

CHAPTER 34

Westmeath Elections 1970-2020

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Adrian Kavanagh and Caoilfhionn D'Arcy's chapter above noted the significant political developments in Westmeath since the historic 1918 election until the end of the 1970s. During this time, both Westmeath and Ireland underwent a number of significant political developments and a changing approach to politics. Candidates communicated with the electorate in new ways during the 1960s and 1970s. The rise of television and growing professionalism in election campaigns, in what may be considered the 'second age'¹ of election communication, placed more of a focus on 'new' media and the role of party leaders. This was particularly evident in Jack Lynch's 'meet the people tour' in the 1969 campaign, with a well-resourced Fianna Fáil at the forefront of new developments.² While the national focus tended to shift towards 'new' forms of advertising, elections in Westmeath continued to reflect a strong appreciation for the 'local', as demonstrated by the geographical trends in election results.

The general election of 1969 marked a time in the Longford-Westmeath constituency in which Fine Gael support levels had steadily risen to challenge those of Fianna Fáil, a trend that dominated the 1970 by-election. Patrick Cooney (FG) filled the seat left vacant by the late Patrick Lenihan (FF) to ensure that Fine Gael TDs outnumbered their biggest rivals for the first time since the foundation of the state. In the 1973 General Election the newly formed national coalition of Fine Gael and Labour changed the then established landscape of Irish politics, taking a combined total of 73 seats, four more than Fianna Fáil in a swing that led to the first change in government in 16 years. The Fourth Amendment to the Constitution, to lower the voting age to 18, was passed by referendum in December 1972. Longford-Westmeath voted to pass the Fourth Amendment with an 86.3 percent support level (84.6 percent nationally). The amendment was signed into law in January 1973, but the February election would take place too soon to allow new young voters to be added to the electoral register, despite calls from the National Youth Federation to rectify the issue.³ While it is debatable whether or not it was a calculated move, many young and old voters alike in Westmeath were understandably disenfranchised and disappointed at the outcome. The *Westmeath-Offaly Independent* noted the significant difference to the previous general election in 1969, in that voters had

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a real alternative government option, and perhaps a more meaningful choice to make than they did previously.⁴

In Longford-Westmeath, Fine Gael secured two seats with Patrick Cooney and Gerry L'Estrange, alongside Frank Carter (FF) and Joseph Sheridan (Ind) to return an unchanged Dáil representation. In many ways the result reflected the national mood. The swing to Fine Gael is demonstrated as Paddy Cooney not only managed to hold on to the former Fianna Fáil seat that was won by Fine Gael in the previous by-election, but also managed to top the poll on this occasion. In many other ways, however, Longford-Westmeath differs from trends elsewhere in the country (fig.1) Labour, for example, took 19 seats nationally with 13.7 percent of the first-preference votes. Despite the candidate's call to 'Conquer with Coleman',⁵ it would be many years before they would establish a foothold in the constituency, with the party failing to win a seat in a general election in Westmeath in the sixty-five years from Henry Broderick's election in 1927 to the election of Willie Penrose in 1992.

Continued strong support for Joe Sheridan also ensured that Longford-Westmeath returned one of only two independent seats in the country, alongside the now Independent Fianna Fáil seat of Neil Blaney in Donegal North-East, with the people of Longford-Westmeath decisively deciding yet again to 'Vote for Joe, the Man you Know'.⁶ The winds of change were shifting both nationally and in the constituency in the 1977 contest when Fianna Fáil returned to power under the leadership of Lack Lynch with the party winning 84 of the now 147 seats available and over half of all first-preference votes cast within the country. In the run up to the election uncertainty was the theme in Longford-Westmeath, with all eyes on the close competition within Fianna Fáil between Albert Reynolds, Sean Keegan, Sean Fallon, and Henry Abbott, after Reynolds defeated Frank Carter in the party's selection convention.⁷ The closely fought national contest ensured a strong focus on marginal constituencies such as Longford-Westmeath throughout the campaign, with Jack Lynch attending a rally in Athlone Town in advance of 'the day of reckoning'.⁸

The revival of Fianna Fáil in Longford-Westmeath ensured the election of future Taoiseach Albert Reynolds in 1977 alongside running-mate Sean Keegan, who had narrowly lost out on a seat both in the previous general election and the by-election of 1970, in a landslide election that also saw another future Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, first elected in Dublin-Finglas. A Roscommon native, Reynolds made a name for himself as a prominent ballroom owner, businessman, and owner of the *Longford News* newspaper, prior to being elected to Longford County Council in 1974. Reynolds was viewed by many as a fresh breath of life for the party within the constituency, bringing 'glamour, ferocious energy, and US-style razzmatazz' to the banks of the Shannon.⁹ The fresh approach used by Fianna Fáil in the election may be related to party staff gaining experience in the USA during the election of Jimmy Carter. Senior staff, such as General Secretary Seamus Brennan, were highly influential in this development.¹⁰ The approach of Flanna Fáil had a unique appeal for the youthful electorate, and the impact of

the Fourth Amendment ensured that the constituency returned half the seats available to the party.

It was not only the change to the eligible voting age that helped Fianna Fáil turn the electoral tide in 1977, but also what became known as the infamous 'Tullymander'. Following the boundary changes implemented by Fianna Fáil in the 1969 and 1973 General Elections, with boundaries redrawn under the supervision of the Minister for Local Government, the Fine Gael-Labour coalition set out to re-draw boundaries to favour the coalition in the next general election. In the 1974 revisions, the government made significant changes, mainly in the Dublin area, to maximise Fine Gael and Labour seats while aiming to restrict Fianna Fáil's total. This was ultimately to backfire with the revisions led by James Tully (Lab) having the opposite impact following a later swing towards Fianna Fáil.¹¹

While the most significant changes related to the Dublin area, the Longford-Westmeath constituency reverted to that defined in the 1974 Electoral Act (previously parts of the Rural District of Delvin and the Rural District of Mullingar areas were included in Kildare). In Longford-Westmeath, the 'back-and-forth' changes to the boundaries had the potential to have a significant impact on election results, with 2,800 voters included in the affected area in this instance.¹² Other structural changes allowed some parties to impose candidates under the direction of their national executives, with Fianna Fáil adding Henry Abbott to the ticket in Longford-Westmeath for the 1977 contest. Abbott however, as with most centrally added candidates, trailed behind locally nominated candidates on election day.¹³ The 1977 election results in Longford Westmeath (fig.1) reflected the national change in the balance of power, with Fianna Fáil taking back the seat previously lost to Fine Gael at the somewhat 'sensational' expense of Minister Patrick Cooney.¹⁴ Labour failed to contest for a seat, despite an increase in votes for new candidate James Bennett. The national increase in support levels for Independent candidates was also reflected here as Joseph Sheridan, in his final Dáil election contest, increased his number of votes (although his share of the vote declined slightly) to gain the most first-preference votes of any candidate for the second time in his career. The election results shocked many within the constituency and ultimately left Athlone in the political wilderness with no local Dáil Deputy sitting in the 21st Dáil.¹⁵

In the 1980s, Ireland had a total of five general election contests, with three taking place between June 1981 and November 1982. Ahead of these contests, there were again significant changes made to the Longford-Westmeath constituency boundaries in the 1980 Electoral (Amendment) Act, with parts of the Delvin area moved out of the constituency to form part of the Meath Dáil constituency – a factor that may have shifted the political balance within the constituency towards Athlone and Longford.¹⁶ The 1981 General Election signified significant changes within the country. Charles Haughey assumed the leadership of Fianna Fáil, Garret Fitzgerald led Fine Gael, and the new Labour

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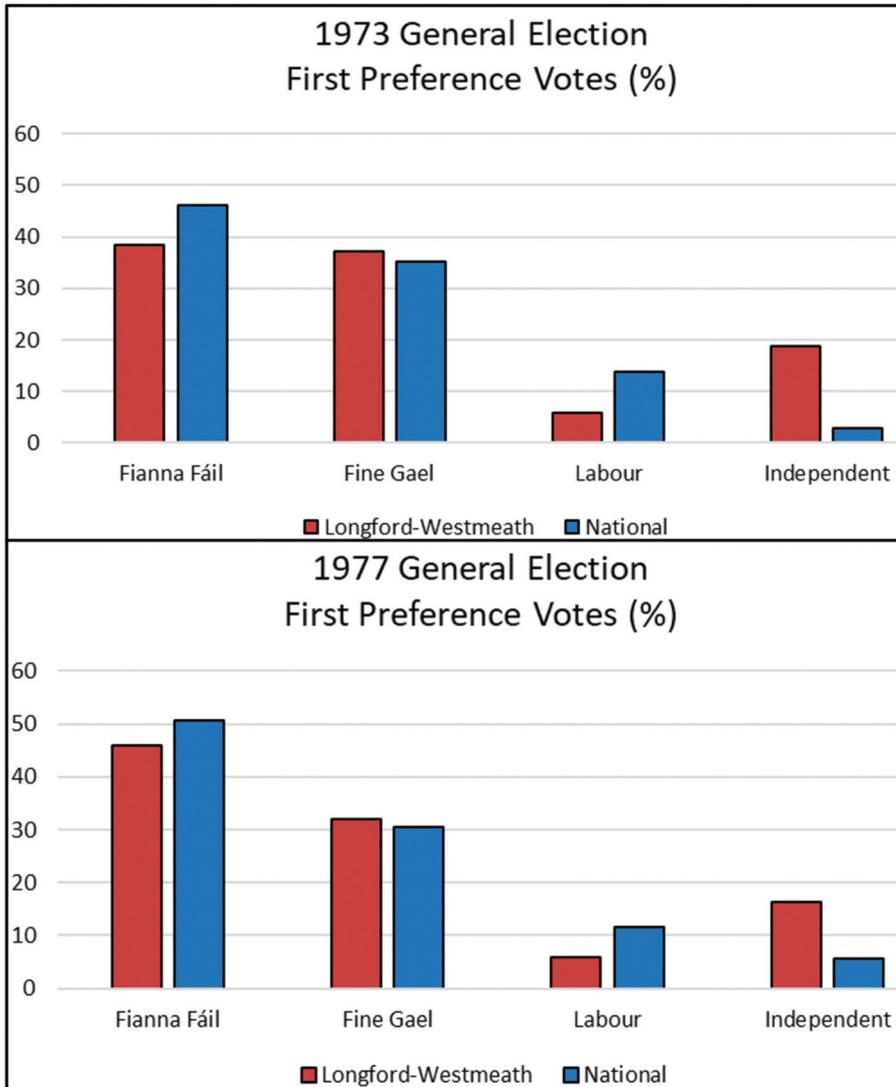


Fig.1: Support levels for Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Labour, and Independents in Longford-Westmeath and at the national level in the 1973 and 1977 Dáil elections.

leader Frank Cluskey lost his own seat, to be replaced as leader by Michael O’Leary. The re-energised Fine Gael Party under Garret Fitzgerald had much national success in 1981. The number of seats nationally increased to 166 for the first time and Fine Gael increased its representation by 22. Despite the increase for Fine Gael, with Fianna Fáil losing two seats against the backdrop of the Anti H-Block campaign, Charles Haughey’s Fianna Fáil was still the largest party in the state with 78 seats. However, it was not sufficient for Fianna Fáil to form a government, and Fine Gael (65 seats) and Labour (15 seats) coalition took power under the leadership of Taoiseach Garrett Fitzgerald.

Longford'Westmeath H-BLOCK Committee

Do I have to die for these five demands:

**Martin
Hurson's
photo should
be in here
but he is
in Long Kesh**

- 1 To wear their own clothes at all times
- 2 That they mix only with fellow Republicans
- 3 No compulsory work. Wide interpretation of the work
- 4 Parcels and letters
- 5 Full remission for protesting prisoners

We wish to inform the voters of Longford/Westmeath that a candidate has been chosen, and endorsed, by the National H-Block Executive in Dublin to contest the forthcoming election and because of the unique situation we find ourselves in — we would like to let Martin himself say something on paper — it's only a short note as you may realise this has to BE SMUGGLED from Long Kesh

"Dear Friends of Ireland and People of Longford/Westmeath, I am speaking to you from the loneliness of my H-Block cell. We need your help to tell Mrs. Thatcher, Prime Minister of Great Britain, that we are not criminals now, nor have we ever been.

We want to be treated as special type of prisoners. The five demands will do this for us. I need your support now by your No. I vote just this one time at this one election."

Vote No. 1 HURSON (MARTIN)

Fig. 2: Campaign advertisement for H-Block candidate, Martin Hurson, as published in the Westmeath-Offaly Independent, June 5th 1981.¹⁷

The atmosphere of change in Longford-Westmeath was solidified in 1981 with the retirement of long-serving TD Joe Sheridan, which, alongside the growing profile of Albert Reynolds, signified a definitive shift of 'the old guard' within the constituency. There was a broad range of nine candidates, with Labour failing to gain a breakthrough despite an increase in their number of votes. The Anti H-Block campaign also gained significant traction within the constituency, with Tyrone native Martin Hurson winning over ten percent of the first-

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preference votes. Hurson's support was greatest in the Longford boxes but his transfers upon elimination outlined how Hurson had taken votes from almost every candidate in the field.¹⁸ Despite some new competition and the 'great uncertainty' that surrounded the campaign, some familiar faces were returned.¹⁹ Reynolds decisively topped the poll in 1981, his second election, and was comfortably elected on the first count. The seat left vacant by Joseph Sheridan, who had previously been a Fine Gael member but had also voted to support a Fianna Fáil government, enabled both main parties benefit from his absence to secure two seats each. Patrick Cooney was returned with 8,244 first-preference votes, recognised as one of the 'success stories of the Elections'.²⁰ Cooney and Reynolds were elected alongside their respective running mates, L'Estrange and Keegan. It was the first occasion since the 1954 election in which both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael held all the available seats in Longford-Westmeath.

The 22nd Dáil was to be short-lived, however, with constituents voting again in February 1982. Following the coalition government's defeat on the budget vote on January 27th, which lost the support of vital independent deputies, spurred by a debate over food subsidy modifications, tax reforms on alcohol,²¹ and proposals to tax children's shoes (the latter perhaps not as prominent an issue as the narrative 'myth' may suggest,²² but a measure which no successive government has dared challenge nonetheless), the general election campaign was 'in full swing' in Westmeath in advance of a February 18th polling date.²³ The range of candidates included some significant changes to the 1981 list. Jimmy Bennett, who had contested the previous two elections for Labour, declined to go forward and a new candidate, Robert Bradley, was nominated. With little change in the Fine Gael candidate selection, perhaps the most notable convention proceedings were to be those of Fianna Fáil. Despite calls from the national executive to select three candidates only, the convention returned four names, including both outgoing TDs, Albert Reynolds, and Sean Keegan. The third candidate selected was somewhat of a surprise. Sean Fallon, the Athlone Fianna Fáil candidate since 1973, who had narrowly missed out on a seat in 1981, failed to be selected, losing out to Mary O'Rourke in the convention by 167 to 133 votes.²⁴ This had been Senator O'Rourke's third attempt to gain the nomination and extended a strong family tradition following on from her father, Patrick Lenihan, and brother, Brian Lenihan (former Roscommon TD from 1961-73 and sitting Dublin West TD 1977-95). The convention also decided to put forward a fourth Fianna Fáil candidate, Henry Abbott, but the National Executive rejected this selection, despite having previously added Abbott to the ticket in 1977.



Plate 1: Retiring Independent Dáil Deputy, Joe Sheridan, wished Albert Reynolds the best of luck in his election campaign, as published in the *Westmeath Examiner* (June 13th 1981).²⁵

The election was fought primarily along economic lines between the largest parties²⁶ with local issues in Westmeath, such as the development of Mullingar Hospital, important.²⁷ Despite the new faces on the ballot paper, the same candidates won seats as in the 1981 contest. Both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael increased their shares of the votes, due to the absence of a strong alternative candidate. Sinn Féin failed to retain a significant proportion of the anti H-Block vote of 1981, perhaps in part due to Minister Patrick Cooney's decision to not allow Sinn Féin party political broadcasts on RTÉ.²⁸ Fianna Fáil newcomer, Mary O'Rourke, improved on the number of votes won by Sean Fallon in 1981, but was still almost 1,000 first-preference votes behind Keegan and failed to overtake her running-mate during the count, despite winning a larger share of Reynolds' surplus votes.²⁹ The significant increase in votes suggested that her level of support was 'a vote for the future'.³⁰ In the subsequent Seanad Éireann elections, Castlepollard-based Donie Cassidy was returned on the Labour Panel, where he would serve for the next two decades.

With an additional three seats in the Dáil, Fianna Fáil would gather the support of a number of independent deputies and three from Sinn Féin-The Workers Party to form a minority government. This government was to be short-lived with a loss of support from Independent Tony Gregory and Sinn Féin-The Workers Party sending the country back to the polls in November. Little change was expected in what was deemed 'one of the most stable constituencies',³¹ with

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all signs indicating two seats each for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. With the party share of the seats considered a foregone conclusion, all eyes turned to the closely fought battle within Fianna Fáil in Westmeath between incumbent Sean Keegan and challenger Senator Mary O'Rourke. The Fianna Fáil convention also put forward Henry Abbott as a fourth candidate, but his nomination was later rejected by the national executive.³² Fine Gael selected Seamus Finnan in place of Gus Hanley as its Longford-based candidate. Robert Brady of Labour, running for the second time, was the only other candidate.

VOTE **Fianna Fáil**
The Republican Party

**STABILITY OF GOVERNMENT
IS WHAT WE NEED**

**THE WAY
FORWARD**
WITH
**Mary
O'ROURKE**
(Senator) Athlone

**Sean
Keegan**
(Outgoing T.D.)
Kibbegan

**Albert
Reynolds**
(Outgoing T.D.)
Longford

VOTE 1, 2, 3 IN THE ORDER OF YOUR CHOICE

ISSUED BY J. KEANE, DIRECTOR OF ELECTIONS

Fig. 3: Campaign advertisement for the Fianna Fáil candidates ahead of the November 1982 General Election, as published in the *Westmeath-Offaly Independent* (November 12th, 1982). As the local candidate for the more Athlone-oriented *Independent*, Mary O'Rourke is the most prominent here, undoubtedly down to party vote management strategy.³³

The election debate focused on the growing unemployment levels nationally and the economic turmoil within the country, which had failed to produce a stable government over both previous terms. This was no different in Westmeath, with calls for a 'responsible government' and a 'responsible electorate', to address the economic problems of the country and local communities.³⁴ The consensus was that there would be 'harsh times ahead' no matter who took the reins.³⁵ This would be the primary focus of a relatively low-key campaign in the constituency, which lacked the usual focus on local issues.³⁶ While 'Spring Comes to Athlone' in support of the Labour effort, the focus remained on the two main parties.³⁷ The party balance remaining unchanged in November 1982, but Mary

O'Rourke's 'near impossible' victory ahead of her running-mate, incumbent TD Sean Keegan, was the major surprise.³⁸ Her victory ensured two TDs for Athlone in the Dáil and a first ever female Dáil Deputy in the constituency (she was one of just fourteen women deputies elected to the 24th Dáil).³⁹ Nationally, Fianna Fáil lost six seats, leaving Charles Haughey to defend a leadership challenge as Fine Gael (gaining seven seats) and Labour (gaining one seat) moved to form a new coalition government that would remain in power until 1987 with Garret Fitzgerald as Taoiseach and Dick Spring as Tánaiste. Continued tensions between the coalition parties, numerous defections that eroded their majority,⁴⁰ defeat in the divisive 1986 Divorce Referendum, in addition to the worsening economic conditions nationally, placed a great deal of stress on the sitting government. In Longford-Westmeath, long-serving Labour Party activist Jack Coleman resigned due to the party's stance on divorce.⁴¹ Despite an active Divorce Action Group campaigning for a 'Yes' vote and appearances from party officials in support of the issue, including those of the newly formed Progressive Democrats party,⁴² Longford-Westmeath subsequently rejected the proposal by a margin of almost 42 percent. Defeat in the referendum and the withdrawal of the Labour Party from government over budgetary disagreements in January 1987 set the stage for a February 1987 election. Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald sought dissolution of the Dáil on January 22nd, making history as he briefly presided over the state's first single party Fine Gael government, and the shortest-lived single party government in the history of the state.⁴³

In advance of the election, it was expected that Fianna Fáil would capitalise on the setbacks for the coalition government and produce a strong result. A longer-than-usual campaign of four weeks, which relied on broad terms such as 'confidence', 'hope', and 'stability', as opposed to detailed policy issues, and the emergence of the Progressive Democrats stemmed the extent of these gains.⁴⁴ While the Progressive Democrats was originally formed by members that broke away from Fianna Fáil, it drew a large swathe of support from Fine Gael, with its supporters potentially seeing support for the Progressive Democrats as a way to 'teach their party a lesson' without supporting rivals Fianna Fáil.⁴⁵ Nationally, Desmond O'Malley's Progressive Democrats had a successful campaign, taking fourteen seats. Fianna Fáil, while not gaining the overall majority that might have been expected, still gained six seats to hold 81 out of the 166 seats in the Dáil (three short of a majority). Fine Gael on the other hand lost 19 seats, while Labour lost four seats and also lost their traditional position as third-largest party in the state to the Progressive Democrats. Charles Haughey became Taoiseach, heading a Fianna Fáil minority government that would stay in power for the next two years.

In Longford-Westmeath, these national trends were also reflected. Following the retirement of Gerry L'Estrange, Patrick Cooney was joined on the Fine Gael ticket by running-mates Colm Smyth and Seamus Finan. On the Fianna Fáil ticket, incumbents Albert Reynolds and Mary O'Rourke were joined by Henry Abbott, who was selected to contest the election ahead of Sean Keegan and Tom

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Bourke.⁴⁶ In the Labour Party, Seamus McNamee was selected ahead of previous candidate Robert Brady, Councillor Willie Penrose, and Councillor Michael Dollard.⁴⁷ The Progressive Democrats, represented by Athlone man Dan O’Sullivan, and former Labour Party member Senator Helena McAuliffe-Ennis, had a strong start to the campaign in the constituency, and enjoyed high hopes of taking the fourth available seat.⁴⁸ The results of the election were a shock to many within the local Fine Gael organisation. Combined with a national increase for Fianna Fáil, notably strong candidate performances, and a very strong vote management system, Fianna Fáil took three of the four available seats, alongside Fine Gael’s Patrick Cooney who took the third seat upon the elimination of running-mate Seamus Finnan.⁴⁹ The effective vote management of Fianna Fáil is demonstrated in the partial tally (fig. 5). The competition among Fianna Fáil candidates may perhaps be best exemplified by the infamous ‘Battle of Tang’,⁵⁰ when O’Rourke and Reynolds sought to address mass-goers on the final Sunday before the election outside the church gate in Tang, Co. Westmeath. The heated debate came close to a violent confrontation before both addressed the crowd to seek their number one vote the coming Tuesday. The tally outlines the extent of Mary O’Rourke’s dominance in Athlone, where she contended with the other Athlone-based candidates (Cooney and O’Sullivan). Overall, it was O’Rourke’s dominance in Athlone that ensured election. O’Rourke also polled well in the Kilbeggan and Tang areas, despite these being further distant from her base. While the surrounding areas in Tang demonstrated strong support for Henry Abbott (fig. 5), it was O’Rourke that dominated the Tang box, gaining the most votes of any candidate (116), with Reynolds in third place (24). Henry Abbott’s strong performance in the Mullingar area and throughout the rest of the constituency is also reflected in the tally data (fig. 5). Abbott is notably the most popular candidate in all areas except for O’Rourke in Athlone and McAuliffe-Ennis’ strong performance for the Progressive Democrats in the Kinnegad district.

In contrast to the elections of the 1970s, the Fianna Fáil party tended to do better in the constituency in the 1980s than their national support level warranted, while Labour struggled to replicate the success it was having elsewhere (fig. 6). While the Fine Gael vote had dipped significantly during the 1980s, this may be best considered a reflection of the national decline in overall party support and the damage done by relatively successful PD party candidates in 1987 in particular. The historic victory for Fianna Fáil within the constituency lasted only two years as the 1980s concluded in the same manner as which they began; with people in Westmeath headed to the polls for another Dáil election. The 1989 election took place against a backdrop of high unemployment and emigration levels. However, the fiscal policy of the minority Fianna Fáil government was widely commended and supported from all sides of the House, and particularly by Alan Dukes, the new Fine Gael leader.⁵¹

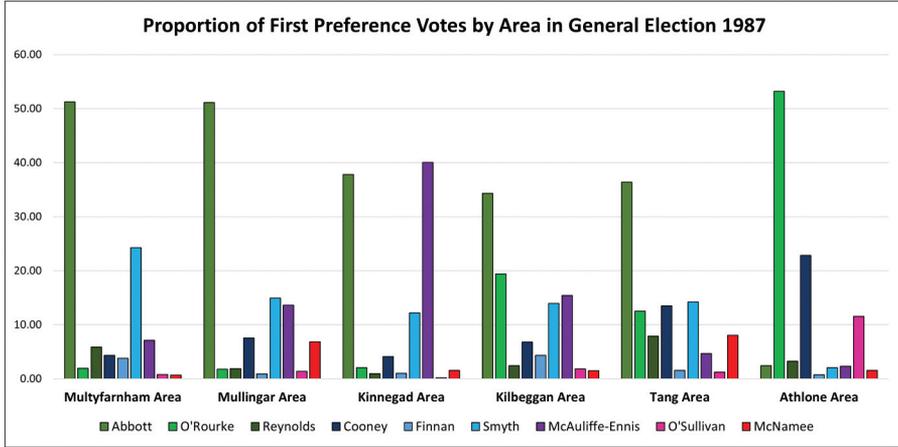


Fig. 4: Partial First-Preference votes by area in Westmeath for General Election 1987, as published in the *Westmeath Examiner* (21 February 1987).⁵²

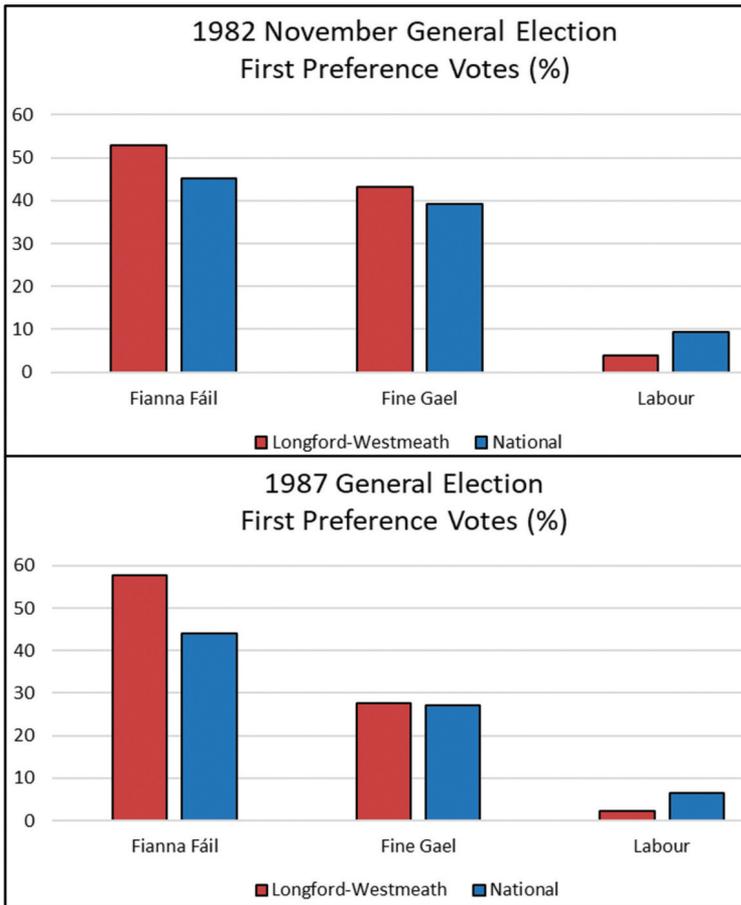


Fig. 5: Support levels for Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and Labour in Longford-Westmeath and at the national level in the November 1982 and 1987 Dáil elections.

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While the 1987 election had brought a number of surprises, the 1989 election marked something of a return to the status quo at national level, with the Progressive Democrats losing eight seats and Fine Gael and Labour regaining some of the seats that they had lost in 1987. The election, which also coincided with the European Parliament Elections, had the lowest turnout nationally at a general election since 1927.⁵³ In Longford-Westmeath, the election was contested by nine candidates with the notable absence of a Labour Party candidate. The ticket did have two independent candidates, however, including Army Wives Independent candidate June Kiernan, as well as Mr. Hugh O'Brien, who had previously contested elections in Co. Clare on the basis of demonstrating that 'you don't need to own shares in an oil well to run for the Dáil'.⁵⁴ The three incumbent candidates made up the Fianna Fáil ticket, but the Fine Gael selection convention was much more eventful, given that Patrick Cooney would instead be contesting the European Parliament election. Following a contested convention, the three Fine Gael candidates selected were Louis Belton (Longford), Paul McGrath (Mullingar), and Brendan McFadden (Athlone). Despite reaching the quota during the contest, Cllr. James Bannon was not selected due to the terms of the directive issued from Fine Gael party headquarters, which required that just one Longford candidate be selected.⁵⁵

The main contest for the last seat was expected to play out in Athlone between Mary O'Rourke and Brendan McFadden.⁵⁶ O'Rourke ultimately proved victorious alongside running-mate and poll-topper Albert Reynolds. Fine Gael's support increased from the 1987 contest in almost every box across Westmeath, while Fianna Fáil's support declined in almost all the boxes outside of the Kilbeggan area.⁵⁷ Both Louis Belton and Paul McGrath were returned for Fine Gael. The most competitive contest was in the Mullingar area, where Paul McGrath's gain for Fine Gael came at the expense of Henry Abbott. Despite being over 2,000 first-preference votes behind Abbott on the first count, McGrath gained significant transfers in subsequent counts, with June Kiernan having a significant impact here, given that she actively campaigned for supporters to avoid giving Fianna Fáil their next preference votes.⁵⁸ The seats for O'Rourke and McGrath weren't to be the only reason Westmeath had to celebrate, as Patrick Cooney also claimed a seat in the Leinster constituency in the European Parliament election. The lengthy stalemate in government formation after the election concluded with Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats entering a coalition government, with Mary O'Rourke continuing as Minister for Education and Albert Reynolds as Minister for Finance.

There was much change in Westmeath in the run up to the 1992 General Election, which stemmed from the coalition collapse in relation to disputed evidence at the Beef Tribunal. Following a brief term with Albert Reynolds as Taoiseach from February to November, albeit one in which Mary O'Rourke was less prominent in the government,⁵⁹ the county again went to the polls, this time to elect three TDs in a newly formed Westmeath constituency that was created by the 1990 Electoral (Amendment) Act. The new Westmeath constituency once

again included the Coole electoral area, which had been part of the Meath constituency in the 1980s. Ahead of the contest, both main parties were struck by resignations of senior party members within the constituency.⁶⁰ Eleven candidates contested the election, including Mary O'Rourke and Henry Abbott for Fianna Fáil, Paul McGrath and Brendan McFadden for Fine Gael, as well as Labour's Willie Penrose, and Peter Rodgers, the first Sinn Féin candidate since the February 1982 election. Five Independent candidates – Stephen Price, Mary Humphreys, John Dunne, Declan Geraghty and Benny Cooney – would also contest the Westmeath constituency, but ultimately none of these candidates polled well.

Some viewed the Westmeath contest as a battle between Athlone and Mullingar to determine which area would have two representatives. The 'Mullingar Factor' encouraged voters to support Abbott (FF), McGrath (FG), and Penrose (Lab), in order of their choice, irrespective of party loyalty.⁶¹ This was ultimately to prove successful, although the two Mullingar-based candidates elected were not the ones that many would have expected in advance of the campaign. Poll-topper Mary O'Rourke would be joined in the 27th Dáil by Fine Gael's Paul McGrath and Labour's Willie Penrose, who narrowly finished ahead of Henry Abbott by just 137 votes on the ninth (final) count to take a Westmeath seat for Labour for the first time in 65 years.⁶² Defeated candidate, Abbott, claimed in his concession speech that 'the election had been an extraordinary one in many ways, having produced new trends, a new political geography, and a great effort from all parties'.⁶³ The significant decline in Fianna Fáil support nationally, while reflected in a seven percent drop in Westmeath, was not as pronounced here as elsewhere. The Labour 'swing' not only impacted Westmeath but it gained eighteen seats nationally to win a total of thirty-three seats in the 27th Dáil.⁶⁴ The election marked a significant change for Labour within the constituency, with its support now more aligned to the national level, while Westmeath was still seen as somewhat of a stronghold for Fianna Fáil (fig. 6).

The results of the election led to the formation of a Fianna Fáil and Labour coalition that would last until 1994, a year in which there were a number of political developments in Westmeath, including Cllr. Pauline Coughlan filling the Fine Gael seat left vacant by the late Cllr. George Allen.⁶⁵ In November, Albert Reynolds stepped down as Taoiseach due to a number of controversies, including the appointment of Mullingar man, Harry Whelan, as President of the High Court.⁶⁶ John Bruton from neighbouring Meath, who previously represented parts of Westmeath in his constituency, was appointed as Taoiseach at the head of a new Rainbow Coalition, involving Fine Gael, Labour, and the Democratic Left, while Bertie Ahern became leader of Fianna Fáil with Mary O'Rourke appointed as deputy leader.⁶⁷

The Rainbow Coalition would govern until June 1997 when they faced re-election with voters presented with the alternative choice of a coalition involving Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats. In Westmeath, pundits noted a degree of apathy toward the contest, with little change expected in the candidates

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to be returned, despite the efforts of the Fianna Fáil (Mary O'Rourke, Henry Abbott, and Camillus Glynn) and the Fine Gael (Paul McGrath and Joe Whelan) tickets to attempt to take an additional seat for their respective parties.⁶⁸

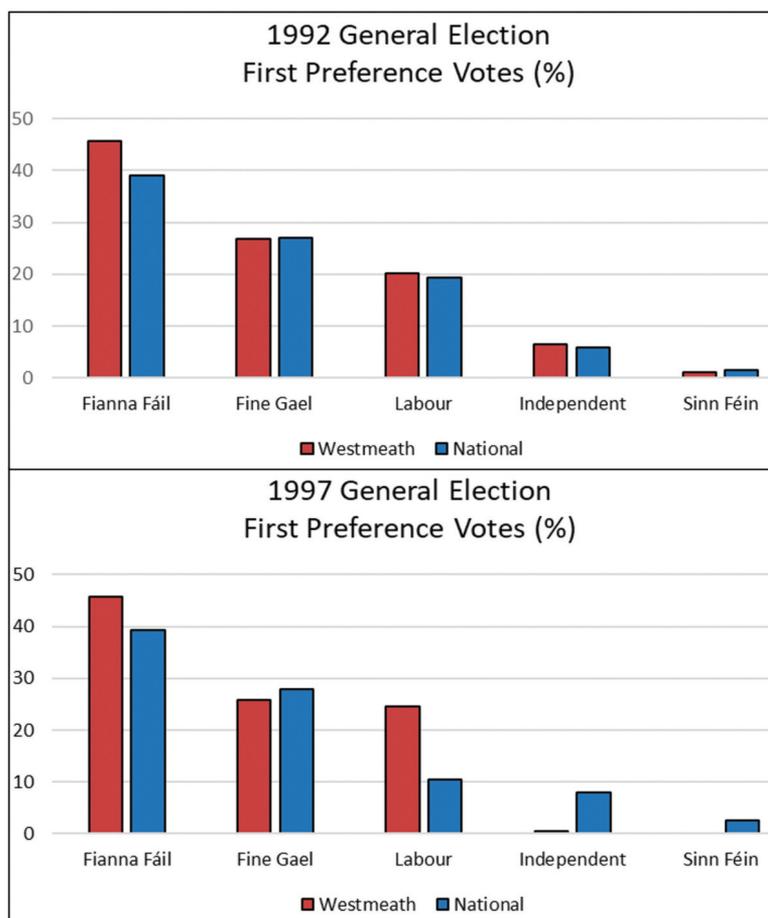


Fig. 6: Support levels for Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Labour, Sinn Féin, and Independents in Westmeath and at the national level at the 1992 and 1997 Dáil elections.

The deputies returned to represent Westmeath in the 28th Dáil indeed remained unchanged from the previous election, but the order in which they were returned was somewhat of a surprise. Despite the ebbing of the 'Spring Tide' for the Labour Party nationally- it lost sixteen seats overall- Penrose managed to firmly 'reverse the national trend' receiving 7,969 first preference votes in a poll-topping performance.⁶⁹ Penrose's performance in 1997 marks yet another occasion where Westmeath bucked a national trend (fig. 7). After failing to return a Labour candidate over the previous 65 years, Penrose secured the first ever result in Westmeath where a Labour candidate finished top of the poll in a Dáil election, despite a fall in the Labour vote nationally. Penrose was joined by

incumbents Mary O'Rourke (FF) and Paul McGrath (FG), with all three candidates reaching the quota in a Westmeath election that had a higher turnout than the national average. Cllr. Henry Abbott of Fianna Fáil was to be unlucky once more, finishing outside of the seats despite an impressive 7,082 first-preference votes, and would later be one of five Westmeath individuals to contest a Senate seat.⁷⁰ Sitting Senator, Donie Cassidy, was subsequently returned to the Labour Panel and Camillus Glynn also joined the 21st Seanad on the Administrative Panel. The General Election saw a national boost for the two largest parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Despite a disappointing result for the Progressive Democrats, in which they only won four seats, the PDs and Fianna Fáil formed a minority coalition, supported by a number of Independents, in a government in which Mary O'Rourke served as Minister for Public Enterprise.

This government ran its full term with the next general election taking place in 2002. The main opposition party, Fine Gael, would go to the country with Michael Noonan as leader following John Bruton's ousting in 2001 after narrowly losing out in a vote of no confidence.⁷¹ The Fianna Fáil campaign was predicated on Senator Donie Cassidy taking the third seat in the constituency at the expense of Fine Gael's Paul McGrath, given the decline in Fine Gael support. The polls suggested a narrow swing of just 2.1 percent would be enough for Senator Cassidy to cause an upset.⁷² Fine Gael had plans of its own to contest for an additional seat, with Athlone Town Councillor Nicky McFadden, while Willie Penrose and the Labour Party machine intensively canvassed in areas such as Athlone to further increase its 1997 vote.⁷³

The 2002 election was a resounding success for Bertie Ahern's Fianna Fáil nationally, with the party gaining eight seats and falling just short of an overall majority. Fine Gael, on the other hand, had a disastrous result, losing 23 seats, while smaller parties, such as the Green Party and Sinn Féin, picked up a number of gains. The result in Westmeath went against the national trend once again, with a slight increase in the Fine Gael vote proving crucial to Paul McGrath retaining his seat. Willie Penrose further improved on his 1997 performance to again top the poll, but also exceed the quota on the first count.⁷⁴ While the party share of seats remained unchanged, there was to be a surprise change in personnel when Donie Cassidy finished ahead of Deputy Party Leader Mary O'Rourke. O'Rourke saw a significant decline in support in the Athlone area, partially due to a strong vote for Fine Gael's Nicky McFadden, but also a contested vote management strategy that left the candidate almost 1,500 votes behind her running-mate on the first count. The result would mean that Westmeath would have three TDs from Mullingar and none in Athlone for the first time since the 1977 election.⁷⁵ O'Rourke would continue to represent the people of Athlone as a Senator, however, being named as one of the Taoiseach's appointees shortly after her electoral defeat and serving as Leader of the Seanad until 2007.⁷⁶

In advance of the 2007 General Election there were significant changes in Westmeath. The *2004 Constituency Commission* report created a four-seat Longford-Westmeath constituency, primarily due to a population-to-

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representative ratio imbalance in the neighbouring Longford-Roscommon constituency, as well as a desire among Longford voters not to be in a constituency that straddled both sides of the Shannon.⁷⁷ The revisions would again mean the exclusion of the former Delvin Rural District (which would form part of a new three-seat Meath West constituency) in a shakeup that would have political repercussions for the 2007 General Election candidates. In this respect, O'Rourke noted the potential to reverse the Mullingar-Athlone imbalance,⁷⁸ an issue that would be at the forefront of electoral focus within the constituency.⁷⁹ Changes also saw the retirement of Fine Gael's Paul McGrath who decided to step down in advance of the election with an 18-year flawless election record, leading to the selection of Peter Bourke and James Bannon alongside Nicky McFadden to contest the election on the Fine Gael ticket.

Nationally, there was a significant rise in support for Fine Gael (gaining 20 seats) and a corresponding decline for the PDs and many Independents. In Longford-Westmeath, pundits predicted that the election would be 'one of the closest ever in the constituency',⁸⁰ as thirteen candidates competed for the four available seats.⁸¹ The election took place against a local backdrop of a controversial water scheme in Lough Ree⁸² and job losses in Athlone.⁸³ Mary O'Rourke was returned with an impressive 8,215 first-preference votes while Willie Penrose once again topped the poll with 9,692. Penrose and O'Rourke would be joined by Peter Kelly, who had previously held a seat for Fianna Fáil in Longford-Roscommon, and Fine Gael's James Bannon, another Longford native who had served on the Seanad Industrial and Commercial Panel in the previous term. Donie Cassidy (FF) fell victim to the re-drawing of constituency boundaries which removed a significant proportion of his support base,⁸⁴ while a low turnout in Athlone hampered the chances of Fine Gael's Nicky McFadden, which meant that Fine Gael had no representative elected from Westmeath.⁸⁵ The geography of representation within the constituency was now more balanced overall, with Athlone getting its Dáil Deputy back, and Penrose still representing the Mullingar area, but the redrawing of the boundaries ensured that only two deputies now resided in the county. However, Nicky McFadden was successful in her bid for the Administrative Panel of the 23rd Seanad in which she joined Senator Donie Cassidy.

During the 30th Dáil Bertie Ahern resigned and Brian Cowen was appointed as Taoiseach in a coalition involving Fianna Fáil, Green Party, and Progressive Democrats.⁸⁶ Despite the resignation of the Taoiseach, the disbandment of the Progressive Democrats, and a backdrop of severe financial crises within the country,⁸⁷ the government survived until the 'earthquake' election of 2011.⁸⁸ The election campaign in Westmeath, as elsewhere, focused heavily on national concerns with a number of new faces in a field of fifteen candidates. Fianna Fáil incumbents Mary O'Rourke and Peter Kelly were joined on the ticket by Cllr. Robert Troy,⁸⁹ while Fine Gael ran the same three candidates as in 2007. Labour selected Mae Sexton, who had held a seat in Longford-Roscommon as a Progressive Democrats Deputy between 2002 and 2007, to join Willie Penrose on the ballot, while Sinn Féin's Paul Hogan hoped to benefit from the predicted

government losses. Perhaps the most notable individual among the many Independent candidates was Kevin 'Boxer' Moran, who had previously represented the Athlone electoral area as a Fianna Fáil Councillor but left the party in advance of the General Election due to discontent with the government's performance.⁹⁰

The election in Longford-Westmeath proved difficult to predict. While the pundits forecasted that Willie Penrose and Fine Gael's James Bannon would comfortably secure re-election, the final two seats had a number of potential occupants, with the focus firmly on vote management strategies and likely transfers from smaller parties and Independent candidates.⁹¹ As the public's attention turned to the potential geography of representation within the constituency, the number of Athlone candidates and their respective performances would have significant bearing on the results.⁹² Willie Penrose topped the poll once again, receiving an impressive 11,406 first-preference votes that secured his membership of the 31st Dáil, in which he would briefly serve as a Minister of State. James Bannon of Fine Gael took the second seat and there was a tight contest race for the final positions as support for Fianna Fáil's two incumbents plummeted. In Athlone, Mary O'Rourke's first-preference votes decreased by 70 percent, while Longford's Peter Kelly vote collapsed in the Longford area. However, newcomer Robert Troy benefitted from the collapse of the vote of his Fianna Fáil colleagues as their transfers ensured that he would win one seat for the party.⁹³ The tight race in Athlone was settled as Mary O'Rourke and Kevin 'Boxer' Moran were eliminated, as their transfers, especially in the latter's case, predominantly stayed local to elect Fine Gael's Nicky McFadden ahead of her running-mate, Peter Burke. One other notable trend in 2011 was the continued growth of support for Sinn Féin, with Paul Hogan more than doubling his first-preference votes from 2007. He was eventually eliminated on the 7th count with 6,487 votes. The election of 2011 in Westmeath reflected national trends with a dramatic collapse in the Fianna Fáil and Green Party vote, and a corresponding increase for competing parties which enabled Fine Gael and Labour to gain 25 and 17 seats, respectively, and form a new coalition government. Robert Troy's vote was contrary to national trends, as the young candidate took one of only twenty seats for Fianna Fáil in the party's worst election results since its formation. The election marked the end of a long career for Mary O'Rourke in Westmeath, who served in political life for almost four decades and held various ministerial roles.

Local and European elections were held in Westmeath in 2014, a year notable for the death of Albert Reynolds, former constituency representative and Taoiseach.⁹⁴ The elections took place on the same day as a by-election in the Longford-Westmeath constituency following the tragic passing of Athlone's Nicky McFadden, who had served her constituents in various roles, including that of councillor, senator, and Dáil deputy.⁹⁵ The elections brought a number of changes to Westmeath, with a recovery in the Fianna Fáil vote, a rise in support for Sinn Féin, and a decline for government parties.⁹⁶ The by-election also reflected a rise in Sinn Féin support levels and a strong showing for Fianna Fáil

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and Independents. However, Fine Gael's Gabrielle McFadden, sister of Nicky, won the seat. This proved to be a rare victory for a government candidate at a by-election contest, but she would only represent the constituency in the Dáil until the 2016 General Election.

There was a severe backlash against a coalition government that had presided over a number of harsh austerity measures in its term in office in the 2016 election. In advance of the contest in Longford-Westmeath, pundits had predicted little in the constituency, with all eyes again turning to Athlone where Gabrielle McFadden (FG), Kevin 'Boxer' Moran (Ind), and Paul Hogan (SF) were expected to fight for the last seat.⁹⁷ With a field of eighteen candidates, the count would be the longest in the country, reminiscent perhaps of the 1965 contest in the constituency.⁹⁸ The closeness of the contest was evident when a full recount was called, with one seat filled by Robert Troy, who had topped the poll with 11,655 votes. The recount was called due to the tight margin of 38 votes which separated Longford-based Fianna Fáil candidate Connie Geraghty-Quinn and Fine Gael's James Bannon, who had seen his share of first-preference votes almost halved from the 2011 contest.⁹⁹ Some counts later, an even tighter margin of six votes would separate Bannon and Willie Penrose, with Penrose edging out Bannon on the fourteenth count by 7,087 to 7,081, following the distribution of Moran's surplus.¹⁰⁰

When all the votes were eventually recounted, the result offered parallels with the 2011 election, as both incumbent Fine Gael Government Deputies failed to retain their seats while their running-mate, Mullingar-based Peter Burke, was successfully returned. With Athlone's McFadden eliminated, it was Independent 'Boxer' Moran that would represent the area in the 32nd Dáil. Paul Hogan, the other Athlone native in the race, lost out to Burke and Penrose on the fifteenth (and final) count in what was his fourth attempt to gain a Dáil seat. Having increased his share of the vote at each general election campaign, Hogan would later resign from the party in 2018, having been the first Sinn Féin representative elected in Athlone in over 90 years when he joined the Council in 2004. Despite the catastrophic election for Labour nationally, in which they lost 30 seats, Westmeath again went against the grain, returning Willie Penrose for another term, but giving him less than half as many first-preference votes as they did in 2011. The election also saw the success of another Westmeath native, Kate O'Connell, who was elected in Dublin Bay South to continue a strong political family tradition, with her father Michael Newman having previously served as a councillor in the Kilbeggan Electoral Area.¹⁰¹ One striking trend in 2016 was the proportion of Longford voters that allocated their first preference to a Westmeath-based candidate. The tally demonstrated that one in three votes went from Longford to Westmeath, and only one in 25 went in the other direction.¹⁰² The result led to the election of four Westmeath-based TDs, and left Longford as the only county in the state with no sitting Dáil Deputy. The 2016 election led to the formation of a somewhat unusual Fine Gael-led minority government, which included Kevin 'Boxer' Moran as Minister of State for Public Expenditure and Reform, and which stayed in power until the 2020 election.

The 2020 General Election was Leo Varadkar's first as leader of Fine Gael, having served as Taoiseach since Enda Kenny stepped down in 2017, and it was the first general election to be held on a Saturday since the historic election of 1918. In Westmeath, it would also be the first general election in almost three decades without Willie Penrose on the ballot, having served as a Dáil representative since 1992 and having previously served as a councillor since 1984.¹⁰³ There were a number of new faces in a field of fifteen candidates. Labour's new candidate Alan 'Budda' Mangan would contest the election in place of Penrose. Fianna Fáil's Robert Troy was joined by running-mate Joe Flaherty, a sitting County Councillor in Longford since 2018. This marked a rare gain for Fianna Fáil in what was a very disappointing election nationally for the party. Fine Gael's incumbent Peter Bourke was joined by Senator Gabrielle McFadden, who sought to regain the seat she lost at the 2016 election, and Longford-based Micheál Carrigy. Sorca Clarke, a Sinn Féin candidate based in Mullingar, would subsequently cause a political upset by topping the poll with 11,848 votes to take a Dáil seat for Sinn Féin in Longford-Westmeath for the first time since the 1957 election.¹⁰⁴ The victory took many by surprise, especially as Clarke had failed to retain her Council seat at the local elections held only a few months earlier in May 2019. A further surprise lay in the elimination of Kevin 'Boxer' Moran, who was tipped by commentators to comfortably retain his seat but h lost out on the final count despite having over 10,000 votes.¹⁰⁵

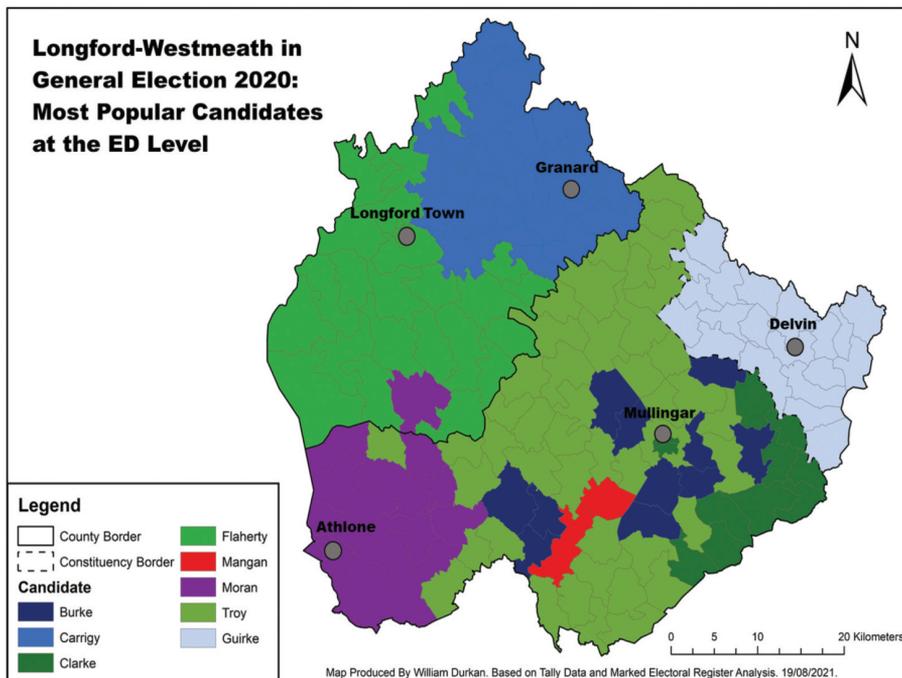


Fig. 7: Map showing areas (electoral divisions) within the Longford-Westmeath constituency in which certain candidates won the most votes (based on an analysis of tally figures, as published in the *Westmeath Independent*, 15 February 2020).¹⁰⁶

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Two Fianna Fáil Dáil Deputies were returned, with Joe Flaherty and Robert Troy securing seats on the final count, reflecting the party's traditional strength in the constituency. Alan 'Budda' Mangan failed to emulate the previous success of Penrose for the Labour Party, winning less than 2,000 preferences on the first count. Peter Burke retained his seat for Fine Gael, as the party yet again failed to elect a deputy from the Longford and Athlone areas. With both 'Boxer' and McFadden failing to win seats, Athlone would not have a deputy in the 33rd Dáil.¹⁰⁷

Even though he failed to retain his seat, Moran was still the most popular candidate in the Athlone area (fig. 7), with other Westmeath candidates proving to be the most popular candidates in their own localities, such as Troy (northern and central parts of Westmeath), Burke (rural areas close to Mullingar Town) and Clarke (parts of Mullingar and south-eastern parts of the constituency, including the Kinnegad area), as well as Mangan (in the vicinity of Castletown-Geoghegan). It is worth noting that Delvin, which votes in the Meath-West constituency, also demonstrated a strong pattern of localised support for Sinn Féin candidate Johnny Guirke, who was successfully elected on the first count. Even with the advent of social media and a widespread swing towards Sinn Féin across the state, the 'local' still proved to be a driving factor determining voter choices in Westmeath in 2020, as well as in Longford. There is perhaps somewhat of an exception in the case of Sorcha Clarke, who won votes from all areas, despite being the most popular candidate in only a few. Overall, local support bases and a strong county divide are seen to drive the overall geography of voter preference, in a constituency that traditionally placed a strong focus on county identity and area representation during campaigns.

This detailed study of the history of general election contests in Westmeath offers interesting insight in terms of how a county, that has often found itself part of constituency with Longford, or split between constituencies, has been influenced, or rather not influenced, by national trends. While Fianna Fáil support may have slipped from traditional highs in the constituency (fig. 8), they still remained the most popular party in all elections since 1989 with the exception of 2011, albeit by much tighter margins in the most recent events. While Labour bucked the national trend in terms of support for Willie Penrose in many instances, the most recent events notably outline a significant decline to the fourth most popular party, despite being second only to Fine Gael in 2011. Perhaps the most notable trend in recent events is the growth of Sinn Féin, as has also been the case elsewhere in the country.

As always, Geography has been a major factor in Westmeath elections. People live in places and Westmeath people, in turn, have been influenced by the places they live in when it comes to electoral participation.¹⁰⁸ These locally-framed choices lead to a particularly geographical pattern of voting, in which Westmeath candidates tend to normally fare best in their local areas. Contrary to what might have been expected, geographical influences on voting in Westmeath seem to be stronger in more recent decades than they were in the earlier decades of the state.

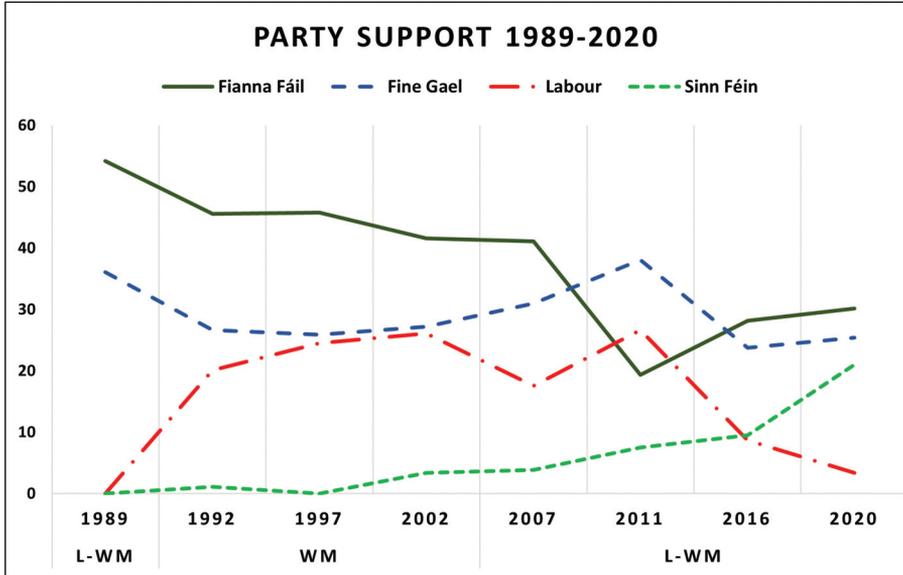


Fig. 8: Party support in the Westmeath (WM) and Longford-Westmeath (L-WM) constituencies in general elections from 1989-2020.

Geography has played a significant role in shaping the candidate selection and campaigning strategies of political parties, as noted in the tendency for Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil (with the exceptions of the 2016 and 2020 contests) to select candidates from the Mullingar and Athlone areas of the Longford-Westmeath constituency, as well as Co. Longford. This has also led to different areas within the constituency vying for dominance, as seen in the conflicts between Longford and Westmeath, and indeed between Mullingar and Athlone, at the constituency level, as evidenced often in the efforts made by local media, and other bodies, to ensure representation. Finally, it is important to note that, even though located at the heart of Ireland, Westmeath is far from a national political barometer and the county plays its own tune when it comes to electoral politics, with support trends in the county, or the wider Longford-Westmeath constituency, often defying the trends observed at national level.

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