11
IRELAND

Richard Dunphy

Figure 11.1  Map of Ireland
1 Geographical position

Located in the north-western part of Europe, the Republic of Ireland belongs geographically to the so-called British Isles. With an area of 70,000 square kilometres, it shares the island’s territory with Northern Ireland, which belongs to the United Kingdom. The Irish Republic has a population of over 4.5 million people with a low density of 65.2 inhabitants per square kilometre. Its population is quite homogenous and does not entail the presence of any major ethnic group.

2 Historical background

The Republic of Ireland gained its independence from British rule in 1922, following an Anglo-Irish Treaty signed on 6 December 1921, that ended several years of conflict between the British government and the Irish independence movement. A crucial aspect of this treaty was the division of the island into Northern Ireland, which remained part of the United Kingdom, and the Southern Irish State, later renamed as the Republic of Ireland in 1949. The treaty, which was supported by moderate Nationalists and opposed by ‘hard-line’ Republicans, triggered a civil
war and eventually led to the establishment of the two main parties that have dominated Irish politics ever since: the pro-treaty Fine Gael, Family or Clan of the Gaels, founded in 1933, and the anti-treaty Fianna Fáil, Soldiers of Destiny, founded in 1926. Such a division over the treaty remained a source of contention throughout the interwar period. In 1932, the leader of Fianna Fáil Eamon De Valera became Taoiseach (Prime Minister) and abolished the oath of allegiance to the British monarchy, which had been an important condition for the Anglo-Irish Treaty. He also severed ties to the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth with a new Constitution in 1937 that made Southern Ireland a Republic in all but name. The official declaration arrived only after the Republic of Ireland Act 1948 (No. 22 of 1948) was signed into law by the Oireachtas (Parliament) on 21 December 1948 and came into force on Easter Monday, 18 April 1949. During WWII, De Valera kept Ireland neutral; he was replaced as Taoiseach by Fine Gael leader John A. Costello in 1948. Costello introduced the Republic of Ireland Act that ended membership of the Commonwealth. The UK government, which reluctantly accepted the Act, offered reassurance to the pro-British majority living in the North of the island by declaring that this territory would join the Republic of Ireland only if this was agreed by the Northern Ireland Assembly. De Valera remained in politics as Taoiseach from 1951 to 1954 and later from 1957 to 1959 and as President of Ireland for two seven-year terms until 1973.

Throughout the 1960s, the objective of the various governments was to improve the economy of the country, still lagging behind in relation to most industrialized western European democracies. Despite its entry to the European Economic Community in 1973, alongside the UK and Denmark, economic recession and stagnation characterized most of the decade in Ireland. Only in the mid-1980s did its economy begin to recover. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Ireland, known as the ‘Celtic Tiger’, undertook major transformations, thanks to massive inward investment and EU structural funds, which led to an economic boom.

However, over-reliance on foreign capital and on an artificially-inflated housing market, massive and unsustainable borrowing, and a relative failure to invest in health and education, made Ireland vulnerable to the full onslaught of the 2008 financial crisis. In November 2010, the country was left with no alternative but to take a loan from the European Financial Stability Fund (EFSF), which led to the introduction of major austerity measures in order to bring down a budget deficit that reached 32.4 per cent of gross domestic product.

Between 1997 and 2008, during Bertie Ahern’s premiership, the Irish and British governments worked closely to resolve the conflict in Northern Ireland. The so-called ‘Good Friday Agreement’, signed on 10 April 1998, was an important milestone towards peace which was finally achieved with the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly and a devolved Northern Irish government. This new situation also allowed the rise of living standards for local people.

### 3 Geopolitical profile

Ireland is well integrated into global governance institutions. However, one major feature of Ireland’s political profile has been its neutrality since WWII, which prevented its membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. And yet, Irish troops have been engaged in humanitarian missions under United Nations’ auspices. After the lengthy and thorny ratification process of the Treaty of the European Union, several Irish governments began to reconsider the question of neutrality within the Common Foreign and Security Policy. The introduction of the battle groups model has led to the inclusion of Irish troops, a policy which has been opposed by smaller parties, particularly the Greens. Finally, Ireland has been involved in NATO’s Partnership for Peace programme since 2000.
4 Overview of the political landscape

The Republic of Ireland, or Éire in Irish, is a parliamentary democracy based on the bicameral Oireachtas, consisting of a Lower Chamber, the 166-member Dáil and an Upper Chamber, the 60-member Seanad. The former dominates the legislative process while the latter may be able to delay, but not reject, legislation. The members of the Dáil are elected every five years by a Single Transferable Voting (STV) system. Ireland is one of the few countries in Europe using such a system. Given that it is difficult to achieve an absolute majority within the Parliament, the two main political parties Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil usually have to form coalitions with smaller parties. The head of state is the President of the Republic, who is directly elected by the population for a seven-year period and is the Guardian of the Constitution. Between 2008 and 2011, Prime Minister Brian Cowen of Fianna Fáil led the country with the Progressive Democrats and the Greens.

However, the management of the financial crisis created a catastrophic loss of confidence in Cowen’s government, which was replaced after early elections in January 2011 by a Fine Gael/Labour coalition government under the premiership of Enda Kenny. Mary McAleese, an independent candidate supported by Fianna Fáil, served two terms as President between 1997 and 2011, and was followed by Labour’s Michael D. Higgins in November 2011.

5 A brief account of political parties

The centre-right Nationalist Fianna Fáil is the biggest party in Ireland, with a level of popular support that has averaged above 40 per cent in general elections since 1932. The party had been leading a minority coalition government, with the Green Party and the support of five independent parliamentary deputies, which lasted from 1997 until early 2011 when it suffered a disastrous defeat in early elections. The centre-right Fine Gael is the second largest party in Ireland and has occupied this position since 1932. Sometimes seen as an alliance of moderate Social Liberals and Christian Democrats, the party is more strongly tied to fiscal rectitude and is less Nationalistic than its main rival. Labour is Ireland’s third political party, belonging to the moderate, social democratic tradition. Since Irish independence was attained in 1921, Labour has been in government for 19 years on six occasions in coalition with Fine Gael, with or without smaller parties and once with Fianna Fáil. In 1999, Labour merged with the small, ex-Marxist Democratic Left party, from whose ranks Labour leader Eamon Gilmore, and his immediate predecessor, Pat Rabbitte, were both drawn. However, the merger did not lead to any discernible move to the left on the political spectrum.

Amongst the smaller parties, Sinn Féin (Ourselves) is an ultra-Nationalist party that acted as the political wing of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), which fought in order to secure the British withdrawal from Northern Ireland and the reunification of Ireland. Both the IRA and Sinn Féin have played a central role in the Northern Ireland peace process; the Republican party has participated in the government of Northern Ireland alongside pro-British Unionists, effectively abandoning its ‘armed struggle’ and even its hard-line Republican principles in favour of much greater pragmatism. Sinn Féin is difficult to locate on a left–right continuum and its membership and support base also contain both far-left and far-right elements, whilst its leadership increasingly gravitates towards the political centre and makes no secret of its ambition to enter a coalition government.

As for other small parties, the Socialist Party was founded by Trotskyists who were expelled from the Labour Party in the early 1990s. Headed by Joe Higgins, it gained a reputation for activist politics at a local level and a trenchant defence of workers’ rights. The

**5.1 Party attitudes towards the European Union**

The Republic of Ireland has long been regarded as one of the most ‘pro–European’ member states. The two main political parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, and from the 1980s onwards Labour also, share a consensus in favour of EU membership, development and expansion.

In particular, Fianna Fáil’s pro–European stance has essentially pragmatic roots, being couched in terms of what Ireland can gain from EU membership and from backing further integration. It harbours many citizens whose attitudes towards EU policy are essentially cold-blooded and certainly devoid of federalist idealism. Above all, the party has tied its reputation and credibility to the strength of the Irish economy and is both deeply sceptical about ceding to the EU strong fiscal powers and highly vulnerable to electoral fluctuations when the economy is in difficulty (Hayward and Fallon, 2009, 493–4).

Fine Gael has long been described as the most pro–EU party in Ireland. However, this remains more true of Fine Gael party elites, who continue to exhibit a strong ideological commitment to European integration and see this allegiance as a core part of their political identity, than it does of party members and supporters, amongst whom a more pragmatic and even critical attitude has been growing in recent years. Traditionally, Fine Gael has drawn a sizeable proportion of its members and supporters from the farming community and it is this rural heartland that has moved from enthusiastic pragmatic support for the EU to a more detached stance since the Fischler Reforms to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The Labour Party has moved...
from an initial position of opposition to the EU to enthusiastic support and active involvement in the Party of European Socialists (PES). However, such ‘Europeanization’ of its politics has affected party elites more than ordinary members (Holmes, 2009b, 538–9).

Initially strongly opposed to Ireland’s membership of the EU, Sinn Féin has later undergone what Agnes Maillot describes as ‘partial Europeanization’, leading the party towards a soft Eurosceptic position (Maillot, 2009, 559). As a result, it no longer calls for Irish withdrawal from the European Union, but for reforming the EU organization from within. The motivation for this change in policy emphasis is two-fold: first, the party has come to see the EU as an opportunity, another terrain of struggle upon which to advance its goal of securing a British retreat from Northern Ireland and reuniting the country. Thus, it has enthusiastically embraced an agenda, hitherto associated with moderate Nationalists, of advocating Irish unity by stealth within the European Union, for example by urging EU institutions to treat Ireland as a single economic unit and by advocating the adoption of the Euro in Northern Ireland. Second, it has come to recognize the centrality of EU funding to Irish and Northern Irish economic regeneration.

As to the Greens’ attitude towards European integration, it has evolved from outright dismissal of the EU as a centralized super state, destructive of Irish democracy, to mild support of the European Union as an opportunity structure (Bolleyer and Panke, 2009). This Europeanization involved both the downgrading of the Greens’ own emphasis on participatory democracy and citizens’ initiatives after 1997, and a closer alignment with EU policy after the 2003 EU Convention on the Future of Europe. After 2003, the party hardly ever applied the old, simplistic frame of the EU as a centralized super state, which it had previously deemed incompatible with local democracy. Their criticisms became less structural and much more refined in subsequent years (Bolleyer and Panke, 2009, 552). The more pro-EU policy stance facilitated the Greens’ participation in coalition government with Fianna Fáil in 2007, and this in turn produced further moderation of its EU policies. In January 2008, the party leader, John Gormley, succeeded in winning an internal referendum of party members in favour of the Lisbon Treaty by 63 per cent to 37 per cent. However, this fell short of the two-thirds majority necessary to change the party’s constitution to allow the party to support the new treaty in view of the first referendum. In fact, its members campaigned on both sides, with the Green Party officially remaining neutral.

Overall, the conduct of Irish referenda on European Union Treaties shows the emergence of a dynamic of elite withdrawal from the political field, permitting the capture of supporters by non-mainstream populist groups on both the far left and far right (O’Mahony, 2009). In particular, in June 2008, the referendum on the Lisbon Treaty was held in circumstances that favoured the emergence of Euroscepticism. Such popular consultation had itself been postponed for months as the then Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, was diverted from the business of government by revelations at a judicial tribunal of enquiry into allegations of corruption (ibid., 438). Between Ahern’s announcement of his pending resignation on 2 April and the election of Brian Cowen as new leader of the Fianna Fáil party and later as Taoiseach on 8 May, there was a political vacuum which was filled by populist ‘No’ vote campaigners. The mainstream parties failed to mount an effective debate on the subsequent referendum, relying on vague pro-European slogans and appeals for trust.

The problem they faced was that the electorate was in no mood to trust mainstream politicians. The whiff of corruption that hung over the Fianna Fáil-led government may not have been enough in itself to lead to widespread alienation. However, Ireland’s hitherto booming economy had come to a staggering halt by the time of Lisbon I. Indeed, in September 2008, the country became the first euro-zone state to enter recession, with GDP expected to contract by 14 per cent by 2010, unemployment predicted to rise by 17 per cent in the same period,
Ireland

and the perilous state of government debt necessitating painful cuts in public spending. Both the incoming Taoiseach and the Minister for Foreign Affairs admitted to not having read the full treaty, which they were appealing to voters to support. The ‘populist capture’ of the Lisbon I referendum campaign comprised a number of strands. On the left, a number of small Trotskyist parties, the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers’ Party, and ‘neo-Stalinist’ parties, such as the Workers’ Party of Ireland, were joined by trade unionists, left-Nationalists and groups such as the People’s Movement in arguing that the Lisbon vote provided an opportunity to vote against policies of economic cut-backs, privatizations and reductions in welfare, assaults on workers’ rights, and the undermining of Irish neutrality and sovereignty. The ultra-Nationalist Sinn Féin, the only party represented in Parliament to join the ‘No’ campaign, since the Greens reversed their position as part of the price of sharing government office with Fianna Fáil, called for a ‘No’ vote largely on grounds of national sovereignty and social justice. A National Platform guided by the prominent left-Nationalist, Anthony Coughlan, echoed these arguments together with the argument that Lisbon was detrimental to small countries such as Ireland. Left groups calling for a ‘No’ vote tended to use the opportunity to call on Irish voters to punish elites that were ‘out of touch’ with the ‘true’ feelings of ‘the people’. On the right, a group of populist Catholic ‘Ultras’, led by Justin Barrett, called for a ‘No’ vote on the grounds that the Charter of Fundamental Rights would force Ireland to legalise abortion, gay marriage, euthanasia and prostitution (O’Mahony, 2009, 441), and again appealed to anti-elite sentiment with slogans such as ‘Don’t be Bullied, Vote No.’

All of these groups had been active during the Nice referenda in 2001–2002. This time, however, they were joined by a well-financed Conservative movement on the right, founded and financed by an Irish millionaire businessman with strong ties to the US military-industrial complex, Declan Ganley. He launched the Libertas movement as a lobby campaign against any EU Constitutional Treaty in 2006. During the Lisbon I Referendum, Libertas developed what were to be Ganley’s key themes of support for neo-liberalism and entrepreneurship, allegations that Lisbon was de facto a new European Constitution and as such would hold business back by drowning it in red tape and new regulations, and attacks on the political elites as being contemptuous of democracy. Given the conservative nature of Irish political culture, Ganley’s movement probably mobilized many voters that the populist left and the ultra-Catholic right alone could not have reached (Fitzgibbon, 2009, 20). Subsequently in 2008, the millionaire businessman turned Libertas into a transnational right-wing Eurosceptic political party, holding its first official Congress in Rome in May 2009 and fielding candidates in many countries in the forthcoming European elections.

6 Public opinion on the European Union

Over time, political parties’ consensus towards the EU was joined by major interest groups including the powerful farmers’ lobby and the main trade unions. EU membership brought very considerable economic benefits, including large-scale investment in infrastructure: Ireland received over €20 billion in funding from the Structural and Cohesion Funds since joining in 1973, facilitating an impressive modernization of roads, tunnels, bridges and telecommunications (Benoit, 2009, 447). Above all, the farming community experienced unprecedented prosperity thanks to the support of the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF) which led to the transformation of Irish rural life (O’Toole, 2003, 20). European Union membership became firmly linked in the Irish popular imagination with the economic miracle which transformed a country accustomed to poverty, unemployment, and emigration into the ‘Celtic Tiger’ phenomenon of the 1990s, with some of the highest growth rates in the
developed capitalist world. Finally, it must be noted that mainstream Irish nationalism, in sharp contrast to British nationalism, worked firmly in favour of positive engagement with deeper European integration. This is because the political elite had successfully ‘sold’ the EU project to most Irish voters as a way of shaking off economic, political, and cultural dependence on the ‘old enemy’, Britain, and of asserting a new and more heavyweight role for Ireland on the European and world stage.

Yet, as Table 11.3 shows, a more sceptical view of the EU and the whole process of ‘deepening’ started to emerge even before the Irish economy plunged into difficulties in the second half of the first decade of the twentieth-first century.

The Irish electorate’s rejection of the Nice Treaty in the first ratification referendum held in June 2001 came as a shock to the political elite. This could be explained as an atypical ‘blip’ caused by the failure of a complacent political elite to mobilise voters and to its reluctance to invest on this campaign in view of the 2002 national election. Moreover, the relatively low turnout meant that ‘No’ voters were not more numerous than in the referenda on the Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties, although ‘Yes’ voters had fallen considerably. The political elite’s success in securing ratification with a second referendum in October 2002 – after a much more organized and coherent campaign – seemed to confirm this hypothesis. However, the Irish electorate’s rejection of the Lisbon Treaty in June 2008 shattered such a comforting view. This time, the turnout was higher than in either of the Nice Treaty referenda, and the ‘No’ vote was marginally higher than in Nice I; indeed, as an overall percentage of the total electorate, ‘No’ voters had risen markedly from an average of 19 per cent in the previous four EU referenda to 28 per cent. A new era loomed on the Irish political horizon, that of Euroscepticism.

Amid a growing climate of financial fear, it became clear that the days when Ireland benefited from massive EU subsidies were over and that the country, one of the most open and globalized economies in the world, had become extraordinarily vulnerable. Not surprisingly perhaps, many Irish voters blamed the governing parties for what was perceived as a missed opportunity for growth, and for the painful disillusionment that accompanied ‘boom and bust’. Irish support for European integration, which tended towards the pragmatic, started to wane and many Irish voters professed a low level of knowledge of EU matters (Laffen and O’Mahony, 2008). Polls suggested little in the way of awareness of what the Lisbon Treaty was actually about.

Despite this development, Irish public opinion remains pro-EU in general, although its support tends to be more pragmatic and closely connected to the effectiveness of the political elite in responding to the new challenges. Finally, as a result of a better organized and coordinated ‘Yes’ campaign, the second referendum on the Lisbon Treaty was approved in October 2009.

### Table 11.3 European referendum results: 1972–2009 (%)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Turnout</th>
<th>Spoilt or blank ballots</th>
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<tr>
<td>10/05/1972</td>
<td>EEC Accession</td>
<td>83.1</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>70.9</td>
<td>0.8</td>
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<td>26/05/1987</td>
<td>Single European Act</td>
<td>69.9</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>44.1</td>
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<td>18/06/1992</td>
<td>Maastricht Treaty</td>
<td>69.1</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22/05/1998</td>
<td>Amsterdam Treaty</td>
<td>61.7</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>56.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
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<td>07/06/2001</td>
<td>Nice Treaty (first time)</td>
<td>46.1</td>
<td>53.9</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>1.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>20/10/2002</td>
<td>Nice Treaty (second time)</td>
<td>62.9</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>48.5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
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<td>12/06/2008</td>
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<td>53.4</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02/10/2009</td>
<td>Lisbon Treaty (second time)</td>
<td>67.1</td>
<td>32.9</td>
<td>59.0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
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</table>

*Source: Adapted from O’Mahony, 2009, 431.*
7 National and EP electoral systems

In Ireland, all local, national and European elections are based on the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system of proportional representation with multi-member constituencies, as enshrined in the 1937 Constitution.

For the national elections, the 166 members of the lower House of Parliament are elected in 43 multi-seat constituencies, 12 constituencies elect up to 5 members of Parliament, 13 up to 4 and 18 up to 3 representatives.

Over the years, the size of the Irish delegation in the EP has changed, in particular in 2009 it dropped from 13 to 12 with Dublin losing 1 seat. For this election, Ireland was divided into

![Map of EP electoral constituencies in Ireland](image)

*Figure 11.2 Map of EP electoral constituencies in Ireland*
four constituencies, South, East, North-West and Dublin, each returning three MEPs. Moreover, in an effort to achieve a fair balance of voters in each Euro-constituency, the central Ireland counties of Longford and Westmeath were moved from the East to the thinly-populated North-West constituency.

Parties present up to three candidates for each constituency and voters are then free to distribute their first, second, third, and fourth preferences amongst all of the candidates on the ballot paper. There is no obligation to choose all candidates within the same list; voters can award preferences across party lines. A high premium is thus placed on the personal popularity of candidates, who must effectively compete, not only with candidates of other parties, but also with their own party colleagues. Personalism, combined with another strong feature of Irish political culture, localism, helps explain the relative success of independent members who are often candidates that have fallen out with one or other of the mainstream parties but can still count on a reservoir of strong local loyalty. The electoral system and the political culture together tend to maximize the seat-winning capacity of any party that can achieve the unity and discipline of its candidates and its voters, can avoid too many cross-party transfers before all of its own candidates have been voted for by its supporters, can successfully ‘ride the wave’ of localism by selecting candidates who appeal to all geographic parts of what are fairly large European constituencies, and can maximize transfers from candidates of the other parties.

8 A glance at national and EP elections

National and EP elections have a different outlook in the Republic of Ireland. Normally, Fianna Fáil, the dominant party of the political system, loses votes in EP elections in relation to previous national elections. In the midst of an economic crisis and the continuing IRA attacks in Northern Ireland, the Fine Gael and Labour coalition government had to call for early elections in 1977. Prime Minister Liam Cosgrave and his government had major difficulties in dealing with the worldwide recession that also affected Ireland considerably. Fianna Fáil won the elections after a strong campaign against the economic policies of the incumbent government, achieving an outright absolute majority of over 50 per cent. In 1979, the Irish population took part in the first direct election to the EP, registering a turnout of 61.99 per cent, lower than the 76.3 per cent turnout at the national elections. Yet, at the EP elections in 1989, turnout reached 68.3 per cent, the highest rate in the past two decades, mainly due to the fact that Irish legislative elections were held on the same day. In 1994 turnout declined to 44 per cent to recover in 1999, 2004, and 2009 to above 50 per cent due to the concurrence of local elections or sometimes referenda. Although, turnout in EP elections is lower than in national elections, it is substantially higher than in other countries if we exclude the 1984 and 1994 elections.

In the late 1970s, the stagnating economy represented a major problem for the Irish government. As a result, inflation, taxation, and disillusionment with the Fianna Fáil government were the main issues of the campaign of the first EP elections. The importance of this vote was not so much the contents discussed in the campaign, but the fact that Irish identity was now intrinsically linked to the European integration process (Collins, 1985, 105–6).

Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Labour, the Workers’ Party and the Community of Democrats in Ireland – along with three independents – ran in the election, but as in Irish legislative elections, the three main parties dominated. The results saw Fianna Fáil with 34.7 per cent and 5 seats, Fine Gael with 33.1 per cent and 4 seats and Labour with 14.5 per cent and 4 seats. Moreover, two independent candidates, Maher and Blaney, were elected due to the high number of preference voting in the respective constituencies. This meant a considerable loss of voting share for
Ireland

the ruling Fianna Fáil of almost 16 per cent, with a 3 per cent improvement for Fine Gael. The big winner was Labour which, due to preference voting, secured 4 seats like Fine Gael, despite achieving only 14.5 per cent of the vote.

In December 1979, the economic crisis led to the resignation of Taoiseach Jack Lynch and his replacement with the charismatic but controversial Charles Haughey who, in spite of scandals, managed to win the election in 1981. Fianna Fáil achieved 45.3 per cent and 78 seats but this was not enough for an absolute majority. Fine Gael got 36.5 per cent and 75 seats, an improvement of 22 seats over the general election of 1977, and Labour got 9.9 per cent and 15 seats. The Workers’ Party got one seat and six independents were also able to get representation. It led to a minority coalition government under the premiership Fine Gael’s Garrett Fitzgerald, which was defeated on budget by one vote. The early elections convened in February 1982 resulted in a hung Parliament since neither of the two big parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael were able to achieve an absolute majority. Negotiations with the other parties and the independents led to the formation of a Fianna Fáil government, under Taoiseach Charles Haughey, which was defeated by two votes in a motion of confidence on 4 November 1982. Therefore, early elections were called again in which Fianna Fáil achieved 45.2 per cent and 75 seats (−6 in comparison to the February 1982 election), while Fine Gael achieved 39.2 per cent and 71 seats (+6 in comparison to the February 1982 election) while Labour got 9.4 per cent and 16 seats (+1 in comparison to the February 1982 election). The consequence was the formation of another Fine Gael–Labour coalition government under Taoiseach Garrett Fitzgerald.

The 1984 European elections represent a normalization of this kind of event. First of all turnout went down to 46.7 per cent (Collins, 1986). A major factor that may explain the decline of the turnout is that local elections were not held on the same day.

As in the 1979 elections, the three main parties dominated the elections. The two main parties were the big winners, while Labour was not able to return any MEP. The campaign was dominated by national economic issues. The government parties could present a positive balance

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<td>Fianna Fáil</td>
<td>34.7 (5)</td>
<td>39.2 (8)</td>
<td>31.5 (6)</td>
<td>35.0 (7)</td>
<td>38.6 (6)</td>
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<td>Fine Gael</td>
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<td>32.2 (6)</td>
<td>21.6 (4)</td>
<td>24.3 (4)</td>
<td>24.6 (4)</td>
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<td>9.5 (1)</td>
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<td>8.7 (1)</td>
<td>10.6 (1)</td>
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<td>—</td>
<td>2.2 (0)</td>
<td>3.0 (0)</td>
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<td>11.1 (1)</td>
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<td>Independents</td>
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<td>10.6 (1)</td>
<td>11.8 (2)</td>
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<td>Total MEPs</td>
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<td>Turnout</td>
<td>63.6</td>
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</tbody>
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Note: *Votes as percentages and number of seats in brackets.
of membership of the EU, particularly for the farming community. As a result, Fianna Fáil got 39.2 per cent and 8 seats and Fine Gael got 32.2 per cent and 6 seats, whilst Labour with its 8.4 per cent did not secure any seats. Moreover, one independent was elected to Strasbourg (Collins, 1986, 141–3).

Ten months before the end of the five-year legislature period, Fitzgerald’s Fine Gael–Labour government collapsed, after refusal of the junior partner to support spending cuts in order to reduce the budget deficit. Moreover, there was also a general opposition of Labour against the free-market policies of the senior partner. New early elections were called in 1987, which led to the victory of Fianna Fáil with 44.1 and 81 seats against Fine Gael’s 29.3 per cent (−10.1 per cent in comparison to November 1982) and 51 seats (−10 in comparison to November 1982). New Taoiseach Charles Haughey formed a single majority government supported by one vote in Parliament. In early 1989, the government decided to resign after the defeat of a private bill motion on funding for AIDS victims. Although the resignation was unnecessary, Haughey’s minority government, encouraged by very good opinion polls, hoped to achieve an absolute majority by calling early elections to be held on 15 June 1989 in concurrence with EP elections. Fianna Fáil lost seats in National Parliament in relation to 1987, but Fine Gael did not profit substantially from the defeat of its main rival. The Progressive Democrats, a new party that emerged in 1987, after a split within Fianna Fáil, got 5.5 per cent. The Workers’ Party and the Greens made gains. A long period of negotiations opened the way to a new Fianna Fáil–Progressive Democrats government guided by Charles Haughey.

Despite the concurrence of the events, turnout at the EP election was 58.98 per cent, about 10 per cent less than that registered at the general election, with double the number of spoiled votes (Marsh, 1994, 170).

The share of the vote was far more fragmented since the two main parties got about 9–10 per cent less in European elections than national elections, while the smaller parties and independents were able to get a higher consensus. European issues were not prominent in the campaign, except for the issue of European common defence that, due to the neutrality of the country, represented an important part of Irish identity (ibid., 178–9). The final results were: Fianna Fáil 31.5 per cent and 6 seats, Fine Gael 21.6 per cent and 4 seats, and Labour 9.5 per cent and one seat, Progressive Democrats 12 per cent and one seat, Workers’ Party 7.6 per cent and one seat. Moreover, the independent Neil Blaney managed to get through. This shows a fragmentation of representation towards the smaller parties in comparison to the previous EP election in 1984. Another interesting difference was the bad performance of the Progressive Democrats in the general election, but with quite a respectable share of the vote in the EP elections.

In early 1992, after a series of political scandals which discredited the coalition government, Taoiseach Charles Haughey resigned. At the early general elections which followed, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael lost respectively five percentage points in relation to the 1989 elections, whilst Labour was able to improve its performance from 9.5 per cent in 1989 to 19.3 per cent in 1992. The Progressive Democrats declined even further from 5.5 to 4.7 per cent and the Workers’ Party fell from 5 to 2.8 per cent. Finally, the Greens got 1.4 per cent and Sinn Féin 1.6 per cent. With a large absolute majority, Fianna Fáil formed a coalition government with Labour under the premiership of Albert Reynolds.

The 1994 EP election was an important mid-term test for the governing party. Apart from the traditional parties Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour, several small parties took part in the electoral race: Greens, the Progressive Democrats, and the Democratic Left, which had split from the Workers’ Party. Although issues related to Nordic enlargement, structural funds, the common agricultural policy, and institutional reform of the European Union were discussed during the campaign, there were no major differences between the political parties. According
to Edward Moxon Browne, the government used ‘European issues as a camouflage to conceal serious underlying tensions between, and especially within, political parties’ (Moxon Browne, 1996, 123). An important question discussed during the campaign related to the dual mandate of Irish MEPs, with some candidates arguing in its favour, whilst others were prepared to give up the national one (Moxon Browne, 1996).

In terms of results, all main three parties were able to improve on the voting share achieved in the 1994 European elections. More specifically, the government party Fianna Fáil got 35 per cent (+3.5 per cent) and 7 seats (+1), Fine Gael 24.3 per cent (+2.7 per cent) and 4 seats (no change) and Labour 11 per cent (+1.5 per cent) and one seat (no change). The biggest surprise was the excellent results achieved by the Greens, with 3.7 per cent and 2 seats. Only one independent was able to achieve representation in the EP.

By the end of 1994, Labour left the coalition government and formed a rainbow coalition with Fine Gael and the Democratic Left, guided by John Bruton. The reason Labour left the coalition was the emergence of several political scandals related to Fianna Fáil, most prominently in the beef industry. The elections of 6 June 1997 led to a victory of Fianna Fáil under the premiership of Bertie Ahern. Fianna Fáil got 39.3 per cent and 77 seats, while Fine Gael achieved 27.9 per cent and 54 seats; both parties improved, each by 9 seats. Labour suffered the biggest defeat, seemingly reflecting public disillusionment with its decision to change senior coalition partners in late 1994. The Progressive Democrats parliamentary group was reduced from ten to four MPs. The Greens got 2 seats, one more than previously. Sinn Féin got one seat, while the Democratic Left received 4 seats.

The subsequent European Parliament elections took place on 11 June 1999, during the mid-term of Ahern’s coalition government and in concurrence with local elections. As such, this was a key indicator for the overall popularity of the ruling party. The government clearly pushed forward European issues and how well they had managed questions like enlargement and EU reform by highlighting the need to negotiate structural and CAP funds. The Kosovo War played an important role in the campaign, due to the debate on the watering down of Irish neutrality. In particular, small parties like the Greens opposed any Irish engagement in the NATO Partnership for Peace programme. The overall results led to a victory for Fianna Fáil, which was able to improve by 3.6 per cent its previous performance; it achieved 38.6 per cent of the votes by securing 6 seats, one less than in 1994. Fine Gael improved slightly to 24.6 per cent (+0.3 per cent) of the vote and 4 seats, whilst Labour declined to 8.7 per cent (−2.3 per cent) and the Greens lost their voting share with 6.7 per cent (−1.2 per cent), but were able to keep their 2 seats. Finally, two independent members gained access to the Strasbourg arena (Moxon-Brown, 2010).

In the 2002 Elections, Fianna Fáil was reconfirmed in office, again in coalition with the Progressive Democrats. Fianna Fáil was able to improve to 41.5 per cent (+2.2 per cent) and 81 seats. Fine Gael achieved just 22.5 per cent (−5.4 per cent) and 31 seats (−23 seats). Labour was able to improve slightly on the results of 1997 by achieving 10.8 per cent (+0.4 per cent) and 20 seats (−1 seat). However, in reality, this reflected a further loss for Labour, as that party had by then absorbed the smaller Democratic Left. The Progressive Democrats slightly decreased their share of the vote, getting 4 per cent (−0.7 per cent), but improved on seats to 8 (+4 seats). The Greens were able to improve to 3.8 per cent (+1 per cent) and 2 seats (+1 seat). Sinn Féin got 2.5 per cent and one seat, seeing little change from the previous election.

Again the 2004 EP elections were scheduled during the mid-term of Ahern’s government. Local elections and a constitutional referendum on citizenship regulations were held on the same day. The 2004 elections were particularly interesting because Ireland had rejected the Nice Treaty in a referendum in 2001, which however was overturned by a follow-up referendum in
2002. It clearly gave a new image of Ireland to the outside world (Holmes, 2004, 2–3). European issues were important in the campaign, particularly ones related to common policies such as Immigration and Asylum and the Common Foreign and Security Policy. The political parties did not differ very much in their support for European policies, however the smaller Green and Sinn Féin parties were more Eurocritical. The three main parties claimed to be the real advocate of Europe (ibid., 3–6). In terms of results, voters punished the main ruling party Fianna Fáil, which got just 29.5 per cent and 4 seats, with a reduction of 9.1 per cent and two fewer seats in relation to the 1999 election. Fine Gael was able to improve to 27.6, increasing by 3.8 per cent and 5 seats (+1 seat) with Labour increasing to 10.8 per cent (+2.3 per cent) and one seat with no change. Sinn Féin got its best ever result, improving to 11 per cent (+5.2 per cent), but not in terms of seats, because it achieved only one seat with no change. The Greens were the big losers, declining from 6.5 to 4.4 per cent and losing both seats in the EP.

In the 2007 legislative elections, Fianna Fáil was able to repeat its 2002 victory, achieving almost the same share of the vote – 41.6 per cent. However, the Progressive Democrats’ voting share and seats collapsed, so that it had to look for additional partners in order to attain a working majority. Hence, the Green party, which had achieved 4.7 per cent and 6 seats, became part of the coalition. Fine Gael also improved by almost 5 per cent to 27.3 per cent and 51 seats.

In sum, differences can be detected between national and EP elections. Apart from the lower turnout in EP elections, both main political parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, lost in terms of popular consensus. Smaller parties – along with independent candidates – were more likely to succeed in EP elections.

9 The 2009 European Parliament election

9.1 Party lists and manifestos

The 2009 European elections were dominated by the discussion about the Treaty of Lisbon and the growing difficult economic situation due to the bursting of the housing bubble. The party manifestos of the main political parties were quite pragmatic and pro-European, yet more Eurosceptic tunes came from smaller parties.

Table 11.5 National election results in Ireland: 1977–2011 (%)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fianna Fáil</td>
<td>50.6</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>47.3</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>41.6</td>
<td>17.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fine Gael</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>37.3</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>36.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>19.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sinn Féin</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>9.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greens</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>1.8</td>
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<td>Socialist Party</td>
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<td>0.8</td>
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<td>1.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Progressive Democrats</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.0</td>
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<td>Workers’ Party</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>1.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>People Before Profit Alliance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Turnout</td>
<td>76.3</td>
<td>76.7</td>
<td>73.8</td>
<td>72.9</td>
<td>73.4</td>
<td>68.5</td>
<td>68.5</td>
<td>66.1</td>
<td>62.6</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>70.0</td>
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Source: www.parties-and-elections.de/ireland2.html.
Given the perilous state of the Irish economy by June 2009, Fianna Fáil fought the campaign from a very defensive position whilst reiterating its deep commitment to the European Union for its great ideals and for enabling Irish sovereignty (Fianna Fáil, 2009, 4). The manifesto cited the pragmatic advantages to the Irish economy of access to European markets and of EU investment in developing the Irish energy market and pledged to fight to obtain maximum aid from the EU Globalization Fund and to use this money to counter job losses (ibid., 6–9). It defended the party’s support for a second referendum on a revised Lisbon Treaty in which the party and the Government would campaign for a ‘yes’ vote (ibid., 10). In a detailed, 32-page manifesto the party covered a wide range of EU policies with which it wished to be associated, but avoided mention of its projected European Parliament alignment with the Liberal ALDE group. The Taoiseach and party leader, Brian Cowen, had confirmed the party’s intention to leave the Union for Europe of the Nations (UEN) group after the 2009 election and join the ALDE group, despite the fact that by no stretch of the imagination could Fianna Fáil be considered a Liberal party. This had been publicly criticized by the party’s most popular MEP, the poll-topping Brian Crowley, who has risen to be President of the UEN group. The issue continued to be a source of some friction within the party, leading Crowley to resign from it in 2014.

During the campaign, Fianna Fáil found itself fighting the election, not so much on the basis of its manifesto as on the basis of its record in government and the personal popularity of some of its candidates. The Taoiseach, Brian Cowen, defended his government’s handling of the economic crisis, accusing the opposition parties of being incapable of offering an alternative coalition government because of the mutual incompatibility of Fine Gael calls for tighter financial rectitude with Labour calls for greater public spending (The Irish Times, 15 May 2009). Unfortunately for Fianna Fáil, by accusing the other parties of misrepresenting the state of the economy as worse than it actually was, Cowen may have played into his opponents’ hands by appearing out of touch with the public mood and complacent (The Irish Times, 29 May 2009). Although Fianna Fáil appealed to its supporters to transfer their votes to Green party candidates this arrangement was decisively not reciprocated by the Greens, further placing the government on the defensive (The Irish Times, 8 May 2009).

Fine Gael’s 20-page European election manifesto was keen to boast its pro-EU credentials, hailing its support of the Lisbon Treaty as ‘good for Europe, vital for Ireland’ and its membership of the Christian Democratic EPP group as proof that it was part of ‘the strongest team in Europe’ (Fine Gael, 2009, 2). The party called for an end to the government’s opt-out from the Lisbon Treaty’s provisions on home affairs and crime and pledged to fight to give Irish agriculture a strong voice in Brussels. It saw a central role for the EU in generating Ireland’s economic recovery and vigorously defended Ireland’s adoption of the euro, arguing that ‘our position would have been all the worse if we still had our own small currency’ (ibid., 13). Coordinated European policies on fiscal and banking issues and a stronger role in generating growth were advocated.

The party leader, Enda Kenny, tapped into a theme which would dominate the campaign, arguing that ‘the mood of the electorate was one of unprecedented anger at the Government for the way it has been running the country’ (The Irish Times, 4 May 2009). Fine Gael returned to this theme constantly, called on voters to use the election to punish the government and showed its desire to change the regime. However, it did also campaign on the basis of policies that highlighted its self-image as a strongly pro-EU party. It attacked the Eurosceptic view that 80 per cent of Irish legislation emanated from Brussels, arguing that the true figure was closer to 30 per cent. Fine Gael called for a change to the Irish Constitution to avoid the need for automatic recourse to referenda to approve EU treaties. Instead, the party proposed that treaties might be sent to the Supreme Court, which would rule on whether elements of such a text needed to be put to a popular vote or not.
At the 2009 election campaign, Labour whole-heartedly embraced the PES agenda, and its 22-page manifesto incorporated many common policies of PES. Labour highlighted two goals above all in its manifesto: jobs creation and social fairness. The party declared itself in favour of ‘better regulation of global finance’ and named its ‘number one priority’ as being ‘to safeguard jobs, create new ones, and promote smart, environmentally friendly growth’. While blaming the Fianna Fáil-led government for the extent of the Irish economic crisis, it argued that ‘This is a global crisis in global capitalism. It demands a response at European level, where countries can come together’ (Labour, 2009, 3). The party called for a European Pact for the Future of Employment with greater spending on education and training; increased spending through the European Investment Bank; completion of the single market with the elimination of red tape and a reduction in bureaucracy; and reform of the banking and financial sectors with a new European system of supervision, measures against tax havens, tax avoidance and money-laundering, and an extension of workers’ rights and protection of pension funds (ibid., 8–9). Labour also called for a European Social Progress Pact, ‘with goals and standards for national, social, health and education policy to contribute to the fight against poverty, as well as Europe’s continued social and economic development’ (ibid., 10).

Like Fine Gael, Labour saw its membership of one of the two biggest groups in the EP as a positive ‘selling point’, which enabled Ireland to increase its influence. Throughout the election campaign, Labour turned its fire on Fianna Fáil, accusing the party of being despised by the Irish electorate and calling for an early general election (The Irish Times, 25 May 2009). The Labour leader, Eamon Gilmore, whose personal approval ratings were the highest of any party leader throughout the campaign, also attacked the Green party for allegedly betraying its values and principles and propping up Fianna Fáil in government. In what may have been a successful attempt to embarrass Fianna Fáil and attract that party’s disillusioned voters, Labour offered the party’s nomination in the East constituency to Nessa Childers, who comes from a well-known Fianna Fáil family. Her grandfather was one of the party’s icons and her father, the late President Erskine Childers, was a long-time party leader and cabinet minister before serving as head of state. Nessa Childers herself had been a Green party city councillor before accepting Labour’s invitation to stand as its candidate, dealing a further blow to the Greens.

Sinn Féin’s manifesto for the 2009 European elections emphasized three themes. First, the party mobilized voters on the basis of populist nationalism rather than class-based socialism, highlighting its presence in the European Parliament in order to ‘build support in Europe for Irish reunification’ and to make the Irish language an official and working language of the EU. Second, the party called for institutional reform of the EU, although this, too, was couched in terms of ‘national interest’ as much as democratic terms. Thus, the party described any revised Lisbon Treaty referendum as ‘anti-democratic and a bad deal for Ireland’, called for a new treaty ‘reflecting the concerns of the Irish people’, demanded a strengthening of national Parliaments and local councils, and called for people in Northern Ireland to have a vote in any future Irish referenda on EU treaties. Third, the party supported an agenda of strengthening workers’ rights, opposing further privatizations, and EU action to tackle unemployment and end poverty. Again, however, this was given a distinctly Nationalist flavour. For example, Sinn Féin pledged to be ‘the strongest advocates of Irish economic sovereignty and all-Ireland tax harmonization’ and to fight to ensure that health and education policy ‘remain the exclusive responsibility of Member States’ (Sinn Féin, 2009).

Interestingly, the manifesto contained no mention whatsoever of the party’s membership of the EUL/NGL group in the EP – perhaps a tacit acknowledgement that an overt association with Communist parties might repel some of the party’s electoral base – and no mention of ‘socialism’. Sinn Féin had hoped to build upon its leading role in the first Lisbon Treaty referendum and upon
the strong public backlash against the government parties. In theory, the party should have been pushing at an open door in 2009. Yet, its share of the vote remained as it was in 2004 and its best chance of winning a European Parliament seat, securing the re-election of Mary Lou McDonald in Dublin, fell victim to a resurgent Socialist Party, whose class-based appeal to disenchanted Dublin workers was undiluted by Nationalist rhetoric.

The Greens fought the 2009 European elections on the basis of a strongly pro-EU platform. They sought to portray the EU ‘Green New Deal’ as ‘an exciting, EU-wide, economic stimulus plan to create millions of new green jobs’. Indeed, the European Union was central to efforts to create jobs and protect the environment. The party also called for measures to make the Union more democratic, to counter the power of lobbyists within the EU, and to increase EU support for climate protection and renewable energy schemes. The Greens also portrayed themselves as pro-business, claiming that:

many people believe that the Irish Government sets the bar very high when it comes to implementing certain EU regulations, compared to some of our fellow EU Member States. This can place Irish businesses at a competitive disadvantage in relation to their overseas competitors.

(Greens, 2009)

Intriguingly, this last sentence reads as if the Greens were a party of opposition not of government, which of course was the case. Indeed, they tried throughout the campaign to keep their distance from Fianna Fáil, refusing to recommend to their supporters that they transfer their votes to the larger government party, leading to speculation that the Greens were considering abandoning the government. It is fair to say that this ‘in government but not responsible for the Government’s policy failures’ stance failed to convince many voters. The Greens had a wretchedly disappointing election campaign. The party only managed to field candidates in two of the four constituencies, Dublin and South, and suffered every bit as much from the anti-government backlash as Fianna Fáil; indeed, in proportionate terms, it suffered much more. We have already seen how former Green Councillor Nessa Childers defected to Labour to be that party’s successful candidate in the East constituency. In Dublin, a bedrock of Green support, the party saw the defection of former Green MEP Patricia McKenna, an arch-Eurosceptic, who had been defeated by John Gormley in the party leadership race in July 2007, polling 263 votes to his 478. In 2008, disillusioned by the party’s support for the Lisbon Treaty, she joined the anti-EU People’s Movement and contested the 2009 European election in Dublin for this organization. The party had to spend a considerable part of its time, including at its manifesto launch, trying to distance itself in the public eye from McKenna’s outspoken attacks on the EU. It was also savaged by the other opposition parties for the compromise it had made to stay in government, which included compromises on gas development, on US military use of the Irish air base at Shannon, and the construction of a new motorway close to the famous historic site of Tara.

The Socialist Party fought the election on a platform of all-out opposition to the EU, arguing that it was a bastion of neo-liberalism and of attacks on working-class living standards and jobs. The party sought to build on its outright rejection of the Lisbon Treaty, echoing many of the criticisms levelled at this by the parties of the European anti-capitalist left. The party only fielded one candidate, the charismatic party leader and former parliamentary deputy, Joe Higgins, who stood in the Dublin constituency. A miniscule budget of just €28,000 supported both its European campaign in Dublin and that of ten local government candidates, making its subsequent success all the more impressive (The Irish Times, 13 June 2009). The party appealed strongly to Dublin workers disaffected by the Government’s economic policies and worried by unemployment.
Libertas, the right-wing Eurosceptic party founded by Declan Ganley, hoped to build upon its role in the Lisbon I referendum. It campaigned largely on the basis of its opposition to the Lisbon Treaty, emphasizing however that it supported Ireland’s membership of the EU. It adopted a stridently populist tone, accusing the other parties’ MEPs of keeping their expense ‘secret and hidden’ (Libertas, 2009). However, the Libertas campaign also became mired in controversy. Its candidate in the East constituency, Raymond O’Malley, called for Ireland to close its borders to workers from fellow EU Member States while its Dublin candidate, Caroline Simons, called for migrants from other EU Member States to be limited to a two-year stay and to be prevented from claiming benefits (The Irish Times, 15 May 2009). This led to Labour branding the party ‘fascist’ and other parties accusing it of playing the ‘race card’ (The Irish Times, 16 May 2009). The party gave further evidence of its right-wing credentials by accusing one of its opponents of being ‘soft’ on abortion rights. And party leader Declan Ganley gave a hostage to fortune by stating that he would not play a major role in the second Lisbon Treaty referendum unless he secured election as an MEP (The Irish Times, 23 May 2009). This may have simply furnished the three main parties and their supporters with an added incentive to ensure that he was not elected.

9.2 Electoral campaign

The 2009 European election campaign in Ireland was fought against the background of severe economic recession, which hit Ireland exceptionally hard. Just as Ireland had experienced a greater economic boom than many other EU Member States during the preceding 15 years, so too did its downturn tend to surpass that of most of its partners. The management of the Irish economy by Fianna Fáil-led governments had involved ‘particularly loose systems of financial regulation and the inflation of a huge property bubble’. The financial crisis plunged the country into economic gloom, with rapidly rising unemployment and collapsing public finances. Not surprisingly, then, the economy totally dominated the election campaign with all parties competing to argue that they had the best policies to promote growth and jobs creation. The right-of-centre parties, including Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, tended to argue over which was best-placed to cut public spending, lower regulation of business, and return the country to the days of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ economic boom, whilst the left-of-centre parties, including Labour, the Socialist Party, and Sinn Féin, were more critical of what they saw as a ‘gung-ho’ approach to capitalism which had led to the recession in the first place, and they tended to place the emphasis on greater regulation and state and/or EU initiatives to promote jobs creation and social justice. However, for all parties, the economy was central. Some of the minor parties, in particular, tried to introduce other themes and issues. Sinn Féin repeatedly raised the issue of national sovereignty; the Greens naturally campaigned in support of stronger EU environmental policies; and Libertas tried to raise the immigration issue and to attack opponents for allegedly supporting abortion rights. But, on the whole, these issues failed to make much of an impact in a campaign thoroughly dominated by the economy.

Of course, another issue that resonated throughout the campaign was the mounting public backlash against the governing parties, Fianna Fáil and the Greens. Even before the start of the campaign it was clear that public support for the government was at an all-time low and that support for Fianna Fáil in particular was likely to be the lowest since the party was founded in 1926. Public opinion never seriously deviated from this mood throughout the campaign; the Government’s defeat was a foregone conclusion. Hardly surprising, then, that the opposition parties should seek to present the European election as something of a referendum on the popularity of a government that seemed destined to a dry and harsh defeat.
9.3 Electoral results

The outcome of the 2009 European election in Ireland reveals two clear trends. First, the elector-ate undoubtedly used the elections to punish the governing parties, *Fianna Fáil* and the Greens. *Fianna Fáil* polled its lowest share of the vote in a nationwide election since the 1920s and lost one of its MEPs. The loss of a single MEP might not seem so disastrous unless one bears in mind that the party had already reached a new low in terms of popular support in the 2004 European elections. The party’s bad performance in local elections held on the same day led to renewed internal criticism of the leadership. *Fine Gael* was certainly the main beneficiary of *Fianna Fáil*’s disastrous performance, overtaking the latter in both European and local elections and establishing itself as a contender for the post of the biggest party. However, due to the vagaries of the Irish electoral system, *Fine Gael* still managed to lose one European seat on an increased vote.

The Greens had a devastatingly bad election, failing to recapture either of the seats in the EP they held between 1994 and 2004 and falling to less than 2 per cent of the popular vote. In their urban stronghold of Dublin, the Greens polled just 1,500 votes more than the former Green MEP turned arch-critic of the party, Patricia McKenna, standing as a candidate for the anti-EU People’s Movement. The Greens faced an almost total wipeout in Dublin, losing all ten of their city councillors in the local elections. In 2010, their Dublin European election candidate, Deirdre de Burca, compounded the Greens’ problems by resigning from the party amid public criticism of the leadership. It is uncertain whether the Greens will survive as a significant force in Irish politics.

The second trend that is apparent is that Ireland defied the general European move to the right. In Ireland in 2009, only the left-of-centre parties, Labour and the Socialist Party, increased both their share of the popular vote and their number of MEPs. Labour’s share of 13.9 per cent of votes was certainly not as impressive as its opinion poll ratings of 20–25 per cent, but it still represented a definite success; moreover, benefitting from transfers from other parties on both its right and left, Labour secured three MEPs, up from just one in 2004. The tiny Trotskyist Socialist Party only contested the Dublin constituency, where its popular and respected leader, Joe Higgins, polled in excess of 12 per cent, cementing Dublin’s reputation for delivering a strong left-wing vote. Dublin thus returned two left-of-centre MEPs with no seat in the Irish capital for *Fianna Fáil*, the third Dublin seat went to *Fine Gael*. The Socialist Party success in Dublin proves that *Sinn Féin* does not have a monopoly of the working-class protest vote, nor is *Sinn Féin* necessarily the most coherent voice of left-wing Euroscepticism. Although *Sinn Féin* substantially held its vote in the European election, its failure to retain its Dublin MEP was a bitter disappointment. This underlines two factors: *Sinn Féin*’s continued isolation within the democratic party system of the Republic, with a marked reluctance of other parties’ supporters to transfer their votes to its candidates; and the party’s growing ideological confusion as a party that is nominally of the radical left, yet includes within its support base many voters who are typical of the radical right, and is led by a leadership that increasingly looks towards the centre. These contradictions led in the immediate aftermath of the election to renewed friction within *Sinn Féin*; its longest serving Dublin councillor, Christy Burke, was amongst those who resigned in protest at the leadership. One might add that the victorious Socialist Party MEP in Dublin would join the Confederal Group of the United European Left/Nordic Green Left (EUL/NGL), the same group to which the ousted *Sinn Féin* MEP had belonged.

For Libertas, a national vote share of 5.4 per cent would normally be encouraging for a new political party. But Ganley’s failure to win election in the North-West constituency was a disappointment to him and whether he will continue to bankroll the party, or whether it has a future at all, remains to be seen.

As Table 11.6 shows, the combined vote for the ‘Eurosceptic’ parties, *Sinn Féin*, the Socialist Party and Libertas, came to 19.3 per cent.
When one adds to this the 2.0 per cent polled by the anti-EU People’s Movement and the 3.0 per cent of the national vote polled by the Euro sceptic outgoing MEP and anti-Lisbon campaigner Kathy Sinnott, who failed, however, to be re-elected, then one can say that around one quarter of the Irish electorate voted for Eurosceptic and anti-Lisbon candidates. This relatively high vote share only produced one Eurosceptic MEP, however, reflecting the fragmented nature of the EU-critical movement in Ireland.

Finally, for reasons explained earlier, non-party independents usually perform well in Irish elections although in 2009 there was one independent MEP less than in the two previous European elections. As Table 11.7 indicates, one independent candidate, Marian Harkin, a community and voluntary sector activist and a liberal by inclination was elected in the North-West constituency and joined the ALDE group in the European Parliament.

Eleven of the 13 outgoing Irish MEPs sought re-election in 2009 and seven of them were successful. With the total number of Irish representatives reduced to 12, this meant that 4 Irish MEPs were elected for the first time. *Fianna Fáil’s* Pat ‘The Cope’ Gallagher was not an outgoing MEP but had served previously as an MEP. The four new Irish members were Labour’s Nessa Childers and Alan Kelly, the Socialist Party’s Joe Higgins and *Fine Gael’s* Seán Kelly.

The overall number of Irish MEPs, equivalent to 12, as agreed in Nice, did not vary after the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty.

### 9.4 Campaign finance

Campaign finance has so far been a grey area in the Irish political system. And yet, given that there is no real public funding, political parties have to raise money in order to conduct their campaigns, which have to be individually tailored due to the importance of the STV electoral system. It means that each individual is allowed to spend about €30,150–45,000 depending on the number of seats available in the constituency. Citizens are allowed to donate up to €600 to political parties anonymously, whilst corporations can contribute up to €5,000, although there are always opportunities to circumvent the system. Parties have to report any donations and expenditures received to the Standards in Public Office Commission.

For the 2007 general election political parties spent about €11 million, but just €1.6 million was disclosed. This clearly makes it difficult to find exact spending figures (OSCE, 2011, 8).

**Table 11.6 EP election results in Ireland: 2009**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political party</th>
<th>1st Pref votes</th>
<th>% Votes</th>
<th>Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Fianna Fáil</em></td>
<td>440,562</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Fine Gael</em></td>
<td>532,889</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour Party</td>
<td>254,669</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sinn Féin</em></td>
<td>205,613</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Party</td>
<td>34,585</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>50,510</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libertas</td>
<td>99,709</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>210,776</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,829,313</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 11.7 List of Irish MEPs: seventh legislature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year of birth</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Professional background</th>
<th>Constituency</th>
<th>National party</th>
<th>Political group</th>
<th>Committee</th>
<th>Committee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liam Aylward*</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Laboratory technician,</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>Fianna Fáil</td>
<td>ALDE</td>
<td>Agriculture and Rural Development, Culture and Education (substitute)</td>
<td>Environment, Public Health and Food Safety, Culture and Education (substitute)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nessa Childers</td>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Psychoanalyst</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>S&amp;D</td>
<td>Environment, Public Health and Food Safety, Culture and Education (substitute)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian Crowley*</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Legal advisor</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Fianna Fáil</td>
<td>ALDE</td>
<td>Industry, Research and Energy, Legal Affairs (substitute)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proinsias De Rossa*</td>
<td>1940</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Postman and salesman</td>
<td>Dublin</td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>S&amp;D</td>
<td>Employment and Social Affairs, Development (substitute)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pat Gallagher</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Fish exporter</td>
<td>North-West</td>
<td>Fianna Fáil</td>
<td>ALDE</td>
<td>Fisheries, Regional Development (substitute)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marian Harkin*</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Teacher and voluntary sector worker</td>
<td>North-West</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>ALDE</td>
<td>Employment and Social Affairs, petitions (substitute), Agriculture and Rural Development (substitute)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim Higgins*</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>North-West</td>
<td>Fine Gael</td>
<td>EPP</td>
<td>Transport and Tourism, Fisheries (substitute), Petitions (substitute)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Higgins</td>
<td>1949</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Catholic priest and teacher</td>
<td>Dublin</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>EUL/NGL</td>
<td>International Trade, Petitions (substitute), Employment and Social Affairs (substitute)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan Kelly</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>S&amp;D</td>
<td>Internal Market and Consumer Protection, Agriculture and Rural Development (substitute), Petitions (substitute)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seán Kelly</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Fine Gael</td>
<td>EPP</td>
<td>Culture and Education, Regional Development (substitute)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mairead McGuinness*</td>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>Fine Gael</td>
<td>EPP</td>
<td>Agriculture and Rural Development, Petitions (substitute), Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (substitute)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay Mitchell*</td>
<td>1951</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Accountant</td>
<td>Dublin</td>
<td>Fine Gael</td>
<td>EPP</td>
<td>Development, Financial, Economic and Social Crisis, Economic and Monetary Affairs (substitute)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note:
* denotes an outgoing MEP re-elected in 2009.
10 Theoretical interpretation of Euro-elections

10.1 Second-Order Election theory

The hypothesis that governments, if they do not perform well, can be punished by voters in European elections seems to be confirmed in the Irish case. More specifically, the 2009 Euro-election represents a good test for such an assumption, since the Fianna Fáil-Progressive Democrats coalition government was not able to address the financial crisis properly and was thus penalized. However, by looking at all seven waves of Euro-elections, it is possible to detect a more complex pattern. The two main parties always lost more than 10 per cent of the vote in relation to previous general elections, although Labour retained the same level of support.

Smaller parties and independent candidates benefitted most from this decline in the two major parties. A timing factor also appeared quite relevant. When EP elections fell during midterm and citizens were dissatisfied with the government’s performance, these elections would become a tool to castigate its members. On the contrary, if voters were happy with the executive, this electoral contest would turn into an experiment which privileged smaller parties.

Overall, European elections in Ireland provided strong support for SOE theory, given that turnout was noticeably lower than in general elections, campaigns were not focussed on...
European issues, and a very strong anti-government vote emerged to the benefit of smaller parties and independents.

10.2 Europe Salience theory

European matters were discussed during the EP electoral campaigns in Ireland, but all parties had more or less the same positive approach to the European Union. The three main parties, in particular Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, presented themselves as the real champions of Europe. By contrast, smaller left-wing parties, like Sinn Féin and the Workers’ Party, put forward rather Euro-critical positions, although EU membership was never contested, except by the Socialists. Also the Greens have come to be more supportive of the EU, being well integrated within the European Green group. No right-wing extreme parties tried to profit from opposition to European integration. The attempts of Libertas to capitalize on Eurosceptic views in the 2009 EP election did not work out, despite a €500,000 campaign sponsored by magnate Declan Ganley.

Over the years, there has been indeed an increase of soft Euroscepticism, which can be mostly seen as Euro-criticism within the context of ongoing support for EU membership. Irish political parties are all more or less pro-European. Ireland’s involvement in the European integration project has been a core aspect of its politics, overwhelmingly supported by public opinion, and an integral part of Irish identity. All this explains why the Europe Salience theory can only marginally interpret EP elections in Ireland.

Elections in the Republic of Ireland are quite personalized through the so-called STV electoral method. This means that candidates have to campaign quite intensively and keep in touch with their respective constituencies throughout the respective legislative period. This is also one of the reasons why Ireland, despite being a small country, has decided to create four constituencies for the 12 MEPs that it elected to the EP in 2009, retaining three constituencies for the 11 MEPs it elected in 2014. This creates quite a different electoral dynamic than in most other small countries, with just one constituency from which all MEPs are elected.

References

Primary sources


Secondary sources