

Irish elections: Ruling Fianna Fail vote increases, Sinn Fein win five seats

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With votes counted in 37 of the 42 constituencies, Bertie Ahern's Fianna Fail had taken 74 of the 166 seats in the Dail (Irish Parliament). The party had achieved 41.5 percent of first preference votes, an increase of 2.2 percent on the last elections held in 1997.

Ireland has a complex proportional representation—single transferable vote system. Voters in multi-seat constituencies (electing three, four or five deputies each) are asked to rank their candidate preferences on a ballot paper. Counting these papers can be slow and it may be some time before a final tally is known. In 1997, the vote took place on June 7 but the final result was not known until the 14th.

Nevertheless, it seems likely that Fianna Fail has fallen short of the 84 seats needed to become the first party since 1977 to rule without the need of a coalition. The most likely outcome of the election is the continuance of the Fianna Fail and Progressive Democrats coalition.

Beyond this, however, the political landscape has been substantially altered by the results of this election.

Fine Gael, the main opposition party in Ireland, has been all but wiped out with a 5.4 percent drop in first preference votes and the loss of more than 20 of the seats it had held since 1997. Fine Gael leader Michael Noonan resigned his leadership, even before the final results were in.

Fine Gael was virtually indistinguishable from its rival in terms of policies. It presented itself as a centre-left alternative to Fianna Fail, and formed an electoral alliance with Labour. Both Fianna Fail and Fine Gael have accused each other of engaging in voodoo or “Enron economics”; each saying the other would drive up government borrowing.

Ahern and Fianna Fail had been credited with good

management of Ireland's booming economy and no doubt this was reflected in the voting. Largely due to US investment in what is viewed as an English speaking gateway to Europe with a relatively cheap, skilled labour force, the Irish economy has grown at an average rate of 9 percent since the mid-1990s. Though there was some concern as to whether Ahern could manage the economy in a slowdown, with the double-digit growth of 11.5 percent in 2000 almost halved to 5.9 percent last year, his share of the vote increased as Fine Gael failed to advance any real alternative.

But the growth in the Irish economy has largely benefited the more privileged layers. In April this year the Combat Poverty Agency (CPA)—a government bureau—said the rich had benefited most from economic growth. The CPA report said that during Ahern's five-year administration, the richest 10 percent received 25 percent of government budget giveaways, while the poorest 20 percent got just five percent. And it said the government only minimally reduced the 10 percent proportion of the population in “severe poverty”—those with incomes below 50 percent of the national average.

“Ireland is amongst the most unequal countries in the European Union,” the CPA report said, calling for tax increases to alleviate the inequities.

While providing massive tax-breaks to big business, the government has been criticised over the state of the health service and education, and the country has been hit by strikes of nurses and teachers in recent months.

The polarisation of Irish society between rich and poor did find distorted expression in the election. There was increased support for independent candidates and those parties purporting to be opponents of big business, while all the main bourgeois parties outside of Fianna Fail saw a drop in their vote.

Alongside the wiping out of Fine Gael, Labour saw a

loss of 2.1 percent in its vote since 1997 and even Fianna Fail's governmental partners, the PD, lost 0.7 percent. In contrast, the Green Party won six seats in the Dail, with a one percent increase in its first preference votes and a host of independent candidates standing on single issue policies gained 14 seats with a 1.2 percent increase in first preference votes. The Socialist Party also maintained its seat in Dublin West, when Joe Higgins was re-elected with 21.5 percent of first preference votes (the second highest in the constituency).

Most significant was the increased support for Sinn Fein. Despite a concerted campaign to highlight the link between the party and the Irish Republican Army, Sinn Fein was able to go from one to five seats in the Dail with a four percent increase in first preference votes. General support for the Good Friday Agreement and the new political institutions in the north is no doubt a factor in the increased support for Sinn Fein, but also of importance is the emphasis that Sinn Fein has placed on being an anti-establishment, all-Ireland party with a progressive social agenda.

"We are a party that offers a real alternative to the stale and corrupt politics that have marked life here for so long," Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams said. "We are asking people to join with us in building an Ireland of equals."

Sinn Fein's most significant victory came in North Kerry in the south-west, where Martin Ferris, a convicted IRA gun-runner and alleged member of the IRA Army Council, topped the poll, ousting Dick Spring, the former deputy prime minister and Labour leader.

With Sinn Fein holding five seats, against the PD's four, there will be talk of the possibility of Sinn Fein being included in a new ruling coalition. For his part, Ahern has ruled out any involvement with Sinn Fein in a coalition until the IRA is disbanded.

Whatever their immediate fate in terms of a position in government, there is no doubt that Sinn Fein's standing in the south has increased. Success in the Irish elections will be encouraging for the party's next big test, the elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Sinn Fein's increased standing, north and south of the border reflects a growing disaffection from the political establishment. This is felt not only among the 63 percent who turned out to vote in the Irish elections, but

among those who didn't, and particularly among the young.

As the new government increases its attacks upon working people in its drive to maintain the privileges of the top ten percent of Irish society, parties such as Sinn Fein will come to play a crucial role. Despite their rhetoric, Sinn Fein do not represent an alternative for Irish workers, north or south of the border. Their entry into government in the north was an acceptance of the new political institutions set up to best secure the exploitation of the working class in the interests of big business. Their entrance into a coalition government in the south would confirm their newfound standing as a trusted representative of business interests.



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