

## Great surprise in Ireland where Sinn Fein came out as the winner in the general election

Three parties emerged from a tightly contested general election in Ireland on 8th February. Sinn Fein (SF) (*Ourselves*), a radical left-wing party led by Mary Lou McDonald, created a surprise and made an impressive breakthrough by winning 24.5% of the vote (first-preference votes). The Fianna Fail (FF) (*Soldiers of Destiny*), led by Micheal Martin, won 22.2% of the votes. Finally, Fine Gael (FG) (*Clan of Gaels*), the party of outgoing Prime Minister Leo Varadkar, obtained 20.9% of the votes.

This close result is unprecedented in the Celtic Republic, which since 1932 has been led by two parties - Fianna Fail and Fine Gael - which have succeeded each other in office, governing either alternatively or in coalition. After Spain, Ireland may be seeing the end of the two-party system.

Turnout was 62.9%, slightly lower than in the previous general elections of 26th February 2016 (- 2.3 points).

### General Election Results of 8th February 2020 in Ireland

Turnout: 62.9%

Political Parties	% of votes cast (First Preference Votes)	Number of seats
<b>Sinn Fein (SF)</b>	24.5	37
<b>Fianna Fail (FF)</b>	22.2	38
<b>Fine Gael (FG)</b>	20.9	35
<b>Green Party (GP)</b>	7.1	12
<b>Labour Party</b>	4.4	6
<b>Social Democrats</b>	2.9	6
<b>Solidarity-People before Profits (PBP)</b>	2.6	5
<b>Independents</b>	12.2	19
<b>Aontu (AON)</b>	1.9	1
<b>Others</b>	1.3	1

Source : <https://www.rte.ie/news/election-2020/results/#/national>

## General elections in Ireland

8th February 2020

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The formation of the future government is likely to be a difficult exercise. Fine Gael and Fianna Fail have each ruled out an alliance with Sinn Fein, in particular because of its links with the Irish Republican Army (IRA), a paramilitary organisation engaged in an armed struggle against the British presence in Northern Ireland. For its part, Sinn Fein has ruled out negotiating with the two parties without a commitment on their part to hold a referendum on the reunification of Ireland within the next five years.

*"Can Fianna Fail and Fine Gael now reverse their position? Is it politically viable for these two parties to exclude Sinn Fein from talks to form a government on the basis of the projected figures?"* asked Micheal Lehane, a political journalist with the *Irish Broadcasting Corporation* (RTE) after the election. *"Sinn Fein is now a mainstream party and it will be very difficult for Fine Gael and Fianna Fail to continue their policy of exclusion in the medium term against the Republican Party,"* said Kevin Doyle, a journalist with the daily *The Irish Independent*.

The *Taoiseach* (Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar, who was himself outdone by a Sinn Fein candidate in his constituency of West Dublin (he retains his seat as a Member of Parliament), made the mistake of putting Brexit at the heart of his election campaign. He welcomed the fact that he had avoided the re-establishment of a physical border between his country and Northern Ireland despite the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union. *"We have a Brexit agreement and after the positive vote of British MPs on the text, it is now certain that the UK will leave the European Union on 31st January. However, Brexit is not done. In fact, we are only at half time. It is now a matter of negotiating a free trade agreement between the European Union and the United Kingdom that protects our jobs, our businesses, our rural communities and our economy,"* he repeated. According to exit polls, a minority of Irish people cast their vote according to this issue. Varadkar, who was asking his compatriots for a *"strong mandate,"* lost his bet.

The campaign, and therefore the vote, was structured around domestic themes: *"What we call the three Hs:*

*health, housing and homelessness"* in the words of Noelle O'Connell, director of *The European Movement Ireland*. According to *Focus Ireland*, the number of homeless people (about 10,000 people) has quadrupled in Ireland in the last five years.

Leo Varadkar highlighted the economic results achieved by his government: strong growth (6.3%, the highest in the European Union), almost full employment (the unemployment rate has been divided by three in eight years), rising wages and purchasing power, healthy state of finances: the State budget, in deficit by 12% in 2011, is now in surplus and the debt stands at 63% of GDP (120% in 2012). *"If the outcome of the poll depended on Leo Varadkar's European policy, he would win easily but people want change,"* said Jon Tonge, a political scientist from the University of Liverpool. On the one hand voters showed that Brexit was already a thing of the past for them, on the other, the Prime Minister was able to see at his expense that you do not win elections on a balance sheet.

For its part, Sinn Fein has positioned itself on all domestic issues, not hesitating to propose rent freezes, the launch of an ambitious plan to build 100,000 housing units over five years, major public investment plans in health and transport, and higher taxes on businesses and wealthier citizens. This programme has enabled it to position itself as the only real political force against the two traditional parties that have dominated Ireland for many decades.

Sinn Fein's rise is all the more impressive given that the party fielded only 42 candidates in the 8 February general election, roughly half the number of candidates from each of the two "big" parties. Moreover, it did not exceed 10% of the vote in the local elections of 24 May and received 11.68% of the votes in the European elections held on the same day (Fine Gael received 29.59% of the votes and Fianna Fail 16.55%).

*"I do not accept the exclusion or the talks to exclude our party, which now represents a quarter of the electorate. This exclusion is fundamentally undemocratic (...) The political establishment, by which I mean Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, are in denial. The position of the leaders*

*of the major centrist parties not to speak with us is not sustainable," McDonald said at the announcement, adding, "I want us to have a government for the people, a government without Fianna Fail and Fine Gael," she said. She said she has been in contact with other parties, referring to the Social Democrats of Catherine Murphy and Roisin Shortall and the Green Party (GP), led by Eamon Ryan.*

*"After the 2008 crisis, Irish politics changed dramatically. Sinn Fein emerged as the main alternative left-wing force. It is comparable to the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) in Greece and the arrival in 2018 of a new President who is not associated with the party's past has strengthened it," said David Farrell, director of the School of Political Science at University College Dublin. "There is a certain weariness with traditional parties. Although Fine Gael has restored the country's economy and prosperity, problems remain. The Fianna Fail may say it has changed, but it is still paying the price for its disastrous management that led to the financial crisis of 2008. People want change and Sinn Fein may be meeting that expectation, particularly among young people," said Gail McElroy, professor of political science at Trinity College Dublin.*

Mary Lou McDonald was able to transform her party by positioning it on social issues and in this way, she was able to attract new voters, especially young

people. *"Sinn Fein bets on the long run. If it does not enter government this time, I think the party will nevertheless consider anything that happens to be a success because it has become an alternative force for the next general election,"* said Jonathan Evershed, a political scientist from University College Cork.

There are a number of questions that arise after the general election. Will Fine Gael and Fianna Fail form a coalition government and take the risk of not responding to voters' demand for change? Will one of these parties finally attempt an alliance with Sinn Fein and other "small" parties?

Fintan O'Toole warned in *The Irish Times* against forming a minority government: *"In 2016, three-quarters of the electorate voted for a party other than Fine Gael but we still had a Fine Gael government. People had a government they did not vote for. Brexit and the stabilization of the economy helped to mask the democratic deficit that was at work, but they did not make it go away. There is simply a big problem with forming a minority government"*.

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