

Ireland's decision to retain the Seanad is not the end of the country's political reform process

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On 4 October the Irish electorate voted against the abolition of Ireland's upper house of parliament, the Seanad, in a referendum. [John Fitzgibbon](#) assesses the outcome of the referendum, noting that the campaign was largely framed around the idea of ensuring the political class received its fair share of cutbacks in the context of austerity policies. The fact that voters rejected the proposal, however, does not mean an end for Ireland's political reform process. Almost all of those arguing in favour of retaining the Seanad advocated future reforms to strengthen its role as a check on executive power.



The Republic of Ireland held a [referendum](#) on abolishing its upper house, the Seanad (Senate), on Friday October 4th. The proposal was defeated by 51.7 per cent to 48.3 per cent on a turnout of 39.7 per cent. Being held at the same time was another referendum to establish a Court of Appeal. Largely uncontested, it passed by 65.2 per cent to 34.8 per cent on a 39.1 per cent turnout.

The proposal to abolish the Seanad is an interesting development from the perspective of the Eurozone crisis as it represents the efforts of one of the crisis states to reform its political institutions, in addition to its economic and financial systems. Institutional failure has been identified as a central component of the Eurozone crisis, yet there has been little in the way of reform of these institutions to facilitate improved decision making and to strengthen institutional checks and balances on government.

The impetus for the referendum came from a pledge made by Taoiseach Enda Kenny in 2009 when he was leader of the opposition. This was followed up in party manifestoes for the 2011 general election where there was general consensus amongst the 4 largest parties that the Seanad was an archaic institution that had outlived its usefulness and needed to be abolished.

Consumed by the pressing need to solve Ireland's dire economic situation and unemployment crisis, the new government of Fine Gael and Labour made only minor political reforms and it was assumed that Seanad abolition was off the agenda. It was with some surprise that the Taoiseach announced his intention to hold a referendum on Seanad abolition and to establish the Court of Appeal in June 2013. As the Seanad is mentioned some 40 times in the Constitution, a referendum was compulsory, while the establishment of the Court of Appeal required changes to the Constitution and a referendum was also constitutionally required.

The Seanad was founded at the beginning of the Irish state in 1922 and was reformed with the new Irish Constitution in 1937. Very much in keeping with the political flavour of the times it has a strong corporatist element with various 'panels' representing different elements of society – administration, agriculture, commerce and industry, education and labour – making up 43 of the 60 seats, with 6 seats for University of Dublin and the National University of Ireland. Elections are held after general elections with local and national politicians and graduates from



Fine Gael poster for the 'Yes' campaign, Credit: Fine Gael (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

certain universities making up the electorate. This narrow electorate was designed to ensure that the Seanad focused on providing experienced and minority (specifically Protestant) voices with a national political platform. In reality it quickly became controlled by the political parties. With the remaining 11 seats retained for appointments made by the Taoiseach, the government of the day has always maintained a majority. These issues combined to turn the Seanad into a debating chamber rather than an important element of parliamentary checks and balances on executive power.

Opinion polling had consistently shown that abolition had clear support amongst the electorate and the government (principally the largest party Fine Gael) delayed their campaign launch until September. Instead of focusing on the need for streamlined government or providing concrete reforms to the Dáil (lower house) the abolition campaign **focused** on the cost of the Seanad and on the opportunity to reduce the number of politicians in the country. Though some token reforms were proposed in relation to using the d'Hondt method for apportioning Chairs of Dáil committees, the **focus** was almost exclusively on making sure the political class received its share of cutbacks, the same as the rest of society in a time of austerity.

Very quickly, however, the argument ran out of steam as the relevant administrators pointed out that Fine Gael's figure of €20 million in savings, displayed prominently in their literature, was incorrect. The main opposition party Fianna Fáil changed its opinion on the Seanad and came out strongly against abolition, using the opportunity to rehabilitate themselves in the public eye after suffering one of the **largest election reverses** in post-war European politics in 2011.

A civil society group made up of independent Senators and leading members from law, business and academia called 'Democracy Matters' mounted a vigorous defence of the Seanad. The basis of this opposition was of resistance to a 'government power grab' and for the need of a reformed Seanad to provide adequate checks and balances on the government. Though the **document** Democracy Matters produced had an unworkable electoral system and was most likely unconstitutional, their argument of a reformed Seanad over no Seanad gained increasing traction. Despite Taoiseach Kenny investing a lot of personal political capital in the referendum, he failed to debate the abolition in a broadcast or public forum. This failure and the uncertainty over the €20 million figure gave the impression of a half-hearted and unresponsive campaign.

Though opinion polls showed the Yes side with a clear lead, pollsters cautioned that the large number of 'Don't Knows' have tended to fall on the 'No' side in similar referendums. In the final days of the campaign the increasing number of polls showing the 'No' vote catching-up gave the momentum to the side advocating retention. The slim majority of 1.3 per cent divided the country into a clear **rural/urban split**, with Dublin and the heavily populated East being in favour of retention, while the rural West and South supported abolition.

It was not any residual affection for the institution from the Irish people that saved the Seanad from the chopping block, it was the failure of the government to clearly articulate a package of wider political reforms to complement its abolition that was the reason for the referendum's defeat. The outcome does not mean the end of political reform in Ireland. None of the Senators and supporters of Seanad retention favoured the status quo; all advocated some degree of reform. What it more likely represents is the resting of control of the political reform agenda away from the government toward a more inclusive and hopefully faster programme of reform.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPPE – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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