

# **Does Europe matter for the Irish? An analysis of the 2014 European Parliament elections**

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## **Introduction**

It is almost two months since the European Parliament (EP) elections took place and the dust has finally settled on the hard fought ballot papers of all 751 elected MEPs. For most, it was a tough campaign, which in Ireland, saw constituencies enlarged in terms of population and geography, while we had a reduction in one MEP, so as to accommodate the accession of Croatia. Apart from these architectural issues, the political environment was also very different from previous elections as there was a strong increase in anti-EU sentiments across Europe from both the far-right and left<sup>1</sup>.

In Ireland, Luke Ming Flanagan and the three Sinn Fein candidates were the standout performers. Incumbents on the other hand, did find the political terrain of the recent election very tough, however many of the old familiar faces such as Brian Crowley, Mairead McGuinness and Marian Harkin managed to get across the line, albeit only just for Harkin. Nevertheless, Ireland's electorate sent a mixture of youth, experience, euro-skeptics and centrist candidates off to Brussels. For some however, namely Fianna Fail (FF) and Labor, the election was a disappointing campaign while for others such as Fine Gael (FG), the election produced a surprisingly good result which saw them once again return four MEPs. Bearing this in mind, how much of the political landscape has changed, if at all, since the previous election? And if it has, what were the factors that influenced the electorate to vote in the manner that they did? Was it a case, that the Irish electorate has had enough with both the austerity policies of Brussels and the trajectory of the EU project or has the electorate decided to send a clear message to the coalition Government that they are unsatisfied with their current performance? In order to answer these questions, this paper will analyze the recent Irish EP election, to see if once again, these elections represent for Europe what the 'midterm' elections offer in the US. Finally, I will conclude by outlining what these elections mean for the future development of the EU.

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<sup>1</sup> Lynch, S. (2014) "Sharp rise in support for Eurosceptic parties the dominant story across EU", *The Irish Times*, (Accessed on 23/7/2014).

## Ireland's EP Election 2014

In the run up to the 2014 EP election, there were some commentators suggesting it could possibly be a watershed moment for political groups from both the far-right and the far-left<sup>2</sup>. In fact, the most recent publication by the IED<sup>3</sup> on *Rising Populism and the European Elections*, points in great detail, to the difficulties that the EU faced in the run up to these elections. Although Ireland did not have a far-right party<sup>4</sup> contesting the elections it did, however, have parties and candidates that were skeptical/critical of the current trajectory of the EU. The most notable being, Luke Ming Flanagan, who could be regarded as a 'revisionist' towards the EU project and the three Sinn Fein candidates who advocated that the EU project should be 'reformed' and a new direction of policy taken<sup>5</sup>.

Surprisingly for Sinn Fein, they got all three of their candidates elected and picked up 19.50% of the overall vote<sup>6</sup>, an increase of 8.26% since 2009 when they lost their only ever MEP, Mary Lou McDonald. As well as Sinn Fein's success, Independents made the most electoral gains, collecting 19.80% of the votes, up a significant 8.3% since the previous election<sup>7</sup>. What's more surprising, is that after the 2014 EP elections, Independents now accounted for the third largest group. While on top of this, Independents also secured more seats than Fianna Fail, who only managed to elect one candidate – Brian Crowley. This is quite a turn around for a party who had three MEPs elected in 2009 and what many political scientists consider to be Ireland's 'pivotal center party'<sup>8</sup> as is evident from their dominance in government since the inception of the State.

The Independent candidate, Luke Ming Flanagan was the surprise package of the election which seen him top the poll in his constituency of Midlands – North West with almost 20% of the vote<sup>9</sup>. Like Sinn Fein, Flanagan ran on an anti austerity platform but also strongly emphasized the 'over regulation' of the current EU project and argued in favor of a 'revision' of the architecture of the EU<sup>10</sup>. In addition,

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2 Peglis, M. (2013), Sasmatzoglou, K. (2013), IED (2013) and EJIL, (2013).

3 Institute of European Democrats (2014) *Rising Populism and the European Elections*. Available at:<http://www.iedonline.eu/publications/2014/rising-populism-and-european-elections.php> (Accessed on 19/7/2014)

4 See O'Malley, E. (2008) and Garner, S. (2007) for more information.

5 See Szczerbiak, A. and Taggart, P. (2003) for a detailed account of the types of Euro-skepticism.

6 European Parliament. (2014) "Results of the 2014 European elections". Available at: <http://www.results-elections2014.eu/en/country-results-ie-2014.html> (Accessed on 23/7/2014).

7 Ibid.

8 McDonnell, D. (2008) "The Republic of Ireland: The Dog that hasn't barked in the night?" in *Twenty First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western Democracy*, edited by Albertazzi, D. and McDonnell, D. Palgrave Macmillian, p202.

9 European Parliament. (2014).

10 McConnell, D. (2014) "Ming Flanagan to contest the European election in May-on anti-Euro ticket", *The Irish*

small electoral gains were made by other Independent candidates and left-wing parties, which if combined with Ming Flanagan and Marian Harkin accounted for the largest share of the overall vote (25.70%)<sup>11</sup>. This would seem to confirm the growing trend in Irish politics that of a decrease in party attachment and votes towards the two traditional parties, FF and FG. For example, the two main parties won 67.8% of the vote at the first EP election in 1979<sup>12</sup> compared to the present, where they only received 44.6% of the vote<sup>13</sup>. As Sinnott<sup>14</sup> and others have argued, this is because of Ireland's PR-STV electoral model which allows new parties and candidates easy accessibility to the political sphere.

Nonetheless, the two major parties FF and FG did manage to get candidates elected along with Independent candidate Marian Harkin. FG, although down 6.8% from the previous election, did manage, quite comfortably, to retain four seats in the EP. It must be noted, that FG's core vote remained relatively strong at 22.3%<sup>15</sup>, while good election strategy managed them to elect two incumbents and two first time candidates. This was very impressive considering recent political blunders by the coalition Government over medical cards, water charges and whistle-blower controversy<sup>16</sup>.

Meanwhile, FF did manage to get a respectable 22.3% of the overall vote<sup>17</sup>, a reduction of only 1.8% since 2009. Although it must be stressed that this figure is somewhat distorted, as the majority of their vote was collected by long term MEP, Brian Crowley, who enjoys a large following from across the political spectrum. Along with that, some of the FF vote seemed to be won as much because of geography than political following. Outgoing MEP, Pat the Cope Gallagher narrowly missed out on the final Irish seat because of his inability to obtain enough transfers from running mate, Thomas Byrne. With that being said, it's hard to fully blame the vote management by FF as it would have been impossible to see Pat the Cope increase his vote if Byrne didn't run.

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*Independent*, Available at: <http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/politics/ming-flanagan-to-contest-the-european-elections-in-may-on-antieuro-ticket-30113105.html> (Accessed on 23/7/2014).

11 European Parliament. (2014).

12 ElectionsIreland.org (2014) "1979 European election". Available at: <http://electionsireland.org/results/europe/1979euro.cfm> (Accessed on 23/7/2014).

13 European Parliament. (2014).

14 Sinnott, R. (2001) "The Electoral System" in *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, edited by Coakley, J. and Gallagher, M. London: PSAI Press, p99.

15 European Parliament. (2014).

16 The Irish Times (2014) "Restoring medical cards". Available at: <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/health/restoring-medical-cards-1.1841719> (Accessed on 20/7/2014).

17 European Parliament. (2014).

In addition, Marian Harkin picked up the final EP seat at the expense of Pat the Cope<sup>18</sup>. Her percentage of votes was down considerably from 2009<sup>19</sup>. However, this time round she had to deal with an enlarged constituency and number of other high-profile Independent candidates, most notably Ming Flanagan, while the rise of Sinn Fein also seemed to affect her first preference vote. Nevertheless, Harkin's ability to pick up transfers was never in doubt and she remarkably fended off two candidates from the largest party in the country, FF.

As with all elections, there are winners and losers and this time around the losers were Labor. In 2009, Labor managed to get three candidates elected to the EP and won almost 14% of the vote<sup>20</sup>. However this time around, they failed to retain any seats and witnessed their vote drop to 5.3%, which ultimately cost their leader Eamon Gilmore his job<sup>21</sup>. It is therefore obvious that the coalition partner paid a heavier price for the Government's performance compared to FG. Labor also suffered at the hands of former party colleague and MEP, Nessa Childers who managed to retain her seat as an Independent<sup>22</sup>. Childers running as an Independent, the rise of Sinn Fein and the plethora of left-wing candidates, all of whom targeted Labor as not adhering to their socialist ideals and 'bending the knee' to both coalition partners FG and the 'Brussels elite' did seem to affect their core vote in Dublin – where it usually polls quite well. As well as Labor's poor performance, the Socialist Party failed to retain their one MEP, Paul Murphy. It seems that their vote suffered because of the number of new left-wing candidates and parties in the Dublin area which in reality divided the left-wing vote at the expense of all candidates.

It seems that a large percentage of the electorate has therefore had enough with the EU project and the traditional political parties. However, I would like to challenge this notion somewhat and examine some of the main theories used to explain EP elections.

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18 Siggins, L. (2014) "Last European Parliament seat taken by Marian Harkin", *The Irish Times*, Available at: <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/last-european-parliament-seat-taken-by-marian-harkin-1.1814325> (Accessed on 19/7/2014).

19 ElectionsIreland.org (2014) "2009 European election".

20 European Parliament. (2014).

21 Kelly, F. Minihan, M. and Duncan, P. (2014) "Eamon Gilmore quits as Labor leader", *The Irish Times*. Available at: <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/eamon-gilmore-quits-as-labour-leader-1.1809400> (Accessed on 20/7/2014)

22 McCann, E. (2014) "Labor's disastrous election reflects the crisis in European social democracy", *The Irish Times*. Available at: <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/labour-s-disastrous-election-reflects-the-crisis-in-european-social-democracy-1.1812776> (Accessed on 21/7/2014)

## Understanding European Elections

When analyzing EP elections there are generally two theories used to explain the results. The most often cited theory is the classic view of Reiff and Schmitt<sup>23</sup> who argue that the EP elections are 'second order national elections'. What is meant by this is that these elections are 'secondary' to the main national electoral contest and they are 'national' in a sense that what drives the electorate's decisions is national politics<sup>24</sup>. In this way, whenever a EP or local election is taking place it acts as a 'national election' which can gauge the performance of the national government<sup>25</sup>. More explicitly, the main priority of national governments is to stay in power and this can only be achieved through 'first order' elections i.e. national elections. However, if there is a national election coming up, as there is in Ireland shortly, then 'second order' elections can be used by the electorate to judge the performance of the government and influence future policy decisions<sup>26</sup>. Mostly, this is used by the electorate to voice anger towards the government over political decisions. In the case of this recent election, voters had the opportunity to demonstrate their anger towards FG and Labor over the handling of a number of key issues, such as medical cards, and water charges<sup>27</sup>. After a somewhat poor performance in the EP elections, mainly by Labor, Government policy took a sharp turn. Firstly there was a reversal of a controversial medical card proposal, while there was some rhetoric suggesting that the proposed water tax would not be as tough on the lower classes, and that the upcoming budget would offer some tax breaks to middle income earners<sup>28</sup>.

In addition, there are other key elements to 'second order' elections. Firstly, participation tends to be lower because there is 'less at stake' compared to 'first order' elections<sup>29</sup>. This has been the case with the 2014 EP election which only had a voter turnout of 51.60%<sup>30</sup> compared to the 2011 Irish national

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23 Reif, K. and Schmitt, H. (1980) "Nine Second-Order National elections – A conceptual framework for the analysis of European election results", *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol 8.

24 Hix, S. and Marsh, M. (2007) "Punishment or Protest? Understanding European Parliament Elections", *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 69, No. 2.

25 Reif, K. and Schmitt, H. (1980).

26 Hix, S. and Marsh, M. (2007).

27 O'Rourke, S. (2014) "Today with Sean O'Rourke", *RTE*, 28 May 2014. Available at: <http://www.rte.ie/radio1/today-with-sean-o-rourke/programmes/2014/0528/620123-today-with-sean-o-rourke-wednesday-28-may-2014/?clipid=1588494> (Accessed on 23/7/2014)

28 Wall, M. (2014) "Cabinet agrees 44 million euro water charge subsidies and plan for free GP care for children", *The Irish Times*. Available at: <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/cabinet-agrees-44m-water-charge-subsidies-and-plan-for-free-gp-care-for-children-1.1875809> (Accessed on 23/7/2014)

29 Schmitt, H. (2005) "The European Parliament Elections of June 2004: Still Second-order?", *MZES, University*.

30 European Parliament. (2014).

election which had a turnout of just over 70%<sup>31</sup>. This comparison aptly illustrates my previous point, that EP elections are not as important compared to the national elections. This is supported by data and a number of studies<sup>32</sup> which have been compiled over the years. Also, as I have already shown government parties tend to lose support in 'second order' elections after an initial 'honeymoon' period. However, as Schmitt<sup>33</sup> has shown governments will not only lose in EP elections but they tend to lose in a 'cyclical pattern'. For instance, Schmitt claims that “after a short period of post-electoral euphoria in which the Government enjoys an even higher rate of popular approval, their support more or less drastically declines until after midterm in order to increase again towards the end of the cycle (to some unknown level).”<sup>34</sup> Although, we are unable to say what the Government's approval rating will be, come the end of their term, we can say that after the 2011 national election FG's support did rise to their highest level in years<sup>35</sup> but then declined prior to the EP election. One could also argue that considering their recent turnaround with medical cards, there is a significant chance that their approval rating will raise – considering all other things remain constant.

Finally, with 'second order' elections there is also a tendency for big parties to lose at the expense of small parties<sup>36</sup>. The reason for this is because the electorate feels there is less at stake with 'second order' elections. This allows people to vote for candidates of their choice rather than voting strategically e.g. In EP elections people might vote for a candidate who they feel is the best candidate, compared to national elections where voters might vote for who they think will make the most policy impact, which quite often will be someone from a large party. Again, this seems to be true, to a degree, when analyzing the Irish EP elections. For example, FF – the largest party nationally, along with the Governing party, FG both lost out in the EP elections. On the other hand, smaller parties such as Sinn Fein (pre-2014 election), the Greens, and Independents all did better than the previous national election.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, the 'second order' election theory seems to account rather convincingly for the recent EP election.

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31 International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2014) “Voter turnout data for Ireland”. Available at: <http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?id=102> (Accessed on 23/7/2014)

32 Reif, K. and Schmitt, H. (1980), Hix, S. and Marsh, M. (2007). and Schmitt, H. (2005).

33 Schmitt, H. (2005).

34 Ibid.

35 Reilly, G. (2011) “Fine Gael popularity surges in latest opinion poll”, *The Journal*. Available at: <http://www.thejournal.ie/fine-gael-popularity-surges-in-latest-opinion-poll-161025-Jun2011/> (Accessed on 20/7/2014)

36 Ibid.

37 European Parliament. (2014) and ElectionsIreland.org (2014).

However, there are other theories which can be used to explain EP elections; the most common alternative is the 'Europe matters' thesis<sup>38</sup>. This suggests that in fact the policies and direction of the European Union do matter to the electorate and that EP elections are therefore not as trivial as perhaps once anticipated.

For example, with the EP having more competencies and decision making abilities over National Governments through the introduction of co-decision making powers with the Commission, plus the new powers the EP has over the election of the EU Commissioner, citizens will automatically have a greater interest in who they decide to elect to the EP. In this scenario, there is much more 'at stake' compared to the 'second order' theory which assumes there is 'less at stake' in EP elections<sup>39</sup>. Therefore it could be argued that Ming Flanagan and Sinn Fein's success is due their euro-skeptic views which the electorate sympathizes with. Likewise, voters who feel that the austerity policies witnessed in Ireland are strongly influenced by the EU will undoubtedly vote against EU integration and pro-EU candidates. In this regard, the electorate shows a concern with the economic impact EU integration has on Ireland. As is often cited, public support for EU integration is based on the economic benefit it has on citizens. As Matthew Gabel<sup>40</sup> explains, "EU citizens in different socioeconomic situations experience different costs and benefits from EU integration and that support for integration is positively related to their welfare gains from integrative policy". Therefore, if Irish voters believe that there is no economic benefit to the current EU project then it becomes reasonable that voters would not vote for pro-EU candidates or for incumbents.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, both theories seem to provide a strong explanation for the 2014 Irish EP election. Therefore, which one is correct? Or is it a case that both theories explain, to some extent, the reasons why the electorate voted the way it did in 2014? I believe so. Although, as the data from previous studies suggest, the main reason that EP elections goes negatively for governing and large parties, as well as producing low voter turnout is because the electorate views EP elections as relatively

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38 Hix, S. and Marsh, M. (2007).

39 Ibid.

40 Gabel, M. (1998) "Public Support for European Integration: An Empirical Test of Five Theories", *The Journal of Politics*, Vol 60, No 2. p336.

unimportant compared to national elections. The data<sup>41</sup> from this election in Ireland seems to verify this account. Turnout was lower than the previous national election, governing parties lost votes (FG and Labor), as well as large parties (FF), while small parties gained (SF). Nonetheless, it does seem that the 'Europe matters' theory accounts for why some of the electorate votes the way they do. It seems that with the growth in decision making abilities for the EU, the EP elections are slowly losing its 'second order' nature, likewise if voters connect Ireland's poor economic situation and the tough austerity measure to the EU it seems rational that the electorate would see this as a threat to their own economic interests and vote for euro-skeptical candidates. However, I believe that this only accounts for a minority of the electorate. For example, the 'Europe matters' thesis would suggest that the electorate or the majority of the electorate has a deep understanding of the EU and their part in Ireland's economic woes. As having witnessed much of the EP election from the doorstep and having spoken to many candidates, it seems that on an anecdotal level the Irish electorate does not fully understand how important the EU is and how their policies affect their everyday lives. For instance, there is little knowledge about what political groups the Irish parties are connected with, what their policies are or even the recent development concerning the election of the EU Commissioner and for that matter, it doesn't seem like these political events worry them. Instead, what they are concerned about is local and national issues like medical cards, water charges and the state of the economy. With that said, voters are concerned if they feel that national issues are being 'pushed' at a Brussels level but it must be added, that there seems to be a void between what they see as the problem and what they understand about the problem. In the future, it therefore looks like EP elections will remain 'second order' elections because of the lack of knowledge the majority of electorate has concerning EU politics and because EU politics are far removed from the electorate's eyes.

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