

The 2016 Irish general election: a final look at the parties and the polling

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Irish voters go to the polls today in the country's general election. Ahead of the vote, [Adrian Kavanagh](#) provides a final look at the parties and the polling. Using a constituency level analysis of opinion polls, he illustrates how seat projections have changed since 2014, noting that a late swing in the polling means the governing parties, Fine Gael and Labour, could struggle to have enough support to return to power.



The 2016 Irish general election campaign is now over and voters will head to the polls today, marking the end of what has been probably both the longest-ever and shortest-ever campaign in the history of the state. The campaign did not formally commence until 3 February, but it could be argued that parties and candidates have been in election mode for well over a year – probably since the intensification of the protests against water charges in the autumn/winter of 2014 or even since the May 2014 Local and European elections.

Polling trends in the final days of the campaign suggest that the outgoing government parties – [Fine Gael](#) and the [Labour Party](#) – are likely to lose a number of seats in Dáil Éireann, with the junior coalition partner, Labour, facing a struggle in each one of the constituencies that they are defending seats in.

The electoral system and seat projections

As last year's general election in the United Kingdom showed, predicting election results on the basis of opinion polls can be fraught with danger, especially in "first past the post" electoral systems that tend to skew seat levels per party and award a disproportionate share of seats to certain political parties – usually the larger, or largest, parties. For instance, the Conservative Party won 50.8 per cent of the House of Commons seats in 2015 on a vote share of just 36.8 per cent.

The Irish electoral system is a proportional electoral system, but it is a different type of proportional system to the list systems used in other states like Germany. The proportional element in the Irish system is based on preferential voting/transferable votes and multi-seat constituencies, however the relatively small number of seats assigned to Irish (Dáil) constituencies (between 3 and 5) means that parties/candidates need to win a fairly significant share of the constituency vote to be in contention to win one of these seats in that constituency.

Small parties (and independent candidates) can – and do – win seats in the Irish electoral system. This "Independents and Others" grouping currently accounts for 30 of the 166 seats in the outgoing Dáil, although these numbers have been inflated by defections from the larger parties. But smaller parties are usually only in contention for seats in their stronger areas (which will usually tend to cut across a small number of Dáil constituencies), while the size of the constituency in terms of seat numbers can often have a bearing too.

Smaller parties often find it easier to win seat in the "larger" 5-seat constituencies than in the "smaller" 3-seat constituencies, as the percentage share of the vote needed to win a seat tends to be smaller in the 5-seat constituencies. This is not as much of an issue for the independent candidates. Apart from some notable exceptions, the support bases of independent candidates tend to be very locally defined, as envisaged in the "friends and neighbours voting" concept. Assuming that their main local support base is entirely found within the constituency area, independents often have as good a chance of winning seats in the 3-seat constituencies as in 4-seat/5-seat constituencies.

Predicting the outcome

Given this system, the party/political grouping support levels indicated in opinion polls need to be viewed within the framework of the 40 Dáil constituencies being contested and their sizes (i.e. whether these are 3, 4 or 5 seat constituencies). This task becomes even more challenging once boundary changes are factored in and particularly for the 2016 election, given that the *2012 Constituency Commission* report brought in the most dramatic changes to Irish general election constituency boundaries since 1980, including an overall reduction in Dáil seat levels from 166 to 158.

Over the past years I have tried to tease out what certain opinion poll trends/figures might mean in terms of potential Dáil seat levels by applying a model based around a constituency-level analysis of the polling figures. This model identifies the national swing towards/away from a political party/political grouping relative to their support levels in the previous (2011) general election. This national swing is then applied to the 2011 support levels for each political party/political grouping in each of the 40 Dáil constituencies to produce constituency-level support estimates for each of these parties/groupings.

Given that swings to/from different parties/groupings tend to vary geographically at elections, these estimates should not be understood as being 100 per cent accurate constituency predictions. However based on these constituency-level support estimates, the likely distribution of seats in a constituency is teased out with the sole purpose of calculating an overall (national) estimate of Dáil seat-levels for each of the larger political parties (Fine Gael, [Fianna Fáil](#), [Sinn Féin](#) and Labour) and the Independents and Others grouping. Figure 1 below illustrates the results.

Figure 1: Dáil seat estimate trends for possible coalitions based on an analysis of opinion polls (2015-16)



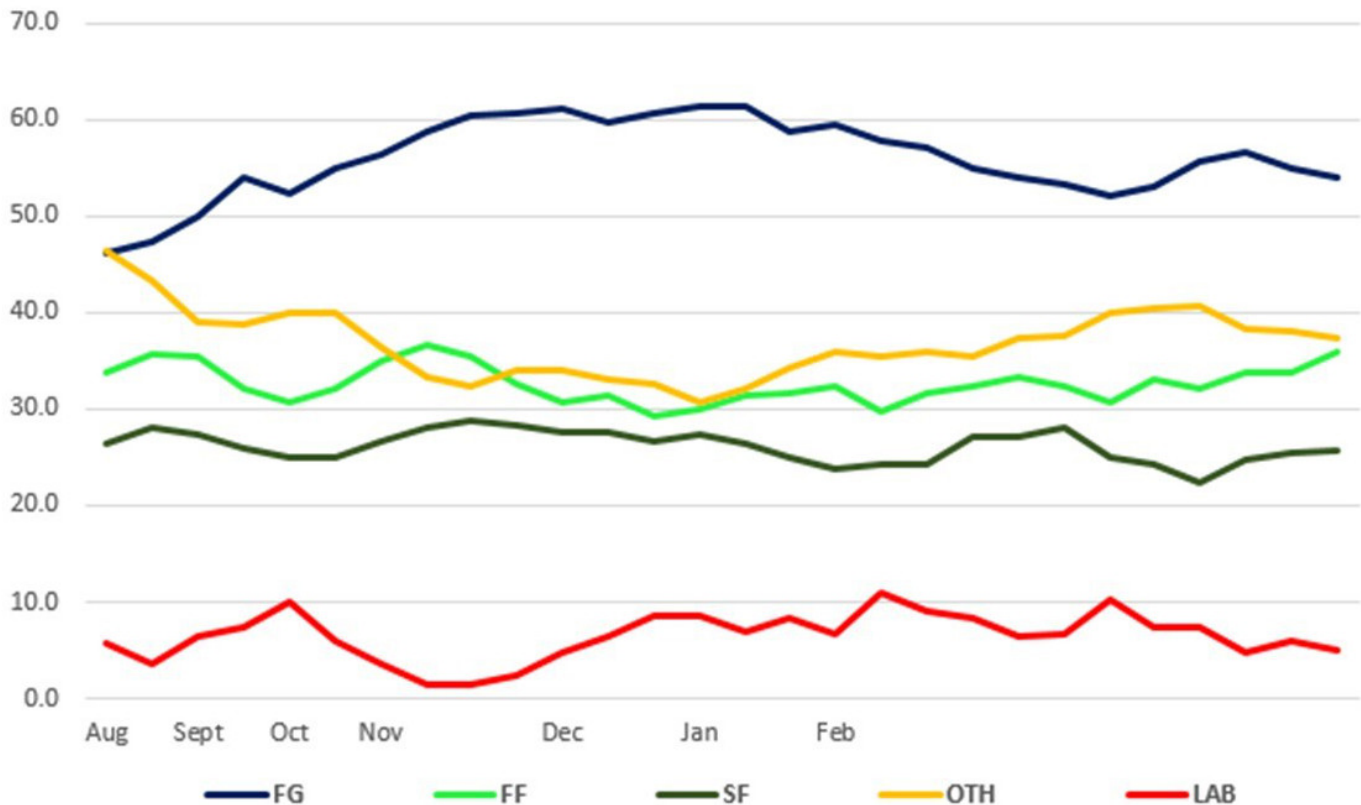
Note: The chart shows combined Dáil seat estimate trends for Fine Gael-Labour and Fianna Fáil-Sinn Féin, as well as the Independents and Others grouping, based on constituency-level analyses of opinion polls carried out between December 2014 and February 2016.

Figure 1 illustrates some interesting trends over this period. In December 2014, combined support levels for the two government parties, Fine Gael and Labour, suggested that they were unlikely to even come close to the number of Dáil seats (79, if the Ceann Comhairle – speaker of the house – is not included) required to have a bare majority in

the next Dáil.

This period came at the end of a number of setbacks for these parties during 2014, including a number of significant losses at the 2014 Local and European elections and the political fall-out of the water charges protests in late 2014. A potential coalition involving the main opposition parties (Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil) and members of the Independents and Others grouping seemed more likely at this point. However, as evidence of an economic recovery in the Republic of Ireland intensified during 2015, support levels for the government – and particularly for Fine Gael – improved and by the end of the year a return to power for the coalition government was becoming a more likely prospect.

Figure 2: Dáil seat estimate trends for parties/groupings based on an analysis of opinion polls (2015-16)



Note: The chart shows combined Dáil seat estimates trends for the larger political parties and the Independents and Others grouping, based on constituency-level analyses of opinion polls carried out between August 2015 and February 2016.

The government parties, however, failed to carry this momentum into the early months of 2016, with this loss of momentum also carrying on into the official general election campaign. The common wisdom had been that – as voters became more focused on the formation of the next government – the Independent and Others grouping might have become “squeezed out” as voters focused more on the competition between the larger parties. But support for this grouping has actually hardened as the campaign has developed and as support has ebbed away from the government parties.

The last opinion poll published before the campaign started – the *Sunday Business Post-Red* opinion poll of 31 January – estimated a combined support level of 39 per cent for the government parties, but this had fallen to around the 35 per cent level in the last few opinion polls of the campaign. Barring a late swing to Fine Gael and Labour, the coalition government looks unlikely to return to power – either as a majority government or as a minority

government with support from smaller parties/groupings, such as [Renua](#), the [Social Democrats](#), the [Green Party](#) or the Independent Alliance, and/or individual independent Dáil deputies. There has also been a late swing towards Fianna Fáil evident in the final opinion polls of the February 2016 campaign, while at the same time there has been a late swing away from Sinn Féin.

Mainly due to the continued strength of the Independents and Others grouping, there appears to be a limited number of potential two-party coalition options. Fine Gael and Sinn Féin could well muster enough seats between them to reach the 79-Dáil seat target, but such a coalition appears to be highly unlikely for ideological reasons. By contrast, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil between them would appear likely to have enough seats to command a comfortable majority in the next Dáil and the ideological/policy differences between these parties are not especially strong.

But there are reasons why such a grand coalition may not emerge. Having observed the tendency for junior coalition partners to suffer in subsequent general elections, Fianna Fáil may be reluctant to enter into coalition with Fine Gael if they have a notably smaller number of seats relative to Fine Gael. Fianna Fáil would also be concerned that this could see them lose ground to Sinn Féin, who would become the main opposition party if such a grand coalition was to be formed. There is also notable hostility amongst ordinary party members to the idea of entering into a coalition with Fine Gael.

At this stage, it seems likely that the shape of next Irish government will not be known immediately after the end of counting across the weekend, bar a late, and sizeable, swing towards the government parties. The only certainty, as of now, is uncertainty.

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