, control of the Oireachtas (Irish parliament) has been passed back and forth between two establishment parties - the center-right Fine Gael, the party of current Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar, and the centrist Fianna Fáil. Yet on February 8, the people of Ireland swung in [a third direction](#), giving the popular vote to the leftist and Irish nationalist party Sinn Fein and plunging the government into uncertainty with no party capable of forming a government.

After the dust settled on election day, Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, and Sinn Fein each controlled roughly a quarter of Oireachtas seats - 35, 37, and 37, respectively, with 81 needed for a majority. Since then, Fine Gael has prepared to go into opposition, with Varadkar [resigning](#) his position as Taoiseach. Fianna Fáil has [refused](#) to enter a coalition with Sinn Fein, citing their tax policy and historic links to the IRA, but has been unable to form a coalition otherwise. Finally, Sinn Fein has [attempted](#) and apparently [failed](#) to create a coalition out of an assortment of left-wing parties. This gridlock was put on full display a week and a half later when motions to nominate Varadkar, Sinn Fein leader Mary Lou McDonald, and Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin [all failed](#) by significant margins. This has left Ireland rudderless until a new government can be formed. However, Sinn Fein's electoral success could have significant ramifications on Brexit, Irish unification, and Ireland's relationship with the United Kingdom.

The defining story of the election was Sinn Fein's surge at Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil's expense. In the past, Sinn Fein and its former leader, Gerry Adams, were hindered electorally by their ties to the [Irish Republican Army](#) and its support for pan-Irish nationalism. Because of controversy surrounding Sinn Fein's ties to the IRA and the support of IRA attacks during the Troubles, they consistently finished behind Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil in past elections. However, especially after the ascension of [Mary Lou McDonald](#) to the post of party president two years ago, most voters associate Sinn Fein not with Irish nationalism, but for its support for [left-wing housing and healthcare policies](#). While Leo Varadkar's government has presided over an era of Irish recovery and economic prosperity, with [unemployment and poverty](#) at all-time lows; this has led to soaring [rent prices](#) and a new housing crisis - of which Sinn Fein's policies were perfectly poised to take advantage.

While their party platform has strayed from its ardent nationalism of the past in order to focus more on their left-wing economics, Sinn Féin still strongly [advocates](#) for a “new, agreed, and united Ireland”. Unification, which has [gained support](#) in recent years, has become increasingly possible in recent years, although still far from actually happening. 56% of Northern Ireland [voted to remain](#) in the European Union during the 2016 Brexit Referendum, and Irish unification would allow Northern Ireland to stay in the EU. Additionally, Protestants are likely to [no longer be a majority](#) in Northern Ireland after the 2021 census, a significant demographic shift from Northern Ireland’s creation, which was partially to protect Protestant interests in a majority-Catholic Ireland. If Sinn Féin does enter the government, they will likely [begin preparations](#) for a unification referendum in Northern Ireland, [as mandated](#) by the Good Friday Agreement.

A potential Sinn Féin - Fianna Fáil coalition (which, although currently ruled out by Micheál Martin, has [previously been suggested](#) as a possibility) would pose its own unique strategic considerations. Fianna Fáil's [2019 partnership](#) with Northern Ireland's Social Democratic and Labour Party, combined with Sinn Féin’s strong presence in Northern Irish politics, could be especially dangerous for unionists in Northern Ireland. These election results are only the latest in a string of political hits for unionists - the 2019 [parliamentary election](#) saw the Democratic Unionist Party lose both seats and their coalition partner status, and although DUP leader Arlene Foster has [expressed confidence](#) that support for unification is sufficient to justify holding a referendum, a staunchly pro-unification Ireland could soften the United Kingdom’s stance.

It is unclear if the United Kingdom would ever call a referendum on unification, what the outcome of such a referendum would be, or what the impacts of the referendum would be on Ireland. But one thing is clear: Brexit, combined with the fiercely pro-unification Sinn Féin’s electoral success, have reopened the dialogue surrounding a potential Irish unification. And the success of left-wing policies and [reactions to globalization](#) in Ireland promise domestic changes in Ireland no matter what happens to unification.