



28 November

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I. Campaign overview

Today marks the final day of campaigning ahead of polling day tomorrow. The last week of the campaign has been the most dramatic in an otherwise humdrum election with the three main parties, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Sinn Féin now neck and neck in the polls.

Fine Gael has slipped dramatically, falling six points to just 19% in less than two weeks according to the Irish Times / IPSOS B&A poll released on Monday morning. The party has had an election campaign littered with challenges and missteps, while the other parties' campaigns have been relatively uneventful. The Business Post/Red C poll released on Wednesday evening was less shocking for Fine Gael but still puts the three front-runners as being neck and neck, with Fianna Fáil leading on 21% and Sinn Féin and Fine Gael both close behind on 20%.

Simon Harris' interaction with disability worker Charlotte Fallon in Kanturk on Friday evening, which was recorded by RTÉ and left Ms Fallon in tears afterwards could prove to be the defining moment in the campaign for Fine Gael. While Harris was quick to apologise for the incident, both on social media and via a phone call to Ms Fallon directly, the widely-circulated video of the incident, viewed millions of times, undoubtedly damaged the party. Fine Gael's campaign strategy has been reliant on using the popularity of its leader to boost the profile of its large roster of unknown candidates, but the Kanturk incident may have the opposite effect on some of their chances.

The drop in support for Fine Gael has not resulted in a major increase in support for the other two main parties. Fianna Fáil is now the most popular party in the country at 22% (a boost of two points), with Sinn Féin polling just behind them at 20% (up one point). Speaking outside government buildings on Wednesday, Sinn Féin's Pearse Doherty asked the public to "lend us your vote". Doherty appealed to those dissatisfied with the current government but not traditional Sinn Féin supporters. It's worth noting that one in five voters is still undecided (19%), so there is still room for one or more of the parties to pull ahead on the day.

It was anticipated that the leaders' debate between Micheál Martin, Mary Lou McDonald and Simon Harris would be another defining moment of the campaign with the potential to influence undecided voters. Instead, the debate was a muted affair with no clear victor on the night. Smaller parties have

benefitted from a small boost in support, while Independents seem to be struggling to maintain momentum. Independents dropped three points to 17% and it will be intriguing to see if this trend continues into polling day. Left-leaning parties by contrast have seen jumps across the board. The support for Social Democrats rose by two points to 6%, Labour and the Green Party both rose one point to 4% and People Before Profit gained one point, putting them at 3%. Aontú remained at 3%. The Business Post/Red C poll published yesterday largely confirms this level of support for the smaller parties.

II. Constituency watch

Several constituencies are shaping up to be key battlegrounds, with competition intensifying between the main political parties, particularly Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and Sinn Féin. These areas will be crucial for determining overall outcomes and the future makeup of the Dáil. RTÉ analysed election competitiveness using the Kavanagh Constituency Competitiveness Score (KCC Score), which measures candidates' electoral experience against available seats. Kildare South ranks highest due to a seat reduction (Ceann Comhairle re-election) and intense competition among three incumbents, two senators (one a former deputy), and three councillors. Wicklow follows, with fewer seats and strong challenges from both independents and established parties. Sligo-Leitrim, ranked third, features three incumbents, seven councillors, a former deputy, and a former MEP. Despite one incumbent opting out, the experienced field makes it highly competitive.

Clare is also a highly contested constituency, with two seats vacated and former Sinn Féin TD Violet Anne Wynne running as an Independent. Fianna Fáil, the Green Party, and Fine Gael are all vying for seats, creating an unpredictable race. Similarly, Cork South-Central sees Sinn Féin's Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire aiming to secure a second seat, with Labour and Independent candidates also making strong bids.

Dublin Central is shaping up to be a volatile race, with Sinn Féin leader Mary Lou McDonald, Minister Paschal Donohoe, and former MEP Clare Daly likely to be elected, meaning either of the sitting TDs Neassa Hourigan of the Greens or Gary Gannon from the Social Democrats will miss out. Gerry Hutch is also running in this constituency. Housing is a key issue due to the large percentage of renters. These constituencies will be crucial in determining the overall outcome of the election.

III. Prospective government formation

Speculation on government formation this week has been dominated by Monday's The Irish Times/Ipsos B&A poll. Fine Gael's dramatic drop in support has dampened the prospects of Simon Harris' and Micheál Martin's parties forming a majority government without the need for additional coalition parties. This is despite Harris' comments last week that he did not want a four or five party coalition, and potentially strengthens the position of Labour, the Social Democrats and the Green Party if they seek to enter government negotiations under a common centre-left platform.

Fine Gael's declining polling makes it more unlikely that Simon Harris will remain Taoiseach after the election, with Micheál Martin appearing more likely to lead the next government. Although there has been some speculation this week that Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin could form a coalition together, this has been dispelled by Martin, who again ruled out working with Sinn Féin, citing fundamental policy differences.

According to Monday's poll, a government led by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael remains the public's preference, with 43% of voters favouring a coalition between these two parties and a third partner. A government led by Sinn Féin without either Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael is preferred by 21% of voters, while only 8% favour a coalition between Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil. When the public was asked which party they would like to see in the next government aside from these three parties, a Sunday Independent/Ireland Thinks poll found that one in five indicated Labour, reflecting its potential influence in future coalition talks.

IV. Polling day and the count

In Ireland, polling day procedures follow a system of proportional representation (PR) through a method called the Single Transferable Vote (STV). Voters are given a ballot paper listing all candidates in their constituency. Instead of selecting just one candidate, voters rank candidates in order of preference, marking a "1" next to their top choice, a "2" for their second choice, and so on. The count takes place over several rounds, with candidates required to meet a specific vote quota, determined by their constituency size, to secure election.

If a candidate receives more votes than the quota, their surplus votes are transferred to other candidates based on voters' next preferences. If no candidate meets the quota in the first round, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and their votes are distributed in turn. This process continues until all seats are filled. Historically, roughly 80% of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael transfers went to another of the party's candidates. More recently, however, this rate has fallen to less than 60%, with inter-party transfers becoming more frequent. Sinn Féin is an exception to this and continues to have exceptionally high transfer rates between its candidates.

As seen in June's Local and European elections, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael enjoyed a high level of transfers between each other's candidates, reflecting the parties' increasingly close relationship since entering into coalition in 2020. The high rate of transfers between these parties could prove a decisive advantage in competitive constituencies across the state, with the voters of each party readily expected to give a high preference to the other.

For Sinn Féin, it remains uncertain how transfer-friendly the party will be. In 2020, the party received few transfers from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael candidates but performed strongly among People Before Profit, Independents and other party voters. The three 'centre left' parties, Labour, the Social Democrats and the Green Party, transfer strongly among themselves.

The counting of votes begins the morning after polling day but the full picture may take some time depending on how close the counts are and if recounts are called. If this does happen, it may mean a result late Sunday or Monday.

In the 2020 general election, votes were cast on February 8th and the full results were available on the 11th. Most constituencies completed their counts by the 10th round due to the PRSTV system, which requires multiple counts for each constituency. But, it is likely that government negotiations will take some time and a complete view of who will make up the next coalition may take some weeks.

An exit poll will be published at 22:00 on Friday once polling stations close. In 2020, the exit poll was broadly reflective of the actual result, albeit understating Sinn Féin support by roughly 2% and overstating Fine Gael's vote by a similar margin.

V. Leaders' debate

The debate between party leaders Simon Harris, Micheál Martin and Mary Lou McDonald on RTÉ's Primetime was the most anticipated debate of the General election campaign, particularly in the aftermath of Fine Gael's poor polling results. Touted as Simon Harris' "battle of his life," the debate fell short of expectations, devolving into a spectacle of serial evasion rather than a decisive clash of ideas.

Ultimately, there was no slam dunk from any party leader on the night, although Micheál Martin was probably marginally ahead of his rivals. Harris succeeded in his primary goal of survival, avoiding any further damage to his party's precarious position. McDonald delivered her trademark sharp one-liners but faltered on policy specifics, particularly under scrutiny on housing. Martin maintained his reputation for steadiness, but he failed to land any significant blows on his opponents. Harris faced tough questioning about the Kanturk incident and Fine Gael's controversial contact with RTÉ in its aftermath, managing to weather the storm without major missteps. McDonald struggled to defend her party's affordable housing plan when pressed on banks' willingness to lend under Sinn Féin's proposals. Meanwhile, Martin was cornered by both McDonald and Harris over his role in the late-2000s financial crash.

Undecided voters who watched are unlikely to have been swayed by this damp squib of a debate. Overall, it is unlikely to alter the trajectory of the election or significantly impact the fortunes of the parties involved.

VI. Independent Ireland manifesto

Last Friday, Independent Ireland launched its General Election manifesto entitled '[Common Sense Solutions for a Better Ireland](#).' This document includes summaries of the party's key priorities, including:

- **Accountability and reform:** Independent Ireland proposes creating a new Department of Efficiency and Reform to reduce overspending and waste within the public sector.
- **Housing:** The party calls for a housing emergency to be declared, tax relief for landlords to be extended, social housing funding to be increased and planning laws to be reformed to facilitate construction.
- **Health:** Independent Ireland proposes increasing the number of healthcare professionals, delivering more hospital beds and implementing effective oversight of the healthcare system.
- **Agriculture and environment:** The manifesto commits to opposing environmental and trade measures that would disadvantage the agricultural industry while increasing supports and grants for farmers
- **Immigration and law:** The party proposes reforms to the immigration system to improve efficiency and enforcement, and commits to supporting Gardaí and opposing hate speech legislation.

VII. Other policy launches

Fine Gael

- **Education and apprenticeships:** Increased investment in schools and college places for vital therapies, and the scrapping of Student Fees and apprenticeship registration charges ([link](#))

Fianna Fáil

- **Sports:** Increase Sport Ireland core funding to ensure inclusive services, dedicated funding to support coaches and promote Ireland as a sporting destination ([link](#))
- **Agriculture, fisheries and rural Ireland:** €278m to protect and improve farm incomes, establish pathways to access emergency assistance, increase the rates under Farm Assist and the Rural Social Scheme ([link](#))

Social Democrats

- **Worker's rights:** Measures to tackle low pay and precarious employment, a statutory right to union recognition, and a commission for a four-day working week ([link](#))
- **Mental health:** 10% of the total health budget to mental health services by 2030, expansion of CAMHS and a national workforce task force for the health and social care sector ([link](#))
- **Youth:** Specialist emotional counsellor/therapist in all schools, review of the CAO points system, phasing out the third level student contribution fee and increased SUSI grants ([link](#))

Aontú

- **Housing:** €1.5bn increase in government expenditure, 15,000 social and affordable homes per year, €350m plan to build accommodation for workers returning to Ireland and a ban on Air BnB in large towns and cities ([link](#))