

# The 2016 Irish general election: the parties and the polling

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*Ireland is expected to hold its next general election in either February or March. Ahead of the election, **James McBride** assesses developments since the last contest in 2011, where Fianna Fáil saw its vote share substantially reduced in the aftermath of the financial crisis. He writes that present polling suggests Fine Gael will retain its status as the largest party, but that it is unclear who the party would be able to go into coalition with to form a new government if the Labour Party experiences a drop in support.*



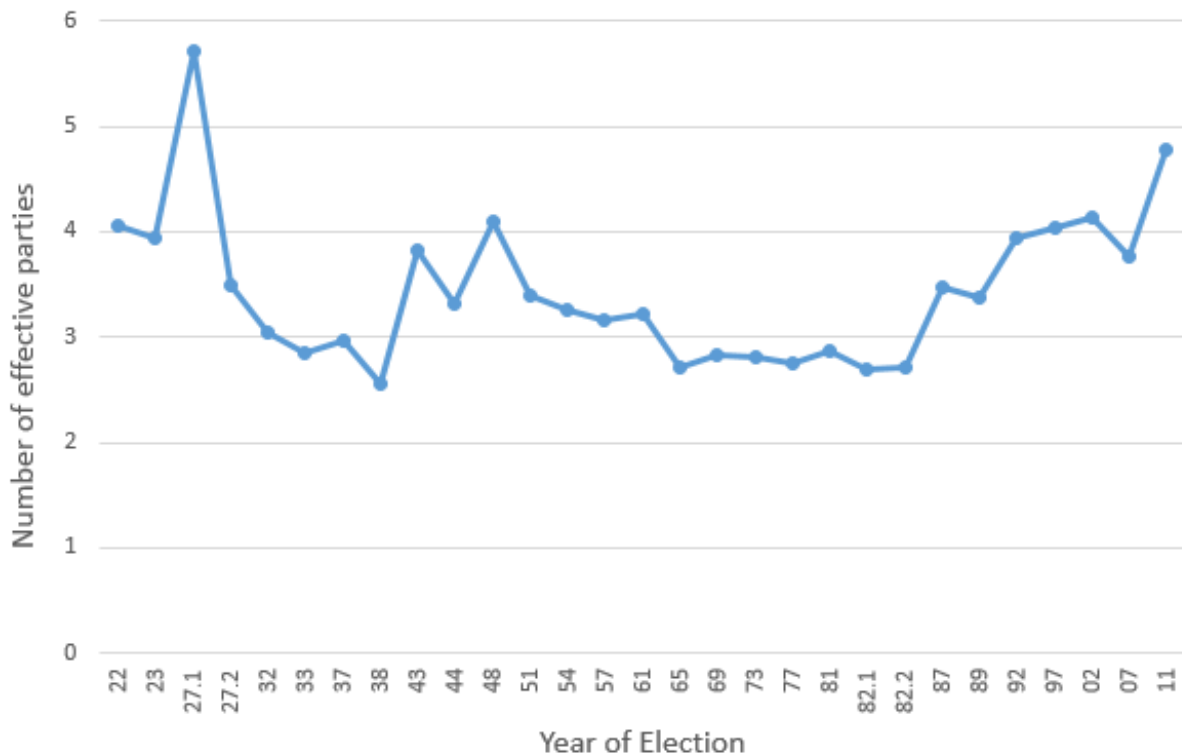
The first quarter of 2016 will see the first general election in Ireland since the momentous “Earthquake” election of February 2011 which saw **Fianna Fáil**, for decades the unchallenged largest party in the Irish system, reduced to a shadow of its former self in the wake of the global financial and economic crisis of the past decade. How has the electoral landscape changed in the intervening years?

## The 2011 election revisited

The 2011 election was a shocking event in the context of Irish political history. The Irish party system had already **transitioned** from the classic ‘two and a half party’ system, which had existed in the 1930s and again from the mid-60s to the mid-80s, into a multi-party system by 2011. However, for the most part the pain of that transition was seen in increased volatility in support for **Fine Gael** and **Labour**, the other two parties in the ‘two and a half’ system, while Fianna Fáil’s share of the vote took a comparatively gentle decline from around 45 per cent of the vote toward a 40 per cent share.

The EU-IMF bailout, however, and its associated austerity, saw their share of the vote collapse from 42 per cent in 2007 to 17 per cent in 2011. That vote split in all directions, with Fine Gael, Labour, **Sinn Féin** and independents all seeing spikes in their respective vote shares. When the dust settled, Fine Gael and Labour had won a combined 113 out of 166 seats in the new Dáil. Ironically, the most volatile election in more than 80 years (see Figure 1) had given them the largest majority in the history of the chamber and secured a stable political environment for the next five years.

## Figure 1: Number of effective parties in the Irish Parliament (1922-2011)



**Note:** The chart implements the [Herfindahl-Hirschman concentration index](#) to illustrate the increasing multi-party nature of the Irish system.

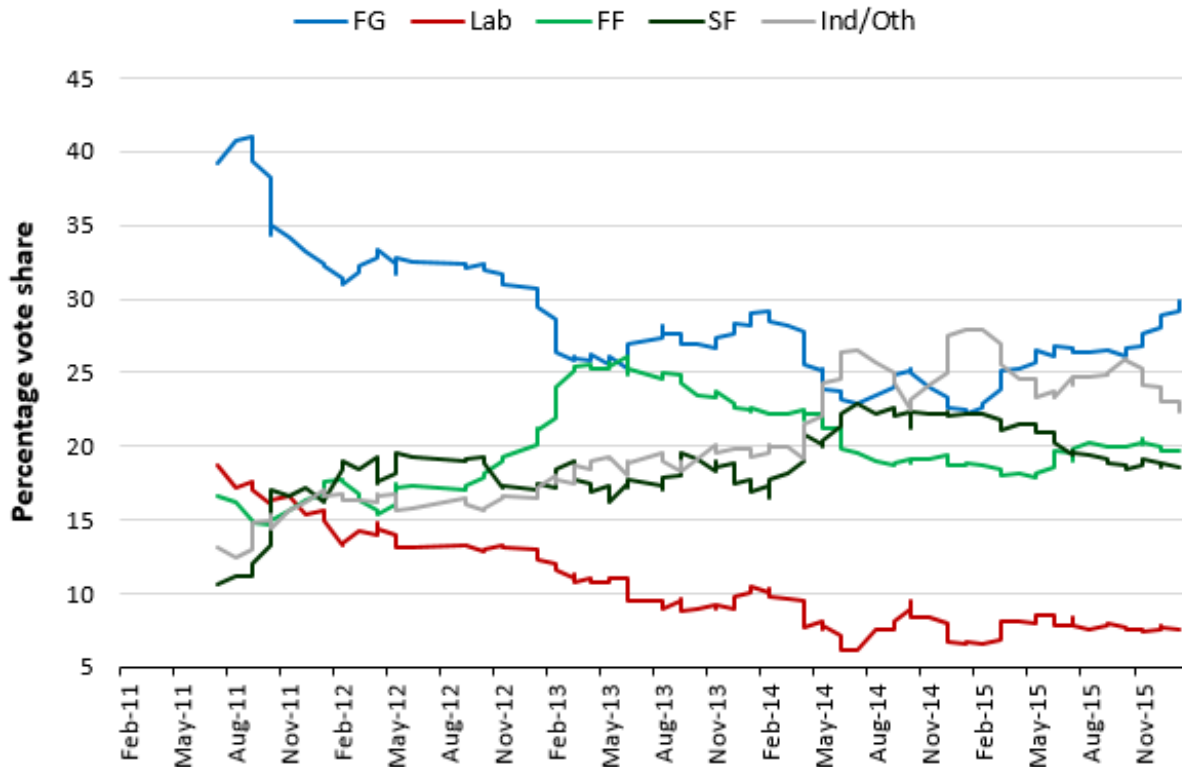
Despite suffering such a crushing defeat at the polls, Fianna Fáil did not suffer the fate of other parties in countries hit by the crisis, such as [Pasok](#) in Greece. In Pasok’s case, the decline was accompanied by increased electoral instability, with multiple snap elections between May 2012 and September 2015 seeing their share of the vote collapse from 44 per cent in 2009 to 5 per cent by January 2015 – the party increasing their vote share only slightly to 6 per cent in September 2015 in alliance with the [Democratic Left](#).

By contrast, the stability of the coalition government in Ireland meant that Fianna Fáil did not have to face the electorate again until local and European Parliament elections in 2014. With the coalition government continuing the implementation of austerity policies, Fianna Fáil’s share of the vote rallied to the extent that they won the largest share of the vote in both sets of elections, though this failed to prevent them from losing two of the three seats they held in Brussels. At local level they reclaimed the mantle of largest party from Fine Gael, a development that might have seemed unexpected in 2011.

While this suggests a recovery for Fianna Fáil, the opinion polls conducted since the last general election tell a rather more nuanced story, as shown in Figure 2. If we look at a moving average of the polls to smooth out some of the irregularities in the data, we see instead a number of waves of support for different options at different times. From the lows of 2011, Fianna Fáil support rose over the first two years of the parliament, with the party even leading in some polls, before drifting lower again.

The outgoing government parties have had contrasting experiences in the polls – both saw their support fall away after a honeymoon period in office, once the realities of continued austerity became clear. However, although the Fine Gael vote stabilised around two years in and has even recovered to some extent over two distinct periods (2013 to mid-2014 and from early 2015 until now), Labour have continued to drift downwards.

**Figure 2: Five-point moving average of voting intention in Ireland (April 2011 – January 2016)**



**Note:** For more information on the parties see: [Fine Gael \(FG\)](#); [Fianna Fáil \(FF\)](#); [Labour Party \(Lab\)](#); [Sinn Féin \(SF\)](#).

This can at least in part be explained by the relative success of Sinn Féin, and the somewhat nebulous group ‘independents and others’ who between them have attracted the anti-austerity vote. While it has stabilised and perhaps drifted slightly lower in the past year, Sinn Féin have still approximately doubled their support since 2011. The rise of independents and others is perhaps the more striking development over the parliament. At its height in mid to late 2014, almost a third of voters preferred that option; as recently as January 2014 it could still attract nearly a quarter of voters, which suggests that the anger felt by a large proportion of the electorate over the collapse of the economy in 2008 has still not abated.

### Looking ahead to the 2016 election

The Irish government has yet to call the next election, but it is generally accepted that it will take place towards the end of February or perhaps early March. Can we make any tentative observations as to the likely outcome? Given the recent trend of the polls, it is likely that Fine Gael will retain its position as largest party and will be in pole position to lead the next government. Even if it does so as a smaller party than in 2011 this will be an historic achievement – since 1932 no one other than Fianna Fáil has won successive elections in Ireland.

If Fine Gael is to lead the next government, who will be its coalition partner, or indeed partners? Given the consistent nature of its decline since 2011, it is difficult though by no means impossible to see Labour contributing enough to retain a two party coalition, in which case one or more of the smaller parties which have arisen since the last election, such as [Renua](#) (founded by Fine Gael members of parliament who were expelled from the party over differences on the issue of abortion) or the [Social Democrats](#) (founded by former independent members of parliament and a former Labour junior minister who resigned the party whip over health policy) may come in to play, as indeed may other Independent members of parliament who may form a significant pool from which to choose.

That leaves Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin, both of whom at this point in proceedings have declared their unwillingness

to go into government with Fine Gael. Fianna Fáil may have fallen back from the heights they reached in the polls earlier in the parliament, but having outperformed those polls in the 2014 European and local elections, they may do so again. If so, at least some of that revival could be at Sinn Féin's expense, recovering some of the voters that defected in 2011.

One final technical issue to note relates to the voting system. The Single Transferable Vote system is reliant on vote transfers as well as first preferences. Both Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin are historically less transfer friendly than Fine Gael or Labour – in 2011 this manifested itself in Fine Gael receiving a record electoral bonus of a share of seats almost 10 percentage points or around 15 seats higher than their share of the vote. If this repeats itself in 2016 the outgoing government may find it easier to return as a two-party coalition than may seem to be the case on current polls.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: European People's Party (CC-BY-SA-2.0)*

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