



8 November

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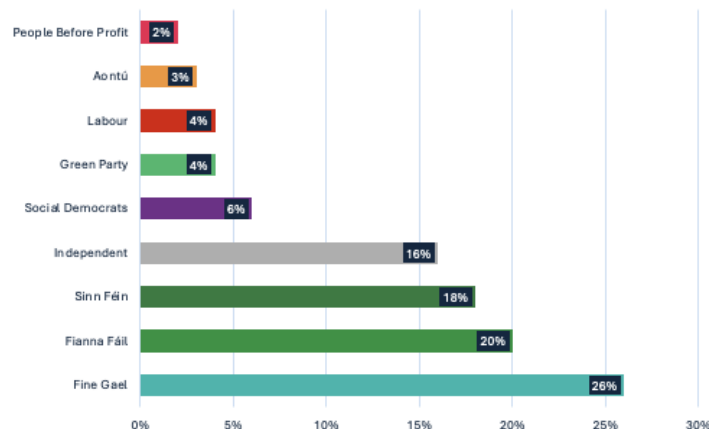
I. Election day: Friday 29th November

Taoiseach Simon Harris announced this afternoon that he will go to Áras an Uachtaráin to ask the President to dissolve Dáil Éireann. A general election is scheduled to take place on Friday 29th November to elect the 34th Dáil.

The next Dáil will be the largest in the history of the State. 174 TDs will be elected, an increase of 14 TDs from the previous election spread across 43 constituencies. This increase reflects a growing population and aligns with the recent Electoral Commission review, aimed at ensuring fairer representation across constituencies. A total of 88 seats is needed for a single political party to form a majority Government, however no party will run enough candidates to secure a single-party government. The Ceann Comhairle Seán Ó Fearghaíl (Fianna Fáil, Kildare South) is the only TD who will be automatically re-elected to the next Dáil.

II. State of the Parties

First preference voting intention %



Source: Sunday Independent / Ireland Thinks, 3rd November

Fine Gael

Fine Gael has experienced a steady increase in support since Taoiseach Simon Harris took over from Leo Varadkar six months ago. According to a Sunday Independent / Ireland Thinks poll, 53% believe Harris will be the next Taoiseach and the party is currently polling at 26%. However, not all polls have been as positive for the party with the Business Post / Red C poll at the end of October placing it at 22%. Fine Gael had a disappointing 2020 general election, losing 15 seats and is hopeful that it will recoup some of its losses. The party is also buoyed by its strong performance in the local and European elections in which it secured 21% of first preference votes.

Fine Gael currently has 32 TDs, of whom more than half will not contest the general election meaning converting its strong polling into Dáil seats will be difficult. Incumbency advantage means that tenured TDs tend to perform better in elections than new candidates, so despite the positive poll results, Fine Gael will likely be fighting to hold many of its current seats rather than making significant gains. This is seen in its candidate strategy, with the party choosing to run single candidates in constituencies where it previously would have targeted a second seat. Fine Gael will be seeking to leverage the Taoiseach's positive polling and what has been coined "Brand Harris" to boost the chances of its candidates. While he has gained support, his leadership has not yet been stress-tested by a general election campaign. Balancing his personal appeal with Fine Gael's core values and a policy focus on stability, business-friendliness and economic management will prove challenging. If the party's strategy is successful and current polling is accurate, Fine Gael stands to be the largest party in the next Dáil.

Fianna Fáil

Fianna Fáil has not experienced the same boost in support as Fine Gael in the lead-up to the election although the party has been steadily gaining support in recent months. The party is currently polling at 20%, six percentage points behind Fine Gael. Despite this gap, data from Sunday Independent / Ireland Thinks shows that when voters are given a list of already-declared and expected candidates in their constituency, there is a notable shift in support towards Fianna Fáil rising to 21%. By contrast, Fine Gael's support drops to 23% in response to the same question. Fianna Fáil secured the largest number of seats in the 2020 general election, with 38 seats. Unlike Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil did not suffer major losses and won 22% of first preference votes and is aiming to increase its seats in the upcoming election.

Only 17% believe that party leader Micheal Martin will be the next Taoiseach. The lagging support for Fianna Fáil's leader is indicative of the party's campaign strategy which is focused on policy rather than the personality of its leadership. According to Martin, the party's election priorities will be focused "on addressing the future needs of the country, including the cost of living, housing, healthcare, creating safe and clean cities and towns, promoting sustainable climate policies, and ensuring a good quality of life for all." The party's approach to candidate selection will likely involve fielding a mix of experienced incumbents and fresh faces to broaden its appeal and secure marginal constituencies.

The Green Party

Polling results demonstrate that Roderic O’Gorman’s recent rise to power has had limited impact on support for the Green Party. The party is polling at just 4% and risks losing half its seats in the upcoming election. The Greens enjoyed an unprecedented surge of first preference votes in the 2020 general election securing 12 seats and 7.13% of votes, up from just two seats in the 2016 election. O’Gorman has said that he’s “certainly open” to entering into a new coalition after the next election; however, the rise in support for Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil means that the coalition partners may not need the support of the Green Party to form a government. The party leader has said that the presence of the Green Party in government is crucial to tackling the climate emergency.

In the local and European elections in June of this year, the party lost almost half of its county councillor seats and both of its European MEPs seats. The decline in support for the party is attributed to a shift in perspective among voters. According to RED C data, 56% believe that “securing Ireland’s economic future should be prioritised over hitting Ireland’s climate targets.”

Sinn Féin

Sinn Féin has recently suffered a major decline in support. The party is polling at 18% from a high of 36% in 2022. The party’s breakthrough election success in 2020 saw Sinn Féin secure 24.5% of the vote and return 37 seats making it the second largest party in the Dáil. Many of Sinn Féin’s candidates recorded massive vote surpluses during the last election, suggesting the party could have won even more seats had it run additional candidates.

Sinn Féin had a disappointing local and European election campaign with the party severely underperforming compared to expectations. The rise of immigration as a political issue has been cited as a leading issue for the party’s decline, with polling citing the “lack of clear message over immigration” as being a primary driver for the drop in support. Sinn Féin was also criticised for running too many candidates and splitting votes. A recent series of controversies have overshadowed the party’s attempts to present an alternative policy vision to the country. Sinn Féin enters this election on the back foot and in the unexpected position of having to fight to hold onto existing seats.

Labour

Labour has consistently been hovering around 4% support in opinion polls. Labour had its worst General Election result in 2020, returning six seats with 4.4% of the vote. This time around the party is running 32 candidates and senior party strategists believe it can win 8 to 12 seats. The party performed strongly in the local elections in June, outperforming the Social Democrats and other smaller parties.

The party has not ruled out the possibility of entering a coalition with Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil post-election. Labour leader Ivana Bacik has also called for an alliance of left-wing parties after the general election to provide parties of the centre-left and left with more leverage during government formation talks. The Social Democrats have previously rebuffed calls for an alliance across left parties.

Social Democrats

The Social Democrats appear likely to increase their seat count, with polls suggesting it could double its 2020 vote share of 2.9%. The party will run at least 24 candidates and believes it can return 10 to 12 seats based on its current polling of 6%. However, the party faces a challenge in retaining key seats. Party leader Holly Cairns faces a potential re-election challenge in Cork South West as does Gary Gannon in Dublin Central. The retirement of long-standing TDs and party stalwarts Catherine Murphy and Róisín Shortall could prove an obstacle to the party retaining seats in previously safe constituencies. The left-wing vote is divided among several parties which could lead to vote-splitting in left-leaning constituencies and limit the party's ability to grow its seat count,

The Social Democrats were cautious about entering into coalition talks during previous general elections, but it has indicated that it wants to go into government this time around. According to a senior party strategist, the party will have “some very clear red lines”, but would be willing to form a government coalition if its policy platforms are enacted.

Independents

Independent candidates are widely expected to increase their vote share in line with the local and European election results in June. 19 Independent TDs were elected in the 2020 general election, receiving 12.2% of the vote. Recent polls show 16% support for Independent or minor party candidates. Independents and particularly those whose policies are closely aligned to Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil could play an important role in the formation of the next Government.

The new political party Independent Ireland is also in line to play a role in coalition talks, winning 24 seats in the local elections and a European MEP seat. The party has three TDs and will target 6 to 10 seats in the upcoming election. The party has indicated that it wants to be involved in government negotiations and is open to having talks with any party that agrees to its policies. The party's influence and success will hinge on local dynamics, as well as its ability to find common ground on key policy issues.

III. The formation of the next government

No party is running enough candidates to secure a majority meaning that a coalition agreement will be required to form a government. The expectation is that Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil will join forces, possibly accompanied by a smaller party or several Independent TDs.

The new Dáil will have its first sitting two weeks after the election. However, a coalition agreement is unlikely to be finalised by then, meaning a “caretaker” government will remain in place until the new Dáil formally convenes, likely around December 18th. During this caretaker period, ministers retain their positions but traditionally limit their activities to essential functions only.

After the 2020 general election, it took four months for Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party to agree on a programme for government, a document which defines the areas of agreement between coalition partners and forms the basis of the government's legislative agenda. This delay was widely attributed to difficult negotiations with the Green Party. By comparison, coalition talks took two months after the 2016 general election resulting in a Fine Gael minority government with support of nine Independent TDs.

Once a coalition agreement is reached, the new Taoiseach is nominated by the Dáil, who vote to approve the Taoiseach and their cabinet. The President will then formally appoint the Taoiseach, and a new government is officially established.

IV. Outstanding legislation

When the Dáil is dissolved, any bills that have not completed all legislative stages effectively "lapse," meaning they are no longer active. These bills exist in a legal limbo until the assembly of the next Dáil. They do not automatically carry over into the next Dáil session, however, if the Bill's sponsors or the Government want to reintroduce any of the lapsed Bills after the election, they must do so from the beginning of the legislative process in the new Dáil.

A returning Government will usually only continue with bills that enjoy cross-party support. Notable outstanding legislation includes the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill 2018, Credit Review Bill 2024, Mental Health Bill 2024, National Minimum Wage Bill 2024, Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2024, Health (Scoliosis treatment) Bill 2024, Health (Waiting lists) Bill 2024.

V. The Seanad

Once the Dáil is dissolved, the Seanad can continue to function for 90 days, though with limited capacity. While it may be seen as a "lame duck" chamber during this period, it retains the ability to finalise any legislation previously passed by the Dáil. However, it usually only handles time-sensitive or essential issues during this period. The standard procedure is that the Seanad will have its final sitting in the days after the election is called.

The Seanad election will take place after the new Dáil has assembled and within 90 days of the Dáil being dissolved. The Seanad comprises 60 members. In contrast to the Dáil they are not directly elected by the general public: 11 are nominated by the Taoiseach, 43 are elected from vocational panels by local councillors and members of the outgoing Oireachtas, and 6 are elected by university graduates.