

THE MAY 2014 LOCAL AND EUROPEAN ELECTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND: SECOND ORDER OR AUSTERITY VOTING?

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This article reviews the radical changes in voter turnout and political support levels evident at the May 2014 Local and European electoral contests in the Republic of Ireland. This analysis considers the degree to which such trends might be reflective of the classic second-order election model. But it also considers whether something deeper may be at play here, shaped by the dramatic political changes in Ireland that have accompanied the period of financial austerity following the onset of the European debt crisis in the 2007–08 period. These contests could prove to be more austerity elections rather than classic second-order contests. Support for the more mainstream political parties (Fianna Fail, Fine Gael and Labour) has collapsed over the past few years. This suggests that the May 2014 election results could reflect a more radical transformation of the Irish political system, rather the temporary, mid-term, decline in government popularity that characterises the second-order election model.

Notable shifts in support levels for government and established political parties have characterised political life in the Republic of Ireland since the onset of the financial crisis in 2008, although these changing voting patterns are framed both in geographical and temporal terms. It could be argued that the old certainties of voting behaviour have been eroded by the social and economic transformations of the past few years. But has the relevance of the established models of political science likewise been eroded, or do such models still offer useful insights into a rapidly changing European political landscape? This account assesses the effectiveness of the second-order election model in this changed political climate, with specific reference to the May 2014 Local and European elections in the Republic of Ireland, the “poster child for fiscal austerity”. This analysis finds that, while voter turnout and political support trends at these contests reflect aspects of the second-order model, past and present political trends within the Republic of Ireland suggest that the loss in government support levels could persist until the next general election contest and add to the further fracturing of an already radically transformed Irish political landscape.

The concept of second-order elections was introduced by Reif and Schmitt (1980) to frame their analysis of the first-ever series of European election contests in 1979. The concept distinguishes between “first-order” elections, namely national parliamentary and/or presidential elections, and other, less salient, electoral contests. By-elections, referendum elections and a host of local (or regional) contests and European elections have all been termed as “second-order” election contests, although Schakel and Jeffery (2013) have suggested that regional electoral contests are less likely to illustrate second-order characteristics. Voters

believe there to be “less at stake” with these electoral contests than with national elections. Reif and Schmitt (1980) claimed, as a result, that election campaigns tend to be less intensively contested at these second-order elections, resulting in lower levels of participation and an increase in the level of invalid ballots. In many of these electoral contests, they note, the representative bodies being elected prove to have relatively little power and national interests and concerns may instead tend to dominate election campaigns. Second-order elections offer voter a “low-cost opportunity to voice their dissatisfaction” with the government (Schmitt 2005: 651), even in the case of government supporters. Government parties will hence tend to fare poorly at these contests, while opportunity spaces open up to allow new and smaller parties to poll strongly. The extent of such government losses may be influenced by the timing of a second-order election contest within a national election cycle (Marsh 1998), with government parties faring notably better if such contests are held earlier or later during their term in office than if these are held in the middle of their term. Reif and Schmitt’s study of the 1979 European Elections found contrasting trends when comparing support levels across the nine states in which these elections took place. In some states, such as the United Kingdom and Italy, support levels for government parties were actually higher at the European contests than at the preceding general election, but governments in other states lost support at these contests. The most notable example here was the Fianna Fáil government in the Republic of Ireland, which experienced an “embarrassing setback” (Reif and Schmitt 1980: 7) at the European contests of 1979, with their support level dropping by 15.9% relative to the 1977 General Election. Reif (1984), in extending the analysis to include the 1984 European Elections, largely confirmed the findings of this earlier study, while also arguing that second-order elections can have political repercussions in terms of creating further turmoil between the different parties forming coalition governments or within government parties. Reif also teased out why government parties fare less well at these contests. He suggested that voters may be more likely to vote tactically at first-order election contests, but with less at stake at second-order contests, they may be more willing to vote with their hearts and opt for newer and smaller political parties and groupings. He also suggests that government support levels at such second-order contests will also be shaped by the strength of the domestic economy, as well as also being influenced by domestic and international political crises. Marsh (1998)’s study of the contests between 1979 and 1994 also confirmed key aspects of the second-order election model. However, he argued that second-order contests can also act as “pointers to subsequent general elections” (ibid.: 606), noting that, in some instances, government support levels may not recover after a poor performance in a second-order elections. Schmitt (2005)’s study of the 2004 European Elections largely confirmed the findings of the earlier studies. Participation levels were generally found to be notably lower than those for the preceding first-order (general) election contest, with the exceptions of the two states that have compulsory voting rules, Belgium and Luxembourg. (Voter turnout levels in the Republic of Ireland were only a few percentage points lower than the voter turnout levels for the preceding general election in 2002, however). Schmitt suggested that low participation levels may, in some instances, be related to levels of scepticism with the European Union (EU), although no general trend was established. With rare exceptions (Spain and Slovakia), government parties were found to lose support at the contests relative to the preceding general election, with the greatest losses being experienced in countries where European Elections were held in the middle of that government’s term in office.

So does the second-order election paradigm still hold in the changed political landscape carved out by the austerity policies of the European debt crisis, or does this model have no

further resonance given the radically changed socio-economic and political climate? This will be the question that frames this analysis of the 2014 Local and European Elections in the Republic of Ireland. But to offer further context, it is useful here to review the turnout and government support trends at the 2014 European Elections contest across all 28 Member States. Voter turnout levels again fell notably relative to those of the preceding first-order (general) election contests in most of the EU Member States, with turnout levels falling by just under 25% on average, albeit with some notable exceptions. The elections in Lithuania took place on the same day as the second round of voting in a presidential election contest, while there was again little change in turnout levels in the states that have compulsory voting laws, namely Luxembourg and Belgium. The level of turnout decline tended to be less notable in those states that held other types of election contests on the same day as the European elections, with Belgium and Greece proving to be the most notable examples here but with a similar trend also being evidenced, albeit to a lesser degree, in the Republic of Ireland. At the other extreme, turnout fell by much higher levels in a number of the newer, post-communist, member states in the most eastern regions of the Union, including the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Slovakia and Hungary, as well as Cyprus. A number of more western states, namely France, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, also experienced levels of turnout decline of close to, or greater than, 30% relative to those recorded at the preceding first-order contests. These states tended also to see significant gains in support and representation levels for a number of populist, mainly right-wing and anti-EU political parties at these contests, such as the Front National, Danish People's Party, Swedish Democrats and the United Kingdom Independence Party. (The Dutch Party for Freedom did lose support relative to their performance at the 2009 European Elections, although the party fared better at the 2014 contest than they had at the preceding general election contest.) It could be argued that the lower voter turnout levels in these states acted as a means of allowing these parties, whose supporters may have been relatively more likely to turn out to vote, to poll strongly at these contests. By contrast, it could also be argued that the rising support levels for these populist right-wing parties may not solely reflect the political trends expected within the second-order election model, but may instead be a function of the changing political landscape of austerity Europe. This latter hypothesis cannot, of course, be verified until the next set of first-order, or general, elections have taken place in these states.

The evidence from the May 2014 contests across the EU generally reflects different aspects of the second-order election model, while also illustrating that the extent of government support losses was shaped by the period within the national electoral cycle that such contests took place in. In all, government party support levels across the 28 EU member states fell by an average of just over 10% relative to the preceding first-order election contests. There were a number of states that eschewed this trend. Belgium fits into this category almost by default, given that federal elections in that state were held on the same date as the European Elections contest, with a new electoral law dictating that the dates of these contests will coincide in the future, commencing with the 2014 contests. The same applies in the case of Lithuania, given that the second round of voting in that state's presidential election coincided with the European vote. (That said, the example of the 1989 elections in the Republic of Ireland, as noted below, shows that government parties need not always win similar levels of support at second-order contests that are being held on the same day as a general election.) Other states that fell into this category included those that held their most recent general election contests relatively close to the European contests, namely Germany, Austria, Italy, Malta and

Bulgaria (with all these states holding general elections in 2013), or states, such as Hungary, that had very low turnout levels for these contests. Finland is the only state in this group that does not fit neatly into either of these two categories, with the relatively high support level for government parties in this case reflecting the large number of parties that currently form Finland’s governing coalition. By contrast, the extent of government party losses outstripped the European average in a number of states, including the Netherlands (30.0%), the United Kingdom (29.1%), the Republic of Ireland (27.9%) and France (27.0%). While the politics of austerity figures prominently in each of these cases, the Irish context is different from that of the other states listed here, given that rising support levels for right-wing populist parties did not act to inflate the extent of government losses in the Irish case.

The European Elections vote took place simultaneously with local election contests in the Republic of Ireland, a pattern that has been in place since 1999 (although the first-ever European contests also took place on the same day as local election contests in 1979). The nature of these contests varies notably from each other in the Irish context, however. European election contests in the Republic of Ireland tend to favour high-profile personalities and, as such, these are similar in scope to Irish presidential election contests. Local elections, by contrast, favour candidates with strong roots in their local areas who have proven records of constituency service and community activism. With the EU having emerged as “an important co-legislator, on a par with national legislatures” over the past number of decades (Schmitt 2005: 653), the European level is substantially more important in terms of setting the Irish state’s policy agenda in contrast with the relatively low levels of power being attributed to the local level. However, studies of voting trends in the Republic of Ireland suggest that the European contests are more second order in nature than local elections are. As is evident from Figure 1, voter turnout levels at European contests in the state have tended to be higher when these are held simultaneously with local election contests (or general elections), with the lowest ever turnout levels being recorded on the two occasions that the European

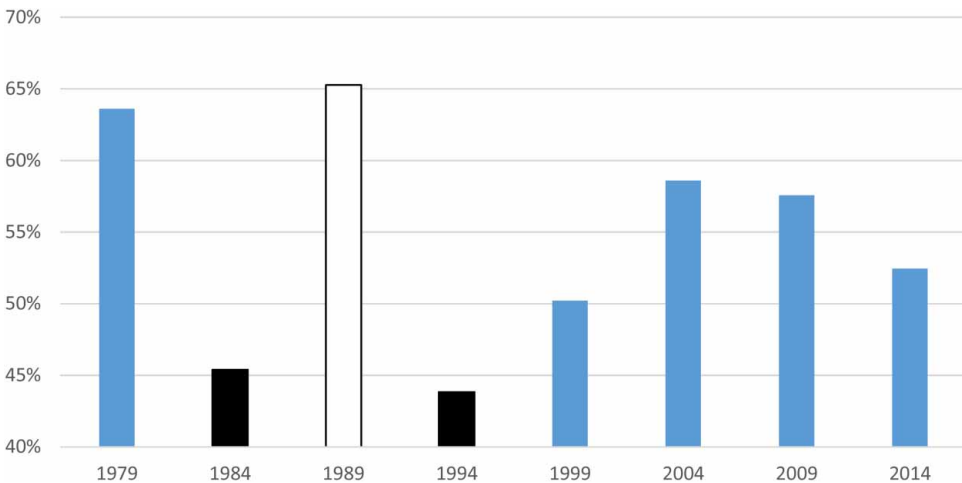


FIGURE 1

Voter turnout levels (%) at European Election contests in the Republic of Ireland, 1979–2014
Notes: The 1989 contest was held on the same day as a general election. All the other contests were held on the same day as local election contests, with the exceptions of 1984 and 1994.

elections were effectively stand-alone contests. The impact that the local election contests have on pushing up European contest turnout levels is also evident when invalid vote trends for these two contests are contrasted. The number of invalid votes cast at the European contest (45,424, or 2.7% of all votes cast) across the state was more than twice as large as the number cast at the local election contests (22,216, or 1.3%), suggesting that at least some members of the electorate placed less weight on the European contest when casting their ballots. Invalid vote levels at the European contest remained relatively low (1.8%) in the Dublin constituency, but these levels spiked in the other two, more rural, constituencies of Midlands–North-West (2.6%) and South (3.2%). By contrast, there were no significant spatial differences in invalid vote levels at the local elections between Dublin (1.4%) and the Midlands–North-West (1.2%) and South (1.3%) constituencies. The contrasting invalid vote levels for the local and European contests in the more rural South and Midlands–North-West constituencies suggest that the local election contests held greater levels of salience for voters in these more rural regions than the European contests did, with this trend not being as readily apparent in Dublin. This reflects the contrasting turnout geographies that exist for different types of electoral contests in the Republic of Ireland. Turnout levels are generally higher in rural Ireland for general and local election contests, but tend to be higher in urban areas (and particularly in middle-class urban areas) for referendum elections. Politics focused around local personalities and local political issues tend to excite rural (and also working-class urban) voters to a greater extent than the issue-based politics that characterise referendum votes, but referendum contests tend to be more attractive to middle-class urban voters (Kavanagh 2002).

The relative propensity of rural and urban working-class voters towards higher participation levels at local election contests has seen higher turnout levels being recorded in certain parts of the state at local elections than at first-order (general) election contests in the past, as tantamount to Horiuchi's (2005) turnout twist concept. A contrast of turnout levels between the 2002 General Election and 2004 Local Elections, for instance, found clusters of higher local election turnout in a number of economically peripheral areas, including a number of areas in the west of the state and also a number of socially marginalised areas in Dublin (Figure 2). Perceptions of being far distant from the capital, whether it be in geographical or social terms, led voters in these areas to place more faith in local politics and their local political representatives, irrespective of the fact that little real power is invested at the local level in Ireland. At a more localised level, the presence in a local elections race of one, or more, candidates from a specific area also had the effect of pushing up turnout levels at those contests in that area, over and above the levels recorded at the preceding general election contest.

The extent of this turnout twist phenomenon is unlikely to have been as widespread at the 2014 contest, however. The turnout difference at the national level between the preceding general election contest (69.9%) in 2011 and the local election contest (51.6%) of 2014 was much wider than that evidenced at the previous two local election contests. This could suggest—at least on the basis of voter turnout levels—that local election contests are becoming decidedly more second order in nature in the Republic of Ireland. But a claim by Reif and Schmitt (1980: 13) that second-order election turnouts will be adversely effected if constituencies are “new and unfamiliar” and “bear little meaning” for electorates, who cannot identify with such “artificial” territorial entities, has resonance here. Major changes were made both to local and European election boundaries ahead of the May 2014 contests, with the overall size of these constituencies being dramatically increased in a number of cases but particularly in the more rural areas. Indeed, Midlands–North-West, the largest of the European

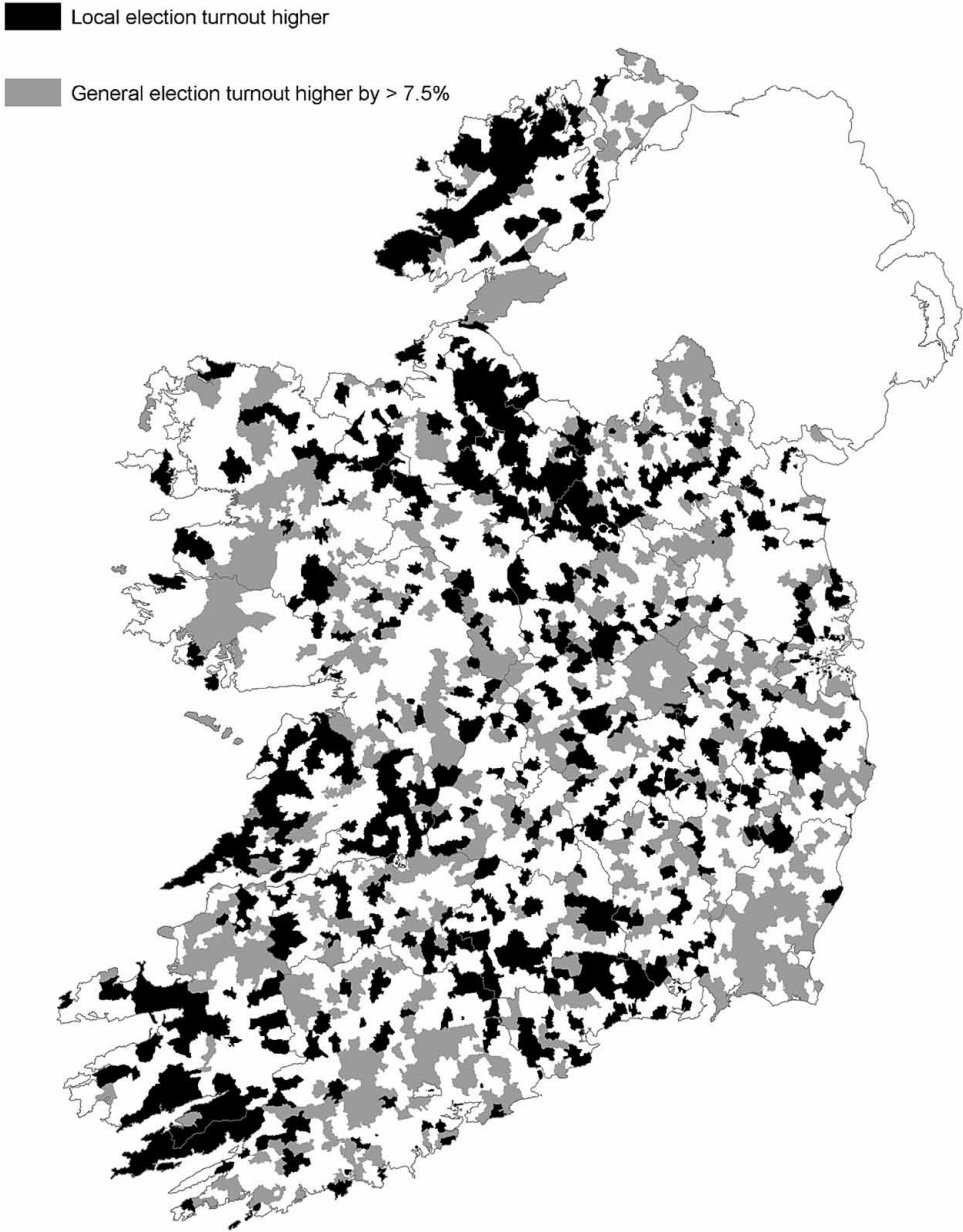


FIGURE 2
Contrasts between turnout levels at the 2002 General Election and the 2004 Local and European Elections at the electoral division level in the Republic of Ireland

constituencies, covered a territory that was larger than the areas of five EU states; Belgium, Slovenia, Cyprus, Malta and Luxembourg. The resultant increase in the distances—in geographical terms, at least—between voters and their most local candidates at the May 2014 contests may have had a depressing impact on turnout propensity, given the role that local candidates play in mobilising higher turnout levels at these contests (Kavanagh 2002).

TABLE 1

Government party performances at second-order election contests (European and local elections) as contrasted with those parties' performances at general election (GE) when elected into power and at general election at end of term in office

Government	Preceding GE	European	Local	Following GE
Fianna Fáil, 1977–81	50.6 (<i>Jun 77</i>)	34.7 (<i>Jun 79</i>)	39.1 (<i>Jun 79</i>)	45.3 (<i>Jun 81</i>)
Fine Gael-Labour, 1981–82	46.4 (<i>Jun 81</i>)	–	–	46.2 (<i>Feb 82</i>)
Fianna Fáil, 1982	47.0 (<i>Feb 82</i>)	–	–	45.2 (<i>Nov 82</i>)
Fine Gael-Labour, 1982–87	48.6 (<i>Nov 82</i>)	40.5 (<i>Jun 84</i>)	37.6 (<i>Jun 85</i>)	33.5 (<i>Feb 87</i>)
Fianna Fáil, 1987–89	44.1 (<i>Feb 87</i>)	31.5 (<i>Jun 89</i>)	–	44.1 (<i>Jun 89</i>)
Fianna Fáil-Progressive Democrats, 1989–92	49.6 (<i>Jun 89</i>)	–	43.0 (<i>Jun 91</i>)	43.8 (<i>Nov 92</i>)
Fianna Fáil-Labour, 1992–94 ^a	58.4 (<i>Nov 92</i>)	46.0 (<i>Jun 94</i>)	–	50.3 (<i>Jun 97</i>)
Fine Gael-Labour-Democratic Left, 1994 ^a –97	46.6 (<i>Nov 92</i>)	–	–	41.5 (<i>Jun 97</i>)
Fianna Fáil-Progressive Democrats, 1997–2002	44.5 (<i>Jun 97</i>)	38.6 (<i>Jun 99</i>)	41.7 (<i>Jun 99</i>)	45.5 (<i>May 02</i>)
Fianna Fáil-Progressive Democrats, 2002–07	45.5 (<i>May 02</i>)	29.5 (<i>Jun 04</i>)	35.6 (<i>Jun 04</i>)	44.3 (<i>Jun 07</i>)
Fianna Fáil-Green Party-Progressive Democrats ^b , 2007–11	47.0 (<i>Jun 07</i>)	26.0 (<i>Jun 09</i>)	27.7 (<i>Jun 09</i>)	19.2 (<i>Feb 11</i>)

^aA change of government occurred in December 1994, without a general election taking place.

^bThe Progressive Democrats initially formed part of the government who were elected into power in June 2007, but the party voted to disband itself in November 2008.

Studies of voter turnout levels in the Republic of Ireland offer strong evidence that local, European, referendum and by-election contests are second order in nature, while suggesting that some electoral contests are more second order in nature than others. These also show that place matters in relation to turnout propensity at second-order election contests, with significant urban–rural variations existing in relation to these. Such trends are also evident in relation to political support levels. Commencing with the “embarrassing setback” for the Fianna Fáil government at the very first European election contest in 1979 (Reif and Schmitt 1980: 7), Irish voters have tended to use European election contests as a means of exacting retribution on government parties, a trend that has also been evident with other types of second-order election contests, including local elections (Table 1). Referendum contests, even though political parties do not of course contest these, also fit into this category as voters may often choose to vote against referendum proposals as much on the basis of anti-government sentiment as their opposition to the actual referendum proposals. The problems faced by government parties at second-order contests are readily evident in the fact that no government party succeeded in winning any of the 21 Dáil by-election contests held between 1983 and 2010. However, the present government parties have succeeded in winning three of the six by-election contests held since the 2011 General Election.

As Table 1 shows, government parties have consistently lost support at the next European and local election contests held after a government was elected into power, although the extent of such losses has varied depending on economic conditions within the state. The period of economic recession extending from the mid-to-late 1970s up to the early

1990s saw significant falls in government support being recorded at such second-order contests, but the extent of such losses was curtailed by the improvement in economic conditions in the late 1990s as evidenced in a relatively strong government performance at the 1999 local and European elections. A mini-recession following the 2002 General Election and another prolonged period of economic recession, commencing in 2008, however, saw a return to the pattern of significant government losses at mid-term local and European election contests but with the size of these losses proving to be even larger than they were in the 1980s and early 1990s. Fianna Fáil, the party whose economic policies were blamed for the economic crisis, lost a significant level of support at the 2009 contest, with a similar fate also befalling their junior coalition partners, the Green Party. But the extent of the Fianna Fáil and Green Party losses in 2009 paled in comparison with those of the government parties, Fine Gael and Labour, at the 2014 elections (Table 2).

It is interesting to note that on the one occasion when a second-order election contest took place on the same day as a general election, namely the electoral contests of June 1989, the extent of government party (Fianna Fáil) losses at the European elections contest far outstripped that party's losses in the general election. This also mirrors the general trend in support patterns at the local and European election contests, with government party support levels tending to be usually higher at local elections than at European contests, even if these contests are held on the same day. Overall, the trend set here is one of government party losses at European contests relative to their performances at preceding general elections, with a similar trend applying in the case of local election contests over this period, but this is only part of the story.

Studies of government party performances at the next general election contests held after these (usually) mid-term second-order elections help determine whether the levels of anti-government sentiment at these contests proved to be temporary in nature, or not. Did

TABLE 2

Political party/grouping support levels in the Republic of Ireland at 2011 General Election and 2014 Local and European election contests

Party/grouping	General Election 2011 (%)	Local Elections 2014 (%)	European Elections 2014 (%)
Fine Gael	36.1	24.0	22.3
Labour Party	19.4	7.2	5.3
<i>Government Parties (combined)</i>	55.5	31.2	27.6
Fianna Fáil	17.4	25.3	22.3
Sinn Féin	9.9	15.3	19.5
The Green Party	1.8	1.6	4.9
People Before Profit Alliance	1.0	1.7	1.4
Anti-Austerity Alliance/ Socialist Party	1.2	1.2	1.8
United Left	–	0.3	–
Workers Party	0.1	0.2	–
Direct Democracy Ireland	–	0.2	1.5
Éirígí	–	0.2	–
Fís Nua	–	0.1	0.3
Workers and Unemployed Action Group	0.4	0.1	–
Independents and Others	12.7	22.5	20.7

government party supporters use these to give their parties a “bloody nose” before returning to normal patterns of voting behaviour at the next general election, or were support levels at the contests instead symptomatic of longer term trend in which government support losses continued into the following general election? The evidence offered by [Tables 1](#) and [2](#) generally tends to support the latter hypothesis. In most cases, while a recovery in government support levels did occur between these second-order election contests and the subsequent general elections, the extent of this recovery did not compensate for the level of losses experienced at the earlier second-order contests, with the “Celtic Tiger” contests of 2002 and 2007 marking the notable exceptions to this trend. In some cases, government support levels continued to fall after these contests, as evidenced with the 1987 and 2011 elections.

The extent of government party support losses since the onset of the European debt crisis in 2008 has dwarfed that of the earlier periods, including the last major economic recession of the 1980s. The fall in support for Fianna Fáil and its junior coalition partner, the Green Party, at the 2009 Local and European elections ([Table 1](#)) was unprecedented in terms of its scope at that point in time. However, the ongoing economic woes, further exacerbated by the need for the state to be “bailed out” in late 2010 by a troika involving the International Monetary Fund, EU and European Central Bank, saw support levels for these government parties plummet further at the 2011 General Election ([Table 1](#)). Fianna Fáil had won 78 seats (out of 166 seats in Dáil Éireann, the Irish parliament) at the 2007 election with 6 seats being won by the Green Party, but Fianna Fáil won just 20 seats at the 2011 election while the Greens were left with no representation. Most of these losses translated in gains for the main opposition parties, Fine Gael and Labour, with these parties forming a government with a majority of unprecedented scope—the two parties would account for 68.1% of all seats (113 seats) in Dáil Éireann. However, despite a number of electoral successes in a short-lived honeymoon period at the start of their term in office (Labour won the 2011 Presidential Election and a Dáil by-election in the Dublin West constituency eight months after the general election was held), opinion poll trends showed that these parties soon started to lose support in the wake of the government’s first austerity budget in the autumn of 2011. Most of the focus was on the Labour Party’s poll ratings with these falling to levels of 6% or 7% by 2013 ([Figure 3](#)); support levels that would leave the party with little or no representation in Dáil Éireann if they were to be replicated at a general election contest (Kavanagh 2013). Fine Gael losses initially were not as dramatic, but a number of political controversies in the first few months of 2014 saw a more significant reversal in that party’s fortunes.

The 2014 Local and European Elections, coming well past the midpoint in the government’s term in office, were always going to pose a major electoral test, especially with two Dáil by-elections (in Dublin West and Longford–Westmeath) also being held on the same day. Fine Gael and Labour fared poorly at these elections, with their combined loss of support relative to the 2011 election amounting to 24.3% at the local elections and 27.9% at the European contests. As usually is the case with Irish electoral contests, geography mattered in relation to these voting trends, with the extent of government party losses varying across the state. The most dramatic losses, relative to the 2011 elections, were experienced in the Dublin region, with combined government party losses of 29.5% at the local elections and 36.3% at the European elections. The extent of government losses in the other, more rural, regions (or European constituencies) was, by contrast, less pronounced. Combined government party losses of 18.7% at the local elections and 26.7% at the European elections were evident in the Midlands–North-West region, while in the South region, there were combined government party losses of 22.8% at the local elections and 24.1% at the European contest.

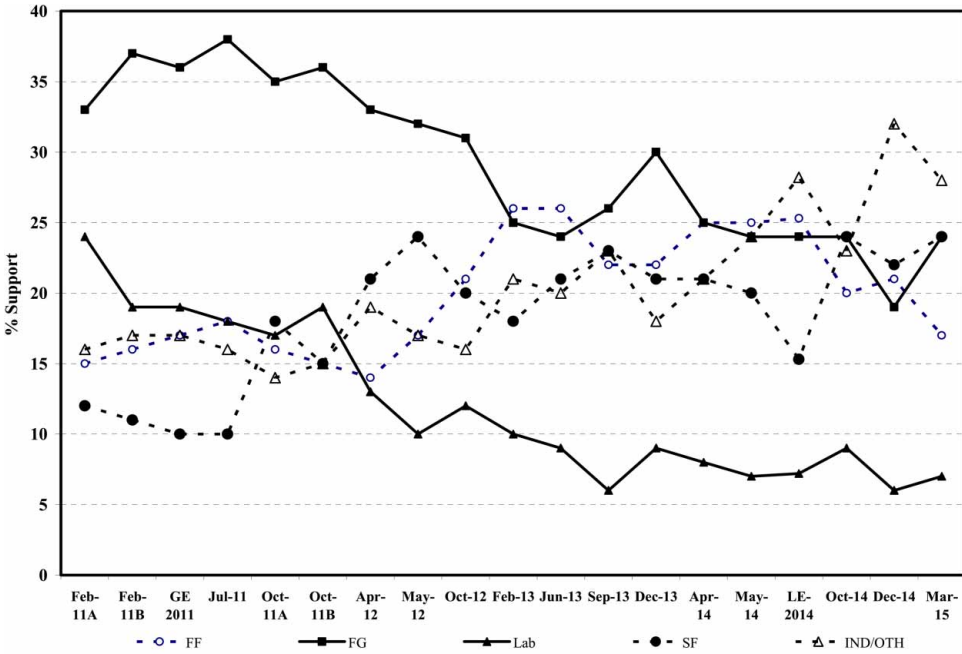


FIGURE 3
 Changing support patterns for Irish political parties in *Irish Times-Ipsos MRBI* opinion polls in the period following the 2011 General Election
 Source: Collins (2015).

Fine Gael lost over 100 seats at the 2014 Local Elections, while Labour lost over 60% of their council seats in these contests. Labour also lost all of the three seats that they had won at the 2009 European Elections. The extent of these Labour Party losses resulted in the resignation of their party leader, Eamon Gilmore, days after these contests had taken place. However, the vagaries of the Irish Proportional Representation by Single Transferable Vote electoral system, wedded to the radical changes made to the European Parliament constituency boundaries, helped Fine Gael to retain all of their four European Parliament seats, even though the overall number of Ireland’s European Parliament seats had been reduced by one. Ironically, Fine Gael won marginally fewer votes than Fianna Fáil did at the European elections (Table 2), but the latter party only won one seat. Fianna Fáil and the Green Party did reclaim some of the ground lost by them during their period in government between 2007 and 2011, however. Fianna Fáil reclaimed their position as the state’s largest political party, at least at the local authority level, while the Green Party regained support and representation levels—mainly in their main, middle-class Dublin, support base. The Green Party increased their number of council seats from 3 to 13 and fell little more than a thousand votes short of winning a European Parliament seat in the Dublin constituency. While these parties’ fortunes have not recovered to the levels of support enjoyed by them at the 2007 General Election, the evidence of the 2014 contests is that the catastrophic losses experienced at the 2009 and 2011 elections have not proven to be terminal in nature.

While the parties that comprised the previous government saw improved fortunes at the 2014 elections, the largest gains were made by independent candidates and a number of left-leaning political parties and groupings. Independents generally fare well at local election

contests in the Republic of Ireland, in a similar vein to the association observed in the literature between the second-order model and stronger electoral performances for smaller parties. The Independents grouping fared especially well in the 2014 contest, accounting for more than one-fifth of all the valid votes cast at these. Non-party fortunes at European contests are a direct function of the profile of the independent candidates contesting these, with very high support levels being recorded in 2014 in the Midlands–North-West constituency as this featured a number of high-profile independents, who accounted for two of the four seats there. While European issues rarely impact on voting at European elections in the Republic of Ireland, with national issues usually having more influence on these, the election of non-party candidate, Luke Ming Flanagan, in Midlands–North-West offered a rare exception to this trend. His success was, in part, due to strong support in this region for his stance opposing the banning of turf-cutting in certain bogland areas, with this ban having arisen from the implementation of the EU's Habitats Directive.

A number of smaller left-wing parties or groupings, such as the People Before Profit Alliance and the Anti-Austerity Alliance, made gains at more localised levels in urban areas, but particularly in the Dublin region. The most significant gains at the 2014 elections, however, fell to Sinn Féin, a nationalist and left-leaning party whose electoral performances in the Republic of Ireland had been overshadowed by their electoral strength in Northern Ireland over previous decades. The party has, however, been consistently building up its support base in the Republic of Ireland since the late 1990s, albeit with a temporary decline in fortunes (particularly in the Dublin region) over the 2007–09 period. A win for Pearse Doherty at the 2010 Donegal South-West Dáil by-election, held a few months before the 2011 General Election, heralded a renewed period of growth for Sinn Féin and the party gained 10 seats at that election. Opinion poll figures since the 2011 contest have pointed towards a consistent trend of increased Sinn Féin support levels (Kavanagh 2013; Loscher 2015), almost to the same extent as the decline in Labour Party fortunes since entering government in 2011. However, while polls in early 2014 had party support levels sitting consistently around the 20% level, Sinn Féin's share of vote at the local elections (Figure 3) fell somewhat short of this, in part due to the lower turnout propensity of the party's younger and more working-class support bases. The party's weaker levels of local organisation may have also placed it at a disadvantage against Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in these contests, particularly in areas where Sinn Féin did not have an established base of support. However, Sinn Féin did succeed in more than trebling their number of council seats at these elections, with an especially strong performance in Dublin (19.0%) and particularly in the more working-class areas within that city (Kavanagh 2015). Sinn Féin's European election performance was even more impressive. The party's approach of selecting presidential-style candidates far in advance of the May 2014 elections paid dividends and they won seats in each of the three European Parliament constituencies. As the largest party in the state not to have been in government since the onset of the economic crisis, Sinn Féin is well placed to further benefit from growing anti-government and anti-politics sentiment in the Republic of Ireland, as confirmed by the series of opinion polls carried out following the May 2014 elections (Figure 3).

Characteristics of the second-order election model were evident again across the European continent at the May 2014 elections. Trends that have characterised European politics during the period of austerity since the onset of the debt crisis in 2008 once again came to the fore. But European-level trends always express themselves differently in different contexts and spaces and this is very much the case with Ireland. So were the May 2014 elections symptomatic of second-order voting behaviour, or did these mark just another phase in a process of

growing anti-government sentiment that would mark these contests as examples of austerity voting? Voter turnout and party support trends at the May 2014 elections would appear to be reflective of the second-order election model, with a notable drop in voter turnout and government support levels relative to those of the 2011 General Election. But trends evident when local and European contests were held during periods of economic recession (1985, 2009) in the past suggest that anti-government sentiment need not always spike at such contests and can instead develop further into even greater losses at the next general election contest. Governments have proven to be especially endangered species in Ireland and since the 1969 election most Irish governments have lost notable levels of support at subsequent general election contests, with the exception of the Celtic Tiger period of economic growth in the early 2000s. Hence, government party support losses at these mid-term contests might not necessarily reflect second-order voting trends, but might instead be merely a staging point in terms of an overall trend of more widespread government losses, culminating in especially low levels of support at a subsequent general election.

A study of opinion poll trends in the wake of the May 2014 elections would suggest the latter scenario, as support levels for the government parties dropped further in the latter part of 2014, culminating in a series of opinion polls in December 2014 that had combined government party support at its lowest level, by far, since Fine Gael and Labour entered office in March 2011 (Figure 3). This was strongly linked to controversies surrounding the proposed introduction of water charges, with the mushrooming of public protests on this issue in late 2014 acting to further bolster the electoral prospects of Sinn Féin, but also the Independents and Others grouping, as was evident at two Dáil by-elections in Roscommon–South Leitrim and Dublin South-West. While government losses are the norm at such mid-term by-elections, the combined loss in Fine Gael and Labour support levels at the Dublin South-West contest (down 46.8% on the 2011 election) was the largest government loss at a Dáil by-election in the history of the state. However, a series of polls in March 2015 pointed towards some recovery for the government parties. A breakdown of the figures for the *Irish Times-Ipsos MRBI* poll of 26 March 2015 (Loscher 2015) points to a geographical and social dimension to these improved government support levels, with combined Fine Gael–Labour levels standing at 50% among the upper-/middle-class groups and at 23% among the working-class groups (Collins 2015). The suggestion is that evidence of economic recovery is acting to bolster government support levels somewhat, especially as the next general election (scheduled to be held at any stage up to April 2016) draws closer, but there is a notable class and geographical basis to this government recovery. If trends continue—and these are as much dependent on the international economic environment as on Irish policy initiatives—then its strong position among the middle-class electorate means that Fine Gael could well recover its support to a sufficient level to allow it to lead the next government. However, given the simmering anti-austerity sentiment in working-class urban areas, and the continued strength of Sinn Féin and other left-wing groupings in such areas, the potential for a recovery in Labour Party support levels seems less certain. It could well be the case that the May 2014 elections amounted to classic second-order contests in certain parts of the state, while marking another phase in the development of anti-austerity style voting in the more working-class urban environments.

Whether amounting to second-order or austerity voting, it can be argued that the May 2014 elections mark yet another phase in the movement of Irish politics more towards the class-cleavage politics of continental Europe. Admittedly, this comes at a point in time when there is much focus on the growing levels of support enjoyed by populist parties on the extreme right of the political spectrum in core EU states such as France, Denmark and the

United Kingdom. In Ireland, by contrast, left-leaning parties and groupings—most notably Sinn Féin—have been the main beneficiaries of the dramatic changes sweeping across the Irish political landscape since 2008. This does, however, bring Irish politics into line with the political changes impacting on the other peripheral EU states (Kavanagh 2015), which have resulted in significant gains at recent elections for left-wing, or anti-austerity, groupings such as the Five Star Movement in Italy, Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece. Ultimately, while the degree of political change in Ireland, as in Greece (Mavris 2012), has outstripped much of the rest of Europe during the period of economic austerity, the result of this change may be to produce an Irish political system that is no longer dominated by the right-of-centre parties of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. A new model may be emerging, which is more in line with the classic right wing–left wing cleavages associated with the European political model and which reflects the political trends in the other peripheral European states. Whether these purely reflected a new austerity voting paradigm (as suggested by political trends in late 2014) or whether these were mainly second-order in nature (as suggested by the opinion polls of March 2015), the May 2014 elections have shown that the old certainties of Irish politics are being fast eroded. The new political landscape that is emerging is highly fractured, uncertain and rapidly changing. With the number of seats in Dáil Éireann to be reduced at the next general election (Kavanagh 2014), the potential for significant seat losses among the government parties is further exacerbated, even if, in keeping with the second-order election model, these parties do recover some support levels before the next general election. The extent of such losses may well force Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael into a grand coalition after the next election for the first time in the history of those parties, which would effectively mark the end of the Civil War politics cleavage that has dominated Irish politics since the founding of the state. This could make for even further, dramatic, changes in subsequent years, should unfavourable economic conditions persist well into the present decade.

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