

Labour won't get vote transfers from the Left

Poll suggests Joan Burton can't rely on broader Left to push candidates over the line, writes analyst Dr Adrian Kavanagh

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Joan Burton and Enda Kenny

For the first time the Sunday Independent/ Millward Brown national opinion poll has attempted to measure the "toxicity" of the main political parties and other political groupings.

Respondents were asked: "Which parties or political groupings would you not consider voting for in any upcoming election?" A number of interesting trends emerge in terms of both potential vote transfer patterns and the changing nature of the Irish political system. These figures suggest Labour will not be able to rely on transfers from the broader Left to the same degree it enjoyed in past general elections. Drawing conclusions is subject to some caveats. The relatively small number of respondents in certain categories (e.g. people who said they would vote for the smaller parties) means the margin of error increases notably when studying trends within these subcategories.

The nature of the Irish electoral system has usually determined that the larger parties get a seat bonus in general elections. This does not always transpire, especially in elections where the big parties experience significant losses in support. Labour in 1997, Fine Gael in 2002 and Fianna Fail in 2011 are cases in point.

However, in many cases candidates from the larger parties are better placed to draw in vote transfers because they tend to rank higher in terms of first-preference votes and hence can attain vote transfers from lower-placed candidates, as and when these candidates are eliminated.

Sinn Fein, by contrast, has often been portrayed as a "transfer toxic" party. This is somewhat of a generalisation, of course, as transfer patterns to Sinn Fein, and indeed any other party, will vary by constituency, as well as depending on the ideological leanings of the candidates that have surpluses to distribute, or are being eliminated.

Geographical trends, as evidenced in a trend of higher transfer levels between candidates from the same areas, will also have a bearing here. For instance, Sinn Fein's Michael Colreavy managed to stay ahead of Fianna Fail in the contest for the final seat in Sligo-North Leitrim in 2011, thanks to an ability to draw strong transfers from a host of left-leaning independent and small party candidates, taking 36pc of the Declan Bree transfers and 29pc of the Susan O'Keeffe transfers.

But, as the by-election contests in Dublin West and Dublin South-West in 2014 showed, Sinn Fein often struggles to win vote transfers. In 2011 Sinn Fein candidates in Dublin North-East and Wicklow fell out of the seat positions as election counts progressed because of the failure to pick up transfers.

At first glance, the figures presented in the Sunday Independent/Millward Brown poll seem to contradict these trends. Voters are most likely to say that the parties they will NOT consider voting for at the next general election generally tend to be the larger parties. In all, 40pc claim they will not vote for Fine Gael, with over 30pc also claiming they will not vote for Labour (32pc), Sinn Fein (32pc) or Fianna Fail (30pc), with levels being decidedly lower for the smaller parties and independents.

These figures could be pointing towards the growing polarisation of Irish politics, with voters on opposing sides of the political spectrum becoming increasingly vehement that they will, or will not, support certain political parties.

Drilling down further into these figures, the trend towards a realignment of Irish politics from the old Civil War divide becomes increasingly evident. A notable divide emerges between the four parties that have been in government at some stage over the past eight years and the anti-establishment parties and groupings, including Sinn Fein, that tend to occupy the Left of the political spectrum.

Civil War politics is still evident to a degree, given that 23pc of Fine Gael supporters

say they will not consider voting for Fianna Fail, while 40pc of Fianna Fail supporters say they will not consider voting for Fine Gael.

But the most striking trend is the high level of anti-establishment party voters who say they will not consider voting for Fianna Fail, Fine Gael or Labour. A large proportion of Sinn Fein supporters claim they will not consider voting for Fine Gael (77pc), Fianna Fail (58pc) or Labour (60pc). Fine Gael won't lose sleep over these figures, but Joan Burton will be worried given that Labour's ability to win extra seats at past general elections was down, in part, to an ability to draw vote transfers from smaller left-wing parties.

If the level of Left-wing transfers to Labour is drying up, as these figures might suggest, this poses an added challenge to Labour in translating their notably reduced support figures, since the 2011 election, into seats in the next Dail.

The social and demographic breakdown of these figures offers further evidence of the growing class basis to Irish politics. A higher level of respondents among the C2DE social class groups are not willing to consider voting for Fine Gael (14pc difference), Fianna Fail (9pc difference) and Labour (9pc difference) than would be the case for the ABC1 social class groups.

By contrast, ABC1 respondents are more resistant to voting for Sinn Fein (12pc difference), the Socialist Party/Anti-Austerity Alliance (9pc difference) and People Before Profit Alliance (6pc difference). Demographic and geographical trends further complement these findings.

The highest levels of dissatisfaction with the establishment parties are associated with the 35 to 44-year-old age cohort - arguably the cohort most affected by the recession.

Older respondents are the most resistant towards voting for Sinn Fein and the other left-wing groupings. Labour and Sinn Fein will face a greater struggle to win votes in rural areas than in the more urban constituencies. The urban-rural variation is even more evident for the Green Party. In all, 30pc of rural respondents and 40pc of farmers say they will not consider voting for the party, as contrasted with a 17pc level for urban respondents.

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