

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 have 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.

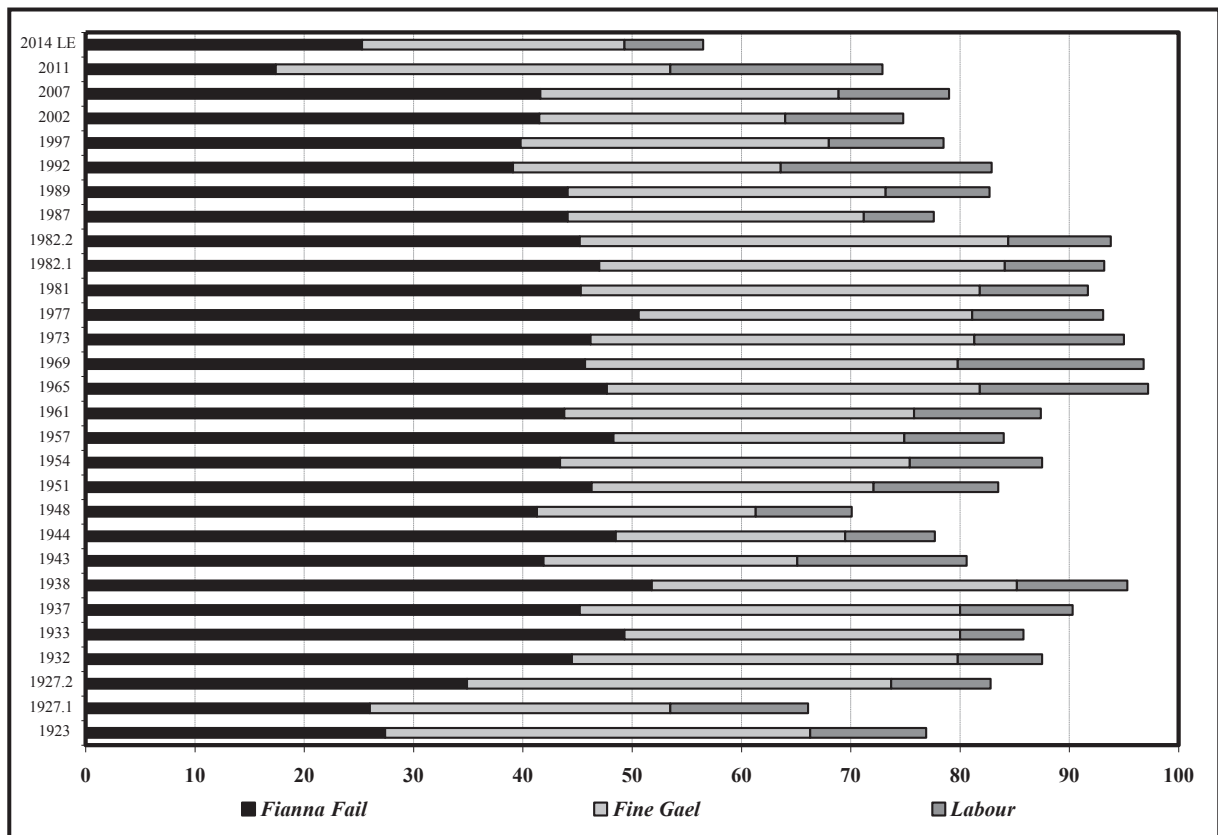


Fig. 1. Combined share of the vote won in Irish general elections between 1923 and 2011 (as well as the 2014 Local Elections) by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour. (1923 Fianna Fáil figure is for the Republicans, 1923–1933 Fine Gael figures are for Cumann na nGaedhal.) The support figures used in this chart for more recent elections (after 1992) were based on the author's own researches, while data for earlier elections were drawn from Sinnott (1995).

Fine Gael also tended to fare well in rural areas (but particularly in areas with a higher level of large farmers) and middle class urban areas, but their support levels were generally lower in working class urban communities and hence Fine Gael never succeeded in mirroring the “catch-all” nature of Fianna Fáil support, even at the 2011 General Election. Fianna Fáil strength amongst the urban working class limited the Labour Party's potential for development, thus militating against the emergence of a strong class cleavage within Irish politics. In the earlier part of the Twentieth Century Labour proved to be highly dependent on support from the rural working classes, or the agricultural labourer class, while the party's fortunes in Dublin fluctuated notably. A merger with the more left-wing Democratic Left party in 1999 did, however, lead to Dublin becoming the party's strongest region during the 2000s, at a point in time when Sinn Féin was also emerging as a significant challenger for the urban working class vote.

As noted above, the two and a half party system left little political space for other political parties to inhabit. Some “minor parties” (Weeks and Clark, 2012) did achieve notable degrees of success in their initial electoral outings, as with the Farmers Party in the 1920s, the Centre Party at the 1933 election, Clann na Poblachta in the late 1940s and the Progressive Democrats and Democratic Left in the 1980s and 1990s. The initial gains made by these parties

tended to be limited to specific areas or social groups within the state, however, and their support levels were never sustained across more than a handful of electoral contests. These minor parties eventually tended to disband or be subsumed within one of the existing larger parties. This is a fate that is unlikely to befall two of the main challengers to the established parties in the present context, however. Being part of a wider global environmentalist movement that does not see electoral success as a virtue in itself, the Green Party is unlikely to disband or join with another political grouping, despite its electoral setbacks in 2009 and 2011. However, the party's electoral appeal remains quite limited within the Republic of Ireland, with their main support base being mainly drawn from middle class Dublin areas.

The second of these parties, Sinn Féin, however offers a more potent challenge to the political establishment. Sinn Féin's roots are deeper than those of the other minor parties. It is by no means a “new party”, having been founded by Arthur Griffith in 1905, and both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael emerged out of splits within that party during the early 1920s. Following the defeat of the Anti-Treaty forces in the 1922–23 Civil War, Sinn Féin, in alliance with the Irish Republican Army (IRA), took an abstentionist approach to electoral politics, both in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, over the following six

decades. The party contested relatively few general elections until the emergence of the “armalite and ballot box” strategy in the early 1980s, which came in the wake of a number of election victories for H-Block Hunger Strike candidates at the 1981 elections. The start of the Northern Ireland Peace Process in 1994 sparked a further period of growth in Sinn Féin support levels. With a left wing political philosophy now shaping party policy, Sinn Féin could now draw support from working class voters, in addition to those who supported the party on a nationalist basis.

Much of Sinn Féin's initial electoral successes were focused on Northern Ireland in the 1980s and 1990s and limited progress was made in the Republic of Ireland until the late 1990s, with the exception of a number of seat gains at council elections. Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin won a seat for Sinn Féin in the Cavan-Monaghan constituency at the 1997 General Election and this led to a period of growth in party support levels, with the mobilising of long term non-voters in low turnout, working class communities forming a key focus on the party's electoral strategy. Electoral successes at the 2002 General Election and 2004 Local and European Elections were, however, followed by a setback at the 2007 General Election and a poor result in Dublin at the 2009 Local and European elections. However, the changed political landscape with the onset of the recession in 2008 would provide fertile ground for a further surge in Sinn Féin growth levels in the immediate lead up to the 2011 General Election and particularly in the years following that contest.

2. Institutional change in post-crash Ireland

The onset of the economic crisis in 2008 marked the end of a long period of Fianna Fáil hegemony. The implications of this, as related to changing political support patterns, will be discussed in more detail in the next section. The economic shock also prompted a drive to reform the Irish political system. The most notable institutional changes involved a reduction in the number of elected representatives, both at the national and local levels, the most widespread amendments to electoral boundaries for a number of decades, the introduction of a gender quota for general election contests and a significant restructuring of local authority structures. The political reform measures introduced by the new Fine Gael-Labour government aimed to make the political system better fit to forestall future economic and political crises. These also acted as a means of reducing expenditure levels relating to the political system, as a means of showing the Irish public that politicians were also willing to “feel the pain” of austerity measures.

At the national level, seat numbers in Dáil Éireann (the lower, and most powerful, house within the Irish parliament) were reduced from 166 to 158. This has significantly increased the potential for internal conflict amongst the larger parties, especially with the newly introduced gender quota legislation requiring political parties to run more female candidates at the next general election (Kavanagh, 2014a). The government also put forward a referendum to abolish the upper house of the Irish parliament, Seanad Éireann, but this was narrowly rejected (by a 51.7%–48.3% margin) in a low turnout contest in October 2013.

At the regional level, the number of local authorities at the county or city level was reduced with some of these being amalgamated, while Borough and Town Councils, the lowest level of electoral democracy in the Irish political system, were abolished. This significantly reduced local representative levels across the state, given that there had been 744 Borough and Town Councillors, although this was offset somewhat by a slight increase in the number of City and County Council seats (from 883 to 949). There was a further rebalancing of City and County Council seat numbers as part of the reforms to narrow the degree of variance existing between urban and rural councils in terms of population per councillor numbers. This resulted in increased representation levels on local authorities in Dublin, but brought about a further reduction in local representation levels in the more rural and less populous counties. With the number of incumbents now outstripping seat levels in some rural constituencies and with a number of outgoing Borough or Town Councillors also seeking to remain in representative politics, there were high levels of competition in terms of party selection processes in rural areas in the lead up to the 2014 elections. By contrast, the increased number of seats in Dublin created opportunity spaces for new candidates and particularly for younger candidates and for female candidates.

There was also an increase in the average number of seats per local election constituency from a range of between three and seven seats to a range of between six to ten seats. These changes brought about a notable increase in the territories of local election constituencies in the more rural areas, with the largest of these constituencies, the South and West Kerry electoral area, covering an area of 2514.8 km². Larger constituency units offered logistical challenges to the candidates, over and above those that had been faced in previous local election contests. However, the increased seat allocations per constituency offered scope for new candidates, who in the past would have been blocked from contesting elections by long-standing incumbents in the smaller (three-seat or four-seat) constituency units. This undoubtedly played a role in the increased number of new female local election candidates. This trend of larger constituency units was also mirrored at the European level. The number of seats allocated to the Republic of Ireland in the European Parliament was reduced from 12 to 11 after Croatia joined the European Union in 2013, necessitating a radical amendment to the European Parliament constituency boundaries. One of the three new constituencies, Midlands-North-West, covered an area of 37,286.6 km² (53.1% of the state territory), which was larger than the territory covered by five European Union states; Belgium, Slovenia, Cyprus, Luxembourg and Malta.

3. The elections of 2011 and 2014: “Earthquake” elections or plus ça change?

The open nature of the Irish economy, allied to the weak financial regulation of banking institutions and an ill-advised expansion in public spending on the part of the Fianna Fáil-led government in the lead up to the 2007 General Election, left it especially vulnerable to the global economic downturn (Leahy, 2011). Following on the “Celtic

Table 1Political party/grouping support levels in the Republic of Ireland at general, local and European election contests between 2007 and 2014^a.

Party/Grouping	General election 2007	Local elections 2009	European elections 2009	General election 2011	Local elections 2014	European elections 2014
Fianna Fáil	41.6%	25.4%	24.1%	17.4%	25.3%	22.3%
The Green Party	4.7%	2.4%	1.9%	1.8%	1.6%	4.9%
Progressive Democrats	2.7%	—	—	—	—	—
Government parties, 2007–2011	49.0%	27.8%	26.0%	19.2%	26.9%	27.2%
Fine Gael	27.3%	32.2%	29.1%	36.1%	24.0%	22.3%
Labour Party	10.1%	14.7%	13.9%	19.4%	7.2%	5.3%
Government parties, 2011–PRESENT	37.4%	46.9%	43.0%	55.5%	31.2%	27.6%
Sinn Féin	6.9%	7.4%	11.2%	9.9%	15.3%	19.5%
People Before Profit	0.4%	0.6%	—	1.0%	1.7%	1.4%
Anti-Austerity Alliance/Socialist Party	0.6%	0.9%	2.8%	1.2%	1.2%	1.8%
United Left	—	—	—	—	0.3%	—
Workers Party	0.1%	0.1%	—	0.1%	0.2%	—
Direct Democracy Ireland	—	—	—	—	0.2%	1.5%
Éirigi	—	—	—	—	0.2%	—
Fis Nua	—	—	—	—	0.1%	0.3%
Workers and Unemployed Action Group	0.3%	0.2%	—	0.4%	0.1%	—
Independents and other small parties	5.1%	16.3%	11.5%	12.7%	22.5%	20.7%

The bold values relate to the different sets of parties (and their combined support levels) that formed the government at different stages of the economic crisis in the Republic of Ireland.

^a The party support figures included in this table are based on an analysis by the author of national-level election results for the six electoral contests referred to here.

Tiger” period, the most prolonged period of economic growth in the history of the state, this sudden reversal of economic fortunes produced a number of political casualties, initially focusing on the Fianna Fáil–Green Party coalition government. Government support losses took place over two specific stages. The first phase occurred in the autumn of 2008, immediately following on the onset of the economic crisis, while the second phase focused on the winter of 2010, when the intervention of a troika involving the International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Union (EU) and European Central Bank (ECB) was required to “bail out” the Irish economy. The events of Winter 2010 would take place just a few months before the general election of 2011, which resulted in dramatic seat losses for both of these parties.

Some opinion polls in the summer and autumn of 2010 had estimated that the Labour Party was the most popular political party in the state. Changing support trends immediately in the wake of the IMF–EU–ECB bailout, as the electorate moved from the “politics of anger” to the “politics of fear”, however resulted in a swing from the Labour Party towards Fine Gael and also, to a lesser degree, Sinn Féin, in the wake of a major victory for that party in the Donegal South–West Dáil by-election of November 2010. In the final weeks of the campaign Fine Gael came very close to winning the level of support required to command an overall majority in Dáil Éireann. A series of ill-advised campaign promises made in the final week of the campaign, however, saw Labour claw back a sufficient level of support to prevent this. Helped by the vagaries of the Proportional Representation by Single Transferable Vote (PR–STV) electoral system, which were further exacerbated by the highly fractured political landscape emerging in the wake of the Fianna Fáil collapse, the new Fine Gael–Labour coalition government enjoyed the largest Dáil majority held by any government since the foundation of the state. The two parties held 68.1% of all the seats in Dáil Éireann,

with Fine Gael accounting for two-thirds of these seat numbers.

This election took place only a few months after the IMF–EC–ECB bailout and resulted in a heavy defeat for the two government parties (Table 1). Blamed for the economic crisis and the resultant onset of austerity policies, Fianna Fáil lost close to half a million first preference votes between the 2007 and 2011 elections (471,235 votes, or 54.9% of its 2007 vote), with its national share of the vote falling from 41.6% to 17.4%. Fianna Fáil had held 78 Dáil seats after the 2007 election, but the party won 19 of the 165 Dáil seats being contested at the 2011 contest. (They also held a seat in the Louth constituency due to the automatic re-election of the Ceann Comhairle.) Large levels of support were lost by the party across the state, but the Fianna Fáil losses were especially heightened in the Dublin region and amongst urban working class communities. The Green Party was left without any Dáil representation (having won 6 seats in 2007).

The traditional “catch-all” basis to Fianna Fáil support meant that no one party gained from the collapse in its support base. Some gains were made by independent candidates, while gains were also made by a number of smaller groupings on the left of the political spectrum, including Sinn Féin and the different parties that formed the short-lived United Left Alliance. Most of the seat gains were made by the two largest opposition parties, Fine Gael and Labour, however. The destination of Fianna Fáil support losses to its main rivals in the Dublin region tended to break down along class lines, with Fianna Fáil defectors in the more middle class areas favouring Fine Gael, while defectors in the more working class areas tended to favour the Labour Party.

Fianna Fáil's position as the largest party in the state, based on general election results, was usurped for the first time since the general election of September 1927. Having been “the perennial runner-up of Irish politics” (Leahy,

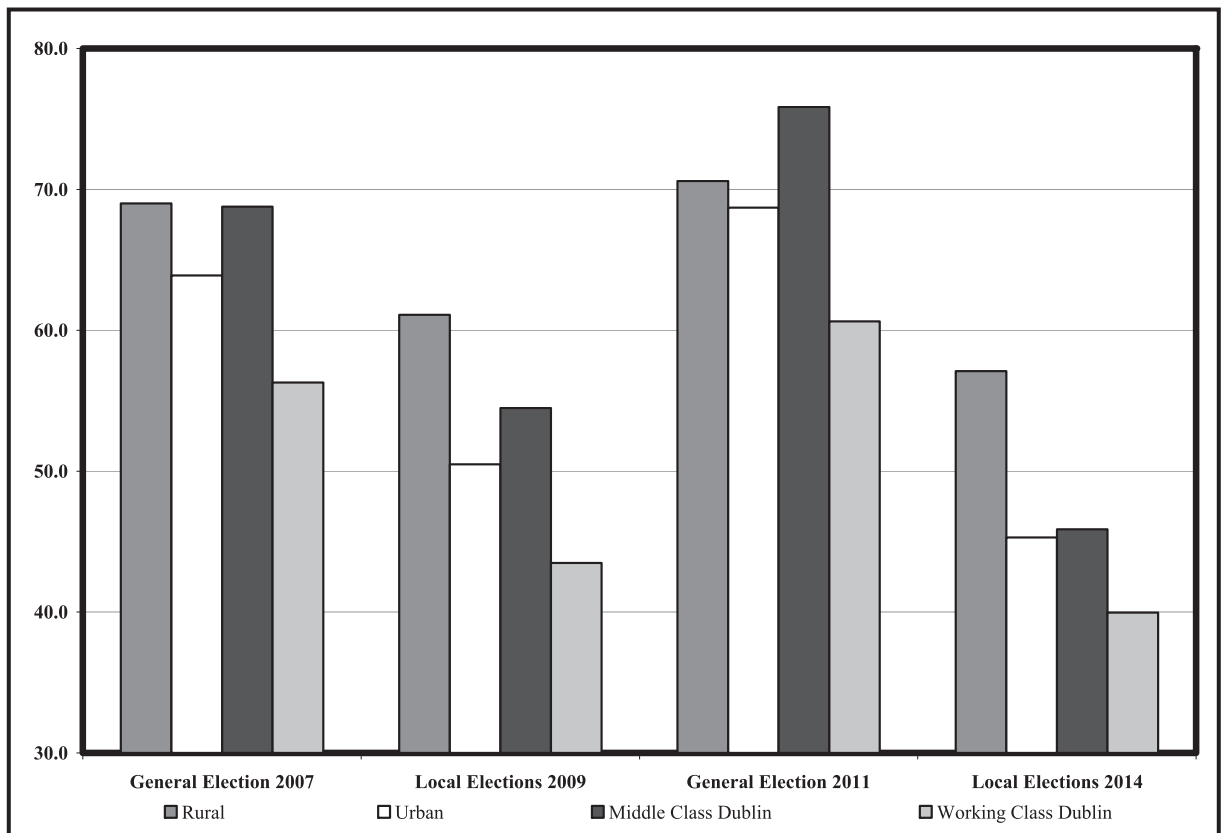


Fig. 2. Voter turnout levels (%) by social areas in the Republic of Ireland at electoral contests between 2007 and 2014. The areas located within the urban grouping include all of the areas/constituencies located within the Dublin region and the Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford City Council areas, as well as the constituencies located within the immediate commuter hinterlands of these city areas. The rural areas grouping is comprised of all of the other areas/constituencies located within the state. The Dublin middle class areas grouping is comprised of the 50% most affluent electoral divisions within the Dublin region, based on an analysis of the 2011 Small Area Health Research Unit deprivation index (Kelly and Teljeur, 2013), while the Dublin working class areas grouping is comprised of the 50% least affluent/most deprived electoral divisions within that region. The mean voter turnout statistics for the urban and rural areas are based on an analysis by the author of official election results, by Dáil/general election constituency and local election constituency for the 2007 General Election, 2009 Local Elections, 2011 General Election and 2014 Local Elections. The Dublin middle class and Dublin working class election statistics are based on an analysis by the author of marked register-based sub-constituency turnout levels for the same electoral contests. More details on the process of calculating these marked register voter turnout figures are provided in Kavanagh (2002).

2013: 26), Fine Gael now assumed the mantle of largest party in the state, having already outpolled Fianna Fáil at the 2009 Local and European elections. Fine Gael commanded high levels of support amongst rural voters and the urban middle classes at the 2009 and 2011 contests, but they did not fare well in the more working class urban areas and, as such, did fully mirror the “catch-all” nature of the old Fianna Fáil support patterns. With the implosion of the Fianna Fáil support base in the more working class areas, Labour now attracted the highest levels of support from these areas.

There was a strong expectation that the extent of their Dáil majority would ensure the new government would go on to enjoy a second term in office, but these expectations were undermined by subsequent political developments. The need to continue with the policies of austerity, as required by the state of the national finances and by the bailout agreement reached with the IMF, EU and ECB troika in late 2010, brought about a notable decline in support levels for these parties between 2011 and 2014, as

measured in a series of national opinion polls. There were admittedly some electoral successes during this period, including a win for Labour's Michael D. Higgins at the 2011 Presidential Election (held a few months after the general election) and a number of victories at Dáil by-elections. The first major electoral challenge for the coalition government would, however, be the midterm 2014 Local and European elections.

As at the 2013 Seanad Referendum, electoral participation levels played a role in shaping the results of the 2014 elections. Voter turnout levels at local and European election contests in the Republic of Ireland had improved notably in the 2004 (58.8%) and 2009 (57.7%) contests relative to the low turnout (50.2%) 1999 elections. However, the national turnout level fell back to 51.6% at the 2014 elections. The low turnout 1999 contest had been characterised by wide rural-urban variations in turnout levels and by exceptionally low participation levels in working class urban areas, such as the Dublin Inner City and Clondalkin, but these extremes were not as pronounced in 2014.

Within Dublin, turnout differences between the more middle class and working class areas narrowed significantly when contrasted with previous electoral contests, including the 2011 General Election (Fig. 2). With working class areas now having a greater bearing on the election results, this further fuelled the notable surge in support levels for the more left-of-centre parties and candidates at these contests.

By contrast, both Fine Gael and Labour lost large levels of support (Table 1). The combined Fine Gael-Labour vote in the European elections fell by 27.9% relative to the 2011 General Election. The relatively larger drop in rural and middle class turnout levels suggests that a significant chunk of the Fine Gael support base may have opted to remain home on polling day, instead of supporting an alternative party or grouping. By contrast, the smaller decline in working class turnout levels suggests that Labour losses could not be attributed to voter abstentionism. Instead, many of those who had supported Labour in 2009 and 2011 were now opting to support Sinn Féin and the other left-wing parties, groupings and candidates.

Most media focus was on the losses suffered by the Labour Party, especially given that party leader and Tánaiste (deputy prime minister), Eamonn Gilmore, resigned immediately in the wake of the election results. Labour was left without any representation at the European Parliament level, having won three seats in 2009, while their number of council seats fell by over sixty percent, despite the overall increase in City and County Council seat numbers. Fine Gael actually lost a larger number of votes and seats at the local election contests than Labour did, but these results were offset by a successful European Parliament campaign. Further highlighting the vagaries of the PR-STV system, Fine Gael's share of the European election vote fell by almost seven percent between 2009 and 2014, but their overall number of seats (four) remained the same, even though Ireland now had one less seat in the European Parliament.

By contrast, Fianna Fáil ended up winning just one seat at the European contests, despite winning a slightly larger number of votes than Fine Gael did. (To make matters worse, less than a month after the election had taken place Fianna Fáil lost their only MEP, Brian Crowley, after he unilaterally decided to leave the ALDE (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe) grouping, which Fianna Fáil is aligned with, to join the ECR (European Conservative and Reformist) grouping.) Fianna Fáil woes at the European level were offset by a strong performance at the City and County Council elections. The large number of Fine Gael council seat losses allowed Fianna Fáil to reclaim its position as the largest political party at the local authority level. Fianna Fáil's junior partner in the ill-fated 2007–2011 government, the Green Party, also fared relatively well in these elections. Party leader, Eamonn Ryan, came close to winning a European Parliament seat in the three-seat Dublin constituency, while the Greens gained a number of seats in the council elections, primarily in the more middle class Dublin constituencies.

Candidates from the Independents and Others (smaller parties) grouping accounted for the largest share of the vote at both the local and European election contests. In Ireland independent candidates generally fare better in the

smaller constituencies associated with local election contests, mainly due to their highly localised support patterns, but also because their financial and organisational resources tend to be more limited than those available to candidates for the larger political parties. The increased size of local election constituencies at the 2014 contests, added to a number of further changes to local election boundaries, offered a significant challenge for independent candidates at these contests. But these challenges were offset by a swing towards the Independents and Others grouping in the months leading up to the elections. The gains made by the Independent and Others grouping were overshadowed by those made by Sinn Féin, however. Sinn Féin trebled their number of council seats and they gained a seat in each of the three European Parliament constituencies.

Sinn Féin fared especially well in terms of selecting – and electing – younger and female candidates at these elections. Indeed these elections marked some limited degree of progress in relation to female electoral participation levels in the Republic of Ireland ahead of the introduction of a gender quota at the next general election. Females had accounted for only one sixth (16.6%) of the successful candidates at the 2009 City and County Council elections, but the level of successful female candidates increased to 20.7% at the 2014 contests, admittedly still a very low level of representation by European standards. By contrast, more females (six) than males (five) won seats at the European Parliament elections, the first time that female candidates have been more successful at a general, local or European election contest in the history of the state. A record level of female candidates had won seats at the 2011 General Election, although this level (25 female Dáil deputies, or 15.1% of the total) pales in comparison with the higher levels found in most other democracies. The introduction of a gender quota at the next general election has been designed to address such concerns. Should this initiative prove to be successful, this will further fuel the high levels of turnover associated with representative politics during the era of austerity.

High levels of electoral volatility are by no means a new feature of the Irish political landscape, but the extent of the changes experienced in the past seven years have been unparalleled throughout the history of the state. The changing support trends associated with the electoral contests that followed the economic “crash” of 2008 does support the claim that these were indeed “earthquake elections”, marking a fundamental break from the normal pattern of party competition in the Republic of Ireland.

The three parties that formed the bulwark of the “two and a half party” political system over the previous century have all experienced dramatic support losses at different stages over the past seven years. This may mark a significant realignment of Irish party politics, or else it may prove to be a temporary reversal in these parties' electoral fortunes driven by very extreme economic circumstances. However, the changes in the socio-economic bases of party support in Ireland across this period, triggered initially by the dramatic loss in Fianna Fáil support, may prove to be the most significant legacy of this particular period in Irish politics. The changing geographic and class bases to political support patterns perhaps offers the most potent

evidence of the new shape that Irish party competition is taking, as will be discussed in the next section.

4. Changing class bases of party support during the era of austerity?

The rapid fluctuations in political support levels at the national level have been underpinned by even dramatic shifts by geographic area and by class group, as illustrated by Table 2. Most of these changes were largely driven by the collapse in Fianna Fáil support levels. The “catch-all” nature of Fianna Fáil support patterns had effectively acted as a dampener on the development of a significant class basis to Irish politics for much of the state’s history, with this support pattern also evident at the 2007 General Election. Fianna Fáil support levels would fall by a level of between twenty and thirty percent in practically all areas within the state between the 2007 and 2011 contests, but their support levels fell to especially low levels in working class urban areas. While the party reclaimed some of its lost support in rural and middle class urban areas at the 2014 elections, little recovery was evident in these working class urban areas. This also proved to be the case with the October 2014 Dáil by-election in the largely working class Dublin South-West constituency, where Fianna Fáil recorded its lowest ever vote share in a Dáil by-election contest (8.6%). The sharpening of the class-basis to Fianna Fáil support patterns was mirrored in Fine Gael support trends over the same time period, with that party also becoming increasingly reliant on rural and middle class urban areas to maintain its support levels following the 2011 election.

Labour had initially succeeded in replacing Fianna Fáil as the strongest party in working class urban areas, but the Labour gains in working class Dublin quickly evaporated after that party entered government in 2011. Relatively few of the Fianna Fáil working class defectors, who had supported Labour in 2009 and 2011, returned to Fianna Fáil at the 2014 elections, however, and Sinn Féin instead proved to the main destination for such voters at these contests. Sinn Féin now replaced Labour as the largest party on the left of the political spectrum and the party also made major gains outside its Border and urban working class heartlands. Sinn Féin won seats in some of the more middle class Dublin local election constituencies, although they were helped to a large degree by the increase in district magnitude levels for these contests. While Sinn Féin support levels in middle class urban areas still remained low relative to other parts of the state, the party won close to ten percent of the vote, on average, in these areas at the 2014 Local Elections. This marked a considerable improvement in the party’s electoral fortunes in these areas when compared with previous electoral contests.

Increased support levels in its urban middle class heartlands provided a firm basis for a Green Party recovery in 2014, following its traumatic period in government with Fianna Fáil. Labour also won a higher level of support amongst middle class Dublin voters, who were attracted to the party on the basis of its liberal position on social issues, than it did amongst the urban working classes. A similar trend was also evidenced when Labour support levels fell in the 1980s during an earlier period in government with Fine

Table 2

Support levels for political parties by social area in the Republic of Ireland at general and local election contests between 2007 and 2014^a.

Party/Grouping	Rural	Urban	Dublin – Middle class	Dublin – Working class
Fianna Fáil				
2007 General Election	42.3%	40.2%	38.7%	38.2%
2009 Local Elections	28.5%	17.3%	18.9%	14.9%
2011 General Election	19.0%	14.8%	13.7%	10.8%
2014 Local Elections	29.3%	19.5%	18.5%	11.6%
Fine Gael				
2007 General Election	30.2%	22.5%	22.9%	13.0%
2009 Local Elections	35.2%	24.4%	30.4%	14.7%
2011 General Election	38.4%	32.2%	37.8%	19.6%
2014 Local Elections	27.1%	19.5%	25.0%	8.9%
Labour Party				
2007 General Election	8.6%	12.7%	14.0%	16.5%
2009 Local Elections	10.9%	24.7%	23.7%	27.8%
2011 General Election	15.7%	26.0%	24.6%	34.2%
2014 Local Elections	5.1%	10.2%	12.8%	10.8%
Sinn Féin				
2007 General Election	7.2%	6.4%	2.7%	13.0%
2009 Local Elections	6.9%	8.6%	3.3%	16.9%
2011 General Election	10.7%	8.6%	3.3%	15.5%
2014 Local Elections	13.5%	17.9%	9.6%	30.6%
Green Party				
2007 General Election	3.5%	6.8%	9.4%	6.1%
2009 Local Elections	1.6%	4.3%	5.8%	3.6%
2011 General Election	1.3%	2.8%	4.8%	2.3%
2014 Local Elections	0.5%	3.2%	6.9%	4.6%

^a The areas located within the urban, rural, Dublin middle class and Dublin working class groupings are the same as those listed as being assigned to these areas in the details provided for Fig. 2. The election statistics listed here for the urban and rural areas are based on an analysis by the author of official election results, by Dáil/general election constituency and local election constituency for the 2007 General Election, 2009 Local Elections, 2011 General Election and 2014 Local Elections, while the Dublin middle class and Dublin working class election statistics are based on an analysis by the author of tally figures (sub-constituency support levels) for the same electoral contests.

Gael. But during the 1980s the party maintained a solid support base in rural constituencies, associated with personal votes for long-standing Dáil deputies, and this ensured that the party maintained representation levels in Dáil Éireann during this period. Labour can no longer rely on a loyal rural support base in the 2000s, however, given the increasingly urban-focus of the party following its merger with Democratic Left in 1999. Labour support levels fell in some rural constituencies after this merger at the same time as its support levels in Dublin were increasing. The collapse in Fianna Fáil support did lead to a spike in Labour support levels in some rural constituencies at the 2009 and 2011 elections, but this new support rapidly faded away after the party’s entry into government.

The erosion of Labour’s different support bases left its support levels, as measured in recent opinion polls, hovering at a level that would leave it with only a handful of seats, or even no seats at all (Kavanagh, 2014b), in the next Dáil, if these support levels were replicated at the next general election. The *Sunday Times-Behaviour & Attitudes* poll of 16 August 2014 did note a surge in Labour support levels (increasing to 14%) following the replacement of party leader, Gilmore, by deputy party leader and Minister for Social Protection, Joan Burton. But this “Burton Bounce” was not sustained and subsequent polls showed that the

improvement in Labour support levels amounted to a more modest increase of, at most, two or three percentage points. By the final few months of 2014 Labour's support levels had declined once again and stood at especially low levels (falling to as low as 5%) in the final three opinion polls of that year (Kavanagh, 2014b).

Labour's struggles may well create the context in which the final stages in the history of Civil War politics in Ireland are played out. If Labour is not a viable option as a coalition partner after the next general election, the two "Civil War parties" may be forced into forming a coalition government, especially given that neither party appears willing to enter into a coalition government with Sinn Féin in the present political climate.

The level of influence enjoyed by the "established" parties (Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour) in past electoral contests has largely evaporated in the more working class urban areas, where the most dramatic changes in political support patterns in the past seven years have been recorded. The combined level of support won by these parties in working class Dublin areas amounted to little more than thirty percent of the vote at the 2014 elections; an almost identical level of support to that won by Sinn Féin. At the Dáil by-election in Dublin South-West in October 2014, the combined support level won by these parties only accounted for 25.9% of the first preference vote, in stark contrast to the support levels won by the Sinn Féin (30.3%) or the Anti Austerity Alliance/Socialist Party (27.2%) candidates. The combined support levels for the parties in the Sunday Independent-Millward Brown opinion poll of 21st December 2014 stood at just 45% (Kavanagh, 2014b), contrasting starkly with the very high support levels enjoyed by these parties in previous decades and particularly during the 1965–1982 period (Fig. 1).

The degree of volatility in Dublin during the period of austerity politics has tended to increase in line with the level of working class populations in an area, while the established parties have fared better in areas with higher levels of middle class populations (Fig. 3). Although it had already commanded a relatively large level of support in such areas prior to this period, the greatest swing towards Sinn Féin over the 2007–14 period took place in the 20% least affluent/most deprived electoral divisions in Dublin. The size of the swing to Sinn Féin from the three larger parties, in turn, declined in line with increasing levels of affluence. But the aforementioned Dublin South-West Dáil by-election has shown that political allegiances in working class urban areas are still highly fluid and that Sinn Féin dominance of working class urban areas is by no means guaranteed. Most commentators had expected Sinn Féin to comfortably win this contest. However, despite winning a higher number of first preference votes, Sinn Féin lost this contest to the Anti Austerity Alliance/Socialist Party candidate, Paul Murphy.

If Sinn Féin was to move close to the political centre in order to better position itself to form part of a future coalition government, its urban working class support base could prove to be equally as vulnerable, as Labour and Fianna Fáil's were, to challenges from parties and groupings located further to the left on the political spectrum. At present, however, the potential for these parties to pose a

strong challenge to Sinn Féin for the urban working class vote is severely limited by the highly fragmented nature of this political grouping. (However media reports early in January 2015 suggest that an alliance, similar in scope to the United Left Alliance of the 2011 election, may be formed between the Socialist Party, People Before Profit Alliance and other groupings ahead of the next general election (McGee, 2015).) Mindful of the threat posed by these groupings, Sinn Féin took a notably stronger oppositional stance in the months following the Dublin South-West Dáil by-election and assumed a more prominent role in the anti-water charge protest movement during the winter of 2014.

Support patterns in other parts of the state have proven to be less volatile, but especially in the more rural areas. Politics in rural Ireland still remains to be very much dominated by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, with these parties commanding close to sixty percent of all rural votes in the most recent general and local election contests. Furthermore, a significant chunk of the rural support for independent candidates is accounted for by Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael "gene pool" independents (former Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael party members). However, results in some rural constituencies at the 2011 General Election and the 2014 Local Elections showed a growing appetite in rural areas for a more radical alternative. A good example of this was the Roscommon-South Leitrim Dáil by-election of October 2014, where radical independent candidate, Michael Fitzmaurice, won the contest by a comfortable margin over his closest rival (the Fianna Fáil candidate).

A political vacuum has been created in the Republic of Ireland by the collapse in Fianna Fáil support levels between 2008 and 2011 and the subsequent decline in support for the new government parties, Fine Gael and Labour. A "new politics" is emerging out of this vacuum, which has been defined to date by growing support levels for Sinn Féin, as well as for independent candidates and other, mainly left-of-centre, smaller parties. In recent months, this "new politics" has seen the emergence of a range of new political groupings within the Republic of Ireland, including the aforementioned proposed new alliance between different groupings on the left of the political spectrum. In January 2015, the creation of a new centre-right political party, led by former Fine Gael junior minister, Lucinda Creighton, was announced. At this stage different alliances of independent politicians are in the process of being formed, with these involving a number of independent Dáil deputies, such as Shane Ross and John Halligan, as well as Michael Fitzmaurice, the winner of the Roscommon-South Leitrim by-election.

As this discussion has shown, the changing support trends associated with this "new politics" have been heavily controlled by both class and geography, with the most significant changes in political allegiances occurring in urban working class areas. However, as the effects of austerity policies continue to be felt in the Republic of Ireland and as opposition to proposed new taxes, such as the contentious proposal to introduce water charges, mounts, the appetite for more radical alternatives to the political establishment continues to grow in all parts of the state. A swift return to the old certainties of the "two and a

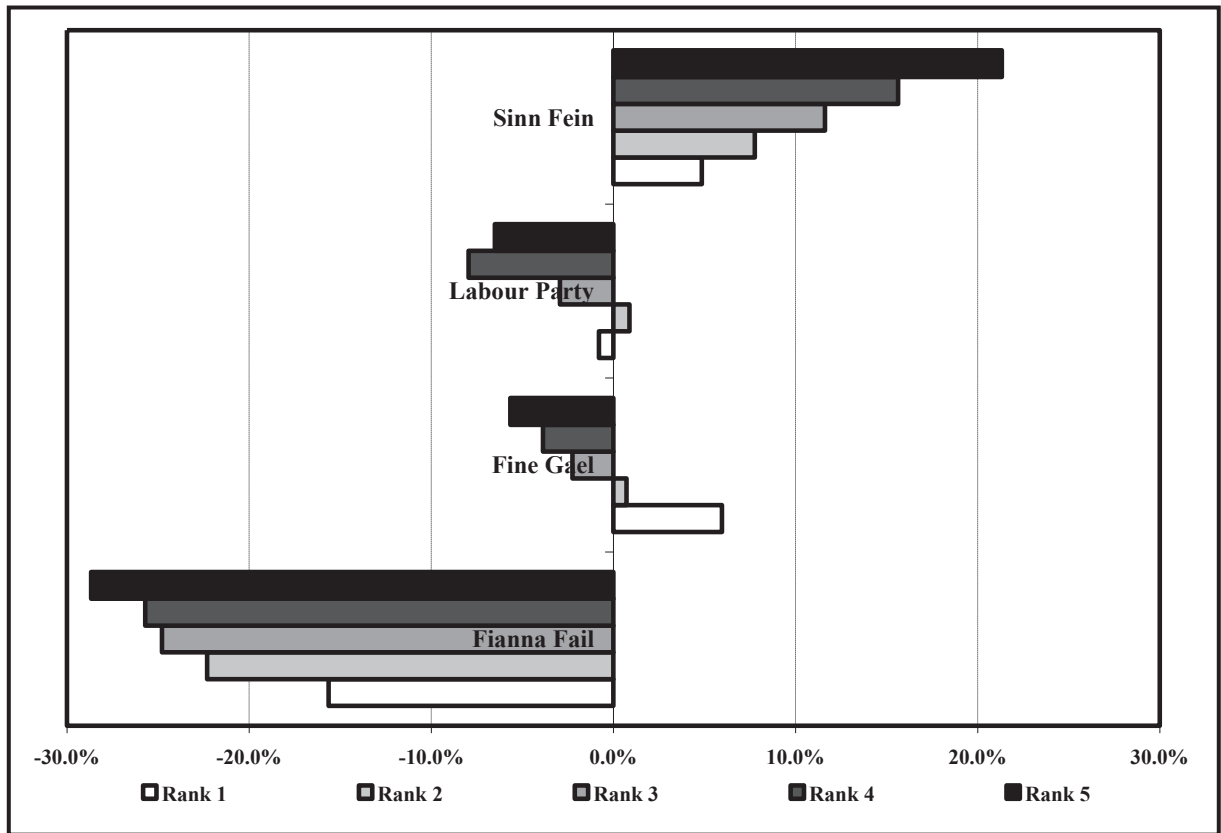


Fig. 3. Shifts in party support levels (%) by social area in Dublin between the 2007 and 2014 elections. Party support levels are calculated based on an analysis by the author of tally figures (sub-constituency support levels) for the 2007 General Election and the 2014 Local and European elections for the Dublin region. The Rank 1, Rank 2, Rank 3, Rank 4 and Rank 5 social areas are identified based on an analysis of the 2011 Small Area Health Research Unit (SAHRU) Deprivation Index figures (Kelly and Teljeur, 2013) for the 322 electoral divisions in the Dublin region. This index is based on an analysis of deprivation-related variables in the 2011 Census in the Republic of Ireland. The Rank 1 areas are defined as being the 20% most affluent electoral divisions in Dublin based on an analysis of the 2011 SAHRU Deprivation index, while the Rank 2 areas are the 20% next most affluent electoral divisions ... and the Rank 5 areas are the 20% most deprived electoral divisions in the Dublin region.

half party system” appears to be highly unlikely in the present political climate.

5. Concluding comments

The nature of political change in the Republic of Ireland, during the period of the European debt crisis, has mirrored trends in the rest of Europe to some extent, but some aspects appear to be largely unique to the Irish context. Support levels for government parties in most other European states, for instance, declined at the May 2014 European and regional elections, as predicted by the second order election model (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). But the destination of government party support losses has tended to be different in other western European states, such as France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden. Populist or extreme right-wing parties, such as the United Kingdom Independence Party and the Front National in France, have made the most significant gains in a number of these states, with these parties often drawing on large levels of support from working class voters. This blurring of the classic left-right political divide in many European states comes at a point in time when the old Civil

War divide in Ireland, which defined politics for most of the state's history, is being eroded. In Ireland, left-wing parties and candidates have proven to be the main beneficiaries of the political vacuum that has emerged during the era of austerity politics. Thus, just when the Irish party system finally appears likely to resemble the traditional European class cleavage model, it could be argued that this same model is being undermined in other European states by the growing strength of populist right-wing parties and groupings.

The rise of populist right-wing groupings tends, however, to be more of a characteristic of the core, or more economically advanced, European countries. By contrast, in the more peripheral European countries new left-wing political parties or groupings, such as Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain and the Five Star Movement in Italy, have achieved very large levels of support in very short periods of time during the past few years of austerity politics. Thus, with the notable swing towards left-wing parties over the past seven years, it could be argued that the pattern of politics in the Republic of Ireland is now starting to resemble that of the other countries in the European periphery.

The three parties that dominated Irish political life for most of the state's history have been the main casualties of the rapidly shifting political landscape of post-crash Ireland. The specific manner in which the Irish public has responded to the economic crisis perhaps explains why political fortunes have fluctuated to such a degree since 2008. There have been protests in Ireland during this period and a series of demonstrations in the final few months of 2014 were sparked by opposition to the proposed introduction of water charges. However, the level of violent protests associated with other European states, such as Greece, has not been as evident in Ireland. The Irish electorate have, instead, largely preferred to “wait in the long grass” and use electoral means to express their anger with government mismanagement and austerity politics. In short, the Irish have chosen to do their rioting through the ballot box. In doing so, they may have fundamentally shifted the political equilibrium of the Irish political system, moving this from a system dominated by the old Civil War cleavage to one that is coming more into line with the traditional style of European party politics, at a time when that class cleavage is coming under threat from the rise of populist right-wing parties in the core states of the European Union.

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