

## The 2005 Meath and Kildare North by-elections

ADRIAN KAVANAGH

To cite this article: ADRIAN KAVANAGH (2005) The 2005 Meath and Kildare North by-elections, Irish Political Studies, 20:2, 201-211, DOI: [10.1080/07907180500135453](https://doi.org/10.1080/07907180500135453)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07907180500135453>



Published online: 23 Aug 2006.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 103



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

# The 2005 Meath and Kildare North By-Elections

ADRIAN KAVANAGH

Department of Geography, NUI Maynooth, Ireland

On Friday 11 March 2005 voting for the Meath and Kildare North by-elections took place between 7.00am and 10.00pm. These elections were caused by the resignations of Charlie McCreevy, to take up the post of the Irish EU Commissioner, and John Bruton, to take up the post of EU Ambassador to the United States. These elections were marked by the continuance of a pattern of poor electoral performances by the government parties, and also by the continuance of a pattern of lower turnout levels relative to those in previous by-elections. For Fianna Fáil these results were particularly disappointing, given that these by-elections, particularly in the Meath constituency, offered the realistic prospect of the first government win in a by-election since Noel Treacy's success in the Galway East by-election in 1982. The by-elections marked a political breakthrough for Independent councillor, Catherine Murphy, in the Kildare North constituency, while the victory of Shane McEntee in Meath was important for Fine Gael and Labour's prospects of forming an alternative government after the next general election.

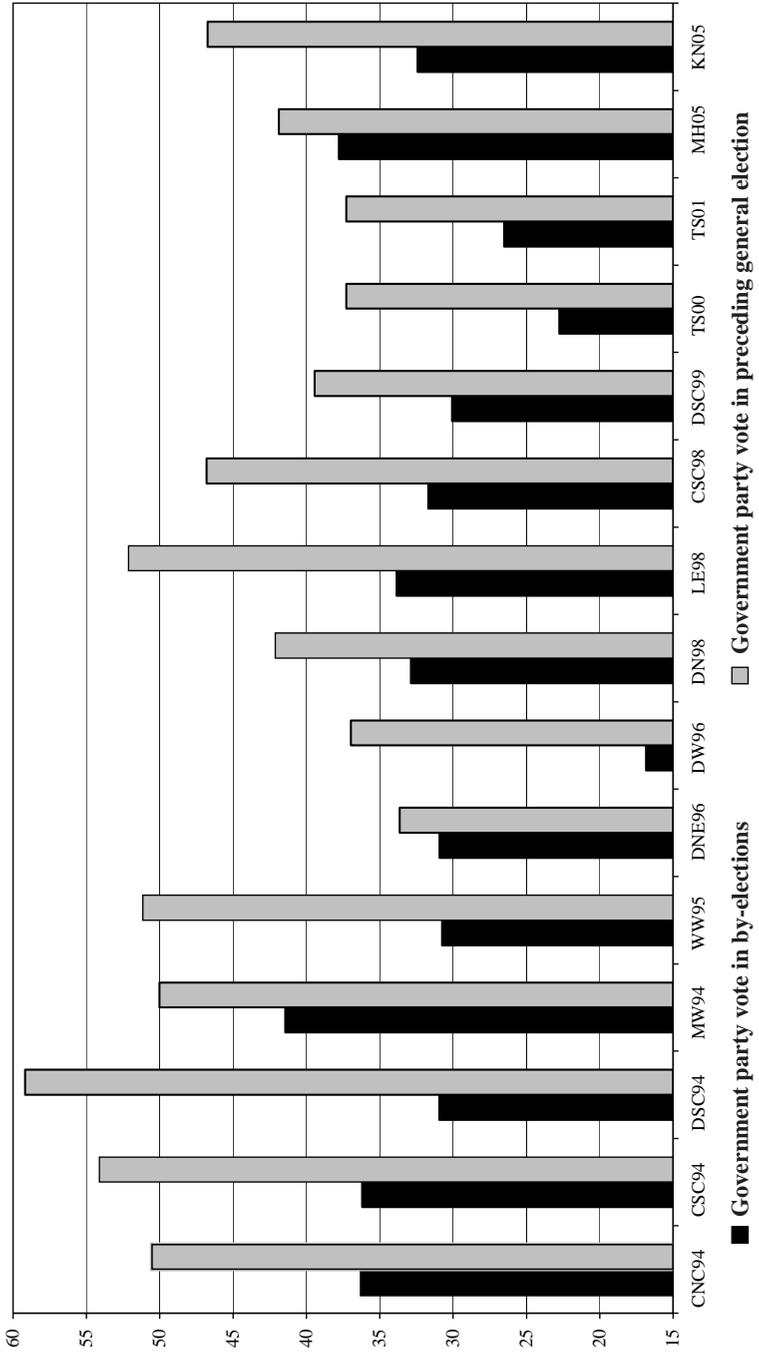
By-elections are perhaps the best example of second-order elections, given that there is usually little at stake in these elections unless the result of the election proves to be necessary to the survival of the government. Second-order elections are often marked by lower levels of support for the government parties, relative to their support levels in first-order, or general elections. This has especially proven to be the case in the past two decades, in which the only government candidates to win seats in by-election in almost four decades have been Clement Coughlan in Donegal South West in 1980 and Noel Treacy in Galway West in 1982. Government successes in by-elections were, however, more frequent in the decades prior to the 1980s. In the 1970s, by-elections were won by a number of government candidates. These included Fianna Fáil's Sean Sherwin in Dublin South West, Patrick Delap in Donegal-Leitrim in 1970, and Gene Fitzgerald in Cork Mid West in 1972, Fine Gael's Brendan Toal in Monaghan in 1973 and Enda Kenny in Mayo West in 1975, and Labour's Brendan Halligan in 1976. The contrasting fortunes of Fianna Fáil in by-elections held during the 27th and 28th Dáils (elections held between 1994 and 2001) further illustrate this

---

*Correspondence Address:* Adrian Kavanagh, Department of Geography, NUI Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Ireland. Email: [adrian.p.kavanagh@nuim.ie](mailto:adrian.p.kavanagh@nuim.ie)

point. The only Fianna Fáil by-election successes during this period took place in the two years during which that party was out of government, with the 1996 by-election wins of Cecilia Keaveney in Donegal North East and Brian Lenihan in Dublin West. Over the 1994–2005 period, Fianna Fáil support in by-elections was to fall by 8.5 per cent, on average, relative to their support levels in preceding general elections, but the party's mean drop in support was 9.5 per cent for the period when the party was in government and 4.5 per cent for the 1995–97 period, when the party was not in government. In all, by-election support levels for government parties have fallen by 13.9 per cent, on average, relative to the preceding general election, between 1994 and 2005 (see Figure 1). The average decline was greatest in the period of the Fianna Fáil–Labour coalition (17.3 per cent), and was also considerable during the period of the Fine Gael–Labour–Democratic Left coalition (14.4 per cent), mainly reflecting a collapse in the Labour vote in a number of these contests, as in the 1996 Dublin West by-election, where Labour support fell from 22.6 per cent in 1992 to 3.7 per cent. The average decline in support for Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats in by-elections between 1998 and 2005 has been 12.0 per cent, a figure that is somewhat skewed by the fact that the Progressive Democrats contested Dublin South Central in 1997, but not the subsequent by-election, while they did not contest Meath in 2002 but did contest the 2005 by-election. The extent of the differences between general election and by-election support levels is shaped, in part, by the fact that Fianna Fáil, as well as other parties in some cases, tends to run multiple candidates in constituencies for general elections, and therefore the party support would be enhanced by personal votes for their different candidates in these contests as envisaged in the 'Friends and neighbours' effect (Parker, 1982).

A second characteristic that marks by-elections and other second-order elections is the lower turnout levels that mark such electoral contests. Gallagher (1996) found that, on average, over the 1923–96 period there has been a decline of 7.0 per cent in by-election turnouts relative to those in the preceding general election for the same constituencies. He found that such turnout decline was especially marked in the Dublin area, with an average decline of 16.4 per cent registered for the 30 by-elections held in the Dublin area over the period. Turnout decline in by-elections, by contrast, tended not to be as marked in the more rural constituencies. Similar trends were noted for the by-elections held in the 1990s during the 27th and 28th Dáils. Turnout decline ranged from relatively low difference levels in the 1994 Mayo West (5.7 per cent) 1996 Donegal North East (6.9 per cent) and 2001 Tipperary South (10.1 per cent) by-elections, to considerably higher levels in the 1999 Dublin South Central (32.5 per cent), 1994 Dublin South Central (21.6 per cent) and 1996 Dublin West (21.6 per cent) by-elections. The relatively higher turnout decline levels, relative to the preceding general election, tend to be associated with the more urban constituencies, thus reflecting Gallagher's (1996) earlier findings. This is particularly illustrated by Figure 2, with the highest turnout declines, as well as the lowest by-election turnouts, found in constituencies in Dublin and Cork cities, as well as in the rapidly urbanising Mid-East region counties of Wicklow, Meath and Kildare. Turnouts in the by-elections in the more rural Tipperary, Mayo and Donegal constituencies are shown



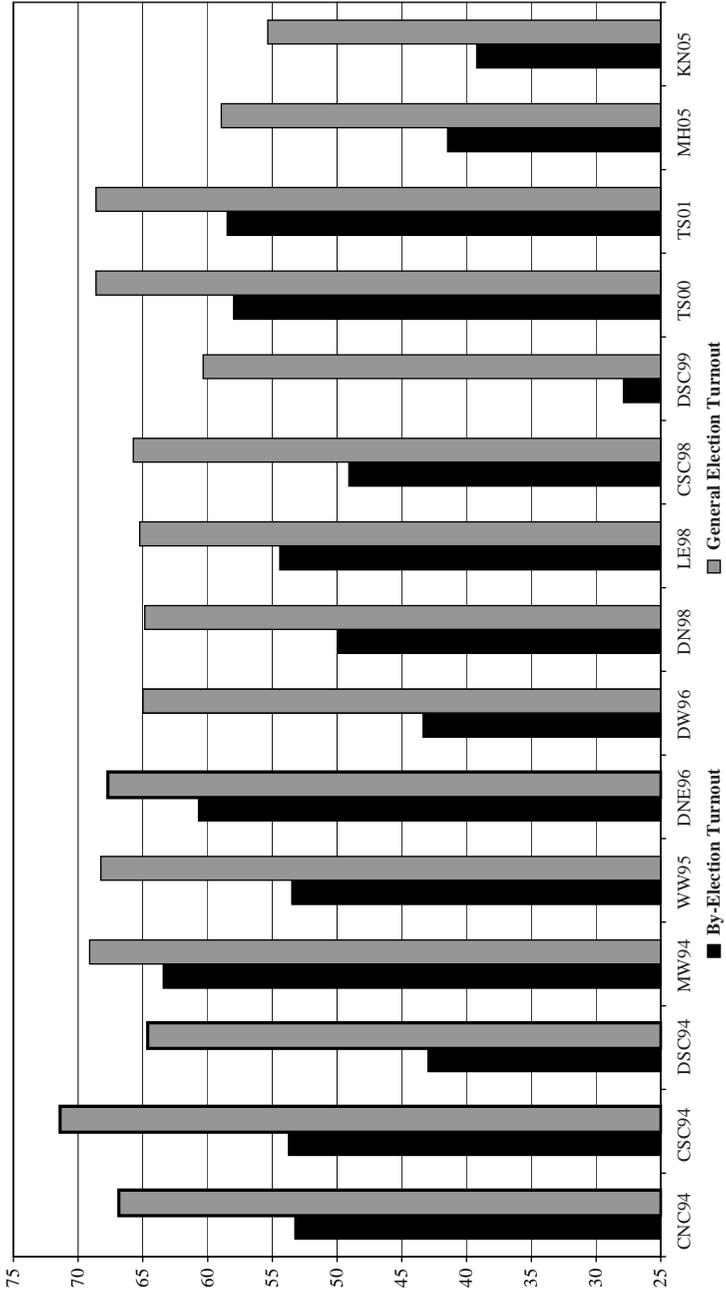
**Figure 1.** Support levels for Government parties in by-elections held between 1994 and 2004, as compared with support levels for these parties in preceding general election contests

to be higher, just as the levels of turnout decline relative to the preceding general elections are shown by Figure 2 to be lower. On average, by-election turnout fell by 18.7 per cent, relative to the preceding general election, in the by-elections held in the Cork City and Greater Dublin (including Meath, Kildare and Wicklow) areas over the 1994–2005 period, while by-election turnouts fell by just 8.8 per cent, on average, in the other, more rural, constituencies.

### **Candidate Selection**

The writ for the by-elections was moved in February, less than three weeks before the chosen date of 11 March, when moves by Fine Gael and Labour to name a March date for these elections saw the government ultimately agreeing to do so. There was some speculation that the government parties would seek to delay the holding of the by-elections until April or May, as Fianna Fáil faced a number of difficulties in terms of its candidate selections for the two by-elections. In Meath, the party's selected candidate, Councillor Tommy Reilly, withdrew from the race in the wake of allegations of land deals involving him and Frank Dunlop and was replaced by Councillor Shane Cassells from Navan. Favoured candidates in Kildare North, such as Charlie McCreevy Jnr and Councillor Paul Kelly, who came close to winning a second seat for the party in 2002, opted not to go forward for selection, most likely to avoid a possible by-election defeat that could diminish their prospects of being selected as a candidate for the next general election. The favoured candidate of the McCreevy camp was Councillor Michael Fitzpatrick, but party head office strongly supported the selection of Áine Brady, and resistance from parts of the local organisation resulted in the party's convention being delayed. Brady was ultimately chosen at the convention in Maynooth, which took place a few days after the moving of the writ for the by-elections. Thus, at the outset, the Fianna Fáil candidates had a lot of ground to make up on their main challengers, but were nevertheless competing in constituencies where the party had done well in 2002. The strength of the challenge from Labour and Leixlip-based Independent councillor, Catherine Murphy, in Kildare North, meant that the party did not view the holding of the McCreevy seat as a highly likely outcome, unless McCreevy Jnr had opted to contest the seat. Fianna Fáil's prospects were further hampered by the tension with the McCreevy camp, and many members of the local Kildare North organisation were alleged to have not actively canvassed for Brady during the by-election. Meath, however, offered the party a good opportunity of being the first government party to win a by-election since 1982 given that the party had won 44.9 per cent of the first preferences in 2002 and 11,334 more votes than their closest rivals in the constituency, Fine Gael.

Fine Gael selected Nobber-based publican, Shane McEntee, to run for them to hold the Bruton seat in Meath. He was viewed as a particularly strong candidate, given that the party had selected him relatively early and also due to his family name, which was well-known in Meath sporting, political and farming circles (Duignan, 2005a). Naas Town Councillor Darren Scully was selected to run for the party in



**Figure 2.** Turnout levels in by-elections held between 1994 and 2004, as compared with turnout levels in preceding general election contests

Kildare North, ahead of Councillor Katie Ridge. This was viewed as a desired result for constituency deputy, Bernard Durkan, who feared that a party victory in the by-election could see his own seat coming under pressure in the next general election. The selection of Scully also meant that the Fine Gael, Labour and Green candidates were all from the Naas area. This left Catherine Murphy as the only significant opposition candidate to hail from elsewhere in the constituency, a factor believed to be very much in her favour as against the Labour and Fine Gael challengers. Labour had selected Paddy McNamara, a councillor for the Naas electoral area, to run for them in Kildare North, while the Green candidate, J.J. Power, was also a councillor for the same electoral area. In Meath, Labour selected Councillor Dominic Hannigan, who had won a seat in the Slane electoral area as an Independent candidate in 2004, before joining Labour some months later. Like McEntee, his electoral prospects in Meath were helped by the fact that he was selected relatively early in the campaign. The Green candidate for Meath was Fergal O'Byrne, who had unsuccessfully contested the previous general election, as well as the 2004 local elections in the Navan electoral area. The Progressive Democrat candidate in Kildare North was Senator Kate Walsh, who had won over 2,000 votes in Celbridge in the 1999 local elections as an Independent candidate, before joining the Progressive Democrats and almost winning 4,000 votes as their candidate in the 2002 General Election. Their Meath candidate was Sirena Campbell from Julianstown. Sinn Féin did not select a candidate to contest Kildare North, but they had a strong candidate in Meath in Councillor Joe Reilly. Reilly, from the Navan electoral area, won over 6,000 votes in the 2002 General Election and made it to the final count, before losing out to Fianna Fáil's Johnny Brady. Other than Murphy, three other Independent candidates were contesting the by-election – Gerald Browne from Leixlip and Kilcock-based Senan O'Cóistin in Kildare North and fathers' rights activist Liam O'Gogain in Meath, but none of these was expected to make much of an impact.

## **Issues**

Given the many similarities between these two adjacent constituencies, both of which are very much commuter-belt constituencies within the Greater Dublin area and have experienced significant population increase over the past decade, the key election issues in both Meath and Kildare North were largely similar. The key issues were health, education, childcare, housing and transport, particularly in relation to the need for greater services in these areas to serve their growing populations. Planning and infrastructure issues were to the forefront, particularly the difficulties faced by the large commuting populations in both of these constituencies. One particularly contentious issue was the proposed routing of the M3 through the Tara and Skyrne area, with the pressing needs of commuters faced with long delays along the N3 coming into conflict with heritage concerns about the impact that the motorway would have on an area of considerable historical and archaeological importance. Other than the frustrations expressed over delays with the development of the M3 and concerns with growing traffic gridlock, public transport was also another area of

contention, with many viewing the bus and train services to these areas as being largely inadequate. Proposals to redevelop a train link to Dunboync and on to a park and ride facility along the proposed M3 received considerable attention, as did the need for better parking services at train stations. Transport problems were also directly related to another major election issue, the lack of adequate employment prospects within Meath and Kildare for the growing populations, thus forcing thousands to commute to Dublin daily for work. The lack of infrastructure among the many new housing estates in Kildare North and the commuter-belt area in south-east Meath was also a major cause of concern, as was the problems faced by overcrowded schools. The proposed incinerator at Carranstown, near Duleek, was a particularly potent election issue in east Meath, with two candidates Fergal O'Byrne and Joe Reilly publicly opposing the granting of an operating licence to the proposed Indaver plant.

A particularly contentious development in Meath in the week of the election was the publication of an opinion poll in *The Meath Chronicle*, which predicted a comfortable victory for Shane Cassells and Fianna Fáil. The poll, carried out by a largely unknown company, Orchard Research and Analysis Ltd, predicted that Cassells would top the poll with 36.7 per cent of the first preferences and would gain enough transfers in subsequent counts to win the seat. Furthermore, albeit in a related piece, the title of an article elsewhere in the same edition, 'Footsore-no-more Cassells an election shoo-in?', probably further added to expectations of a Cassells victory (Duignan, 2005b: 16). One particularly contentious finding of the poll was that Cassells' main challenger, Shane McEntee, would win just 20.4 per cent of the votes, leaving him with little chance of retaining the Bruton seat for Fine Gael:

The survey will prove desperately disappointing for Fine Gael with its by-election candidate, Shane McEntee, recording just 20.4 per cent support ... On these figures, he will not win the seat, leaving FF with four out of five in Meath and FG's Damien English as the solitary opposition TD in the constituency. (*Meath Chronicle*, 2005: 3)

This poll infuriated Fine Gael, which alleged a bias towards Fianna Fáil on the part of the *Chronicle*. They argued that this was an attempt to demobilise McEntee voters by demoralising them, mirroring controversies over similar constituency polls in other provincial newspapers in the run-up to the 2002 General Election. As it transpired, *The Meath Chronicle* poll was to under-estimate McEntee's support by almost 14 per cent, while over-estimating support for Cassells by 4 per cent. Ironically, the poll did pick up on a surge in support for Labour and Sinn Féin in the constituency, relative to the 2002 results, although it did to some degree over-estimate the support for Reilly, Hannigan and the other candidates in the field. Reilly was predicted to win 14.9 per cent of the votes, with Hannigan on 13.3 per cent, Campbell on 7.6 per cent, O'Byrne on 5.5 per cent and O'Gogain on 1.6 per cent. Faced with criticisms of the poll in the wake of the results, *The Meath Chronicle* countered the claims that its poll

had betrayed a bias towards Fianna Fáil and argued that the low turnout may have accounted for the poll discrepancies.

Fianna Fáil, which had argued for the wider publication of this poll nationally in the week of the by-election, later maintained that the poll had somewhat backfired on them, with both Noel Dempsey and Mary Wallace arguing that the poll may have resulted in Fianna Fáil voters becoming too complacent and staying at home (Duignan, 2005c). Fine Gael, however, still maintained that the poll's publication had done them no favours in the contest.

## **Results**

Polling day was to see two defeats for Fianna Fáil and its government partners, the Progressive Democrats, as Independent candidate, Catherine Murphy, won the Kildare North by-election and Fine Gael's Shane McEntee won the Meath by-election. In Kildare North, though Áine Brady topped the poll, transfers ensured that the seat went to Murphy, while McEntee topped the poll ahead of Shane Cassells and also succeeded in attracting more transfers, thus ensuring a comfortable victory on the final count. The Fianna Fáil vote was down by 12.5 per cent in Meath and by 18.7 per cent in Kildare North, while the share of the vote won by the Progressive Democrats in Kildare North fell by 4.0 per cent, although they did succeed in winning 5.4 per cent in Meath, a constituency they did not contest in 2002. The share of the vote won by Fine Gael in Meath was up by 6.9 per cent, while the share won in Kildare North also increased slightly by 0.8 per cent. The Labour share of the vote fell by 3.6 per cent in Kildare North, but increased by 6.9 per cent in Meath, while the Sinn Féin vote in Meath also increased by 2.8 per cent. There was no major change to the Green share of the vote – it was up by just 0.1 per cent in Kildare North but declined by 0.5 per cent in Meath. No Independents had contested Kildare North in 2002, but Independents were to account for more than a quarter (25.4 per cent) of all the votes cast there in the by-election. However the Independent share of the vote in Meath fell from 10.2 per cent of the votes cast there in 2002 to 1.4 per cent in the by-election.

As regards the transfers, in Kildare North, Murphy won almost half the transfers of the other two Independent candidates (46.7 per cent) on the second count, while Brady (27.7 per cent) won slightly more of the Power/Walsh transfers on the third count than Murphy (27.1 per cent) did. On the fourth count, Scully (39.2 per cent) won most of the McNamara transfers and would probably have won a higher share, except that 31.4 per cent of these transfers went to McNamara's former Labour colleague, Murphy. Scully's transfers on the final count greatly favoured Murphy (46.4 per cent) over Brady (22.3 per cent) and these, along with the McNamara transfers, were ultimately to ensure the Murphy victory. In Meath, O'Byrne won the highest share of the O'Gogain transfers (21.9 per cent) on the second count. On the third count there was a significant difference between the small share of the Campbell/O'Byrne transfers won by Reilly (7.4 per cent) against the shares won by McEntee (25.2 per cent), Cassells (27.8 per cent), and especially Hannigan (30.9 per cent). The

**Table 1.** Turnout levels, percentage of spoiled votes, and candidate support levels in 2005 Meath and Kildare North by-elections

	Kildare North	Meath
Electorate	65,080	121,041
Turnout	25,524 (39.22 %)	50,183 (41.46%)
Spoiled Votes	211 (0.83%)	477 (0.95%)
Fianna Fáil	Áine Brady 6,201 (24.5%)	Shane Cassells 16,117 (32.4%)
Fine Gael	Darren Scully 4,630 (18.3%)	Shane McEntee 16,964 (34.1%)
Labour	Paddy McNamara 4,507 (17.8%)	Damien Hannigan 5,567 (11.2%)
Progressive Democrats	Kate Walsh 2,006 (7.9%)	Sirena Campbell 2,679 (5.4%)
Green Party	JJ Scully 1,547 (6.1%)	Fergal O’Byrne 1,590 (3.2%)
Sinn Féin		Joe Reilly 6,087 (12.2%)
Independents	Senan O’Cóistin 211 (0.8%) Gerald Browne 226 (0.9%) Catherine Murphy 5,985 (23.6%)	Liam O’Gogain 702 (1.4%)

final count saw the distribution of the Reilly and Hannigan votes, and 43.0 per cent of these went to McEntee while 27.2 per cent went to Cassells.

Turnout rates in the two by-elections were considerably lower than those recorded for the 2002 General Election. In Kildare North, just 39.22 per cent of the registered electorate turned out. This contrasted negatively with the turnout rate of 55.36 per cent in the constituency for the general election. 41.46 per cent of the registered electorate in the Meath constituency voted in the by-election, which represented a decline of 17.48 per cent on the 58.94 per cent turnout level recorded in the general election. These turnouts represented some of the lowest participation rates recorded for Dáil elections in the history of the State, with only the 28.2 per cent turnout rate in the 1999 Dublin South Central by-election being lower in recent decades. The decline in turnout levels was not as dramatic as those experienced in by-elections held in some Dublin constituencies during the past ten years, but was higher than the turnout declines experienced in some rural constituencies, as Figure 2 shows.

Given that Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats’ victory in the 2002 General Election was preceded by two abysmal Fianna Fáil performances in the 2000 and 2001 Tipperary South by-elections, the by-election defeats hardly point to a likely government defeat at the next general election. However they may have implications for Fianna Fáil’s ability to win two seats out of the newly redrafted constituencies being formed within these areas: the enlarged four-seater Kildare North and the new three-seater Meath West and Meath East constituencies (Kavanagh, 2003). Given how close Councillor Paul Kelly came to winning a second Fianna Fáil seat in 2002 and the addition of the more rural north-western part of the county into the enlarged Kildare North, there would be high expectations of

two Fianna Fáil seats here in the next general election. However, Catherine Murphy's by-election win means that Kildare North is now the only constituency where the party does not have a sitting Dáil deputy. So they will have to displace one of the three incumbents, Murphy, Labour's Emmet Stagg, or Fine Gael's Bernard Durkan if they are to win two seats here at the next general election. In relation to the new Meath constituencies, the fall-out of the by-election leaves Meath West as offering Fianna Fáil their best prospect of winning two seats out of the two new Meath three-seat constituencies. The eastern part of County Westmeath, the Delvin rural district, forms part of this new constituency and Fianna Fáil won over half the votes cast in this area in the last general election, with most of these cast for local candidate, Donie Cassidy (Kavanagh, 2003). A similar share of the vote should ensure two seats for Fianna Fáil in Meath West, given that they have two incumbent TDs in this new constituency (or actually three, if you include Donie Cassidy whose Castlepollard bailiwick now falls within Meath West). Joe Reilly poses the main threat to a second Fianna Fáil here, and his higher share of the vote in the by-election means he remains a realistic contender for one of the three seats, despite the difficulties posed to small party candidates in contesting three-seat constituencies. The by-election result, however, has established two strong opposition prospects in the new Meath East constituency, the sitting TD Shane McEntee, and Labour's Dominic Hannigan, who is believed to have won roughly 20 per cent of all the votes cast in this area in the by-election. John Bruton's son, Matt Bruton could also emerge as another strong Fine Gael prospect here, especially as his Dunboyne base in the south of the constituency would well complement McEntee's north Meath base in Nobber. Shane Cassells could emerge as the running mate of incumbent Fianna Fáil TD, Mary Wallace, although he faces difficulties in that his Navan base is just across the border in Meath West. Ultimately the by-election results have ensured that electoral competition will be fierce both locally and nationally as we head towards a general election in 2007.

## References

- Duignan, J. (2005a) FG's exceptional performance just short of record percentage share, *The Meath Chronicle*, 19 March.
- Duignan, J. (2005b) Footsore-no-more Cassells an election shoo-in?, *The Meath Chronicle*, 12 March.
- Duignan, J. (2005c) Winning a fourth seat too big a task, admits FF, *The Meath Chronicle*, 19 March.
- Gallagher, M. (1996) By-elections to Dáil Eireann 1923–96: the anomaly that conforms, *Irish Political Studies*, 11, pp. 33–60.
- Kavanagh, A. (2003) The constituency commission', *Irish Political Studies*, 18(2), pp. 89–99.
- Meath Chronicle* (2005) Survey shows FF in line for fourth seat, *The Meath Chronicle*, 12 March.
- Parker, A. J. (1982) The 'friends and neighbours' effect in the Galway West constituency, *Political Geography Quarterly*, 1(3), pp. 243–262.

**Adrian Kavanagh** is a lecturer and researcher in the Department of Geography/National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis, NUI Maynooth. He did his doctoral work on the associations between social deprivation and low voter turnout

in the Republic of Ireland and the manner in which these associations may be influenced by geographical context. In Summer 2001 he was lead researcher on a project that studied low voter turnout in the South West Inner of Dublin, which was subsequently published as *Unequal Participation, Unequal Influence* in 2002. In Summer 2003 he worked on a project to calculate voter turnout rates for the 2002 General Election at an electoral division level for the entire country based on an analysis of the marked registers for that election, a project done in conjunction with the Geary Institute, UCD.