An evolving political landscape: Political reform, boundary changes and the 2014 local elections

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Abstract

This paper reviews the May 2014 local election contests in the Republic of Ireland, while also offering a brief overview of the contests in Northern Ireland. These local elections took place in the context of radical changes to local government structures on both sides of the border – changes which would frame the types of choices open to voters at the May 2014 contests. The new – and generally larger – constituency areas opened up opportunity spaces for new candidates (including new female candidates) to participate in local electoral politics, although these opportunities, in turn, were very much framed by geography. The overall reduction in local representation levels in rural areas in the Republic of Ireland meant that incumbency factors acted as significant brakes on the entry of new candidates in these areas. The radically changing political landscape associated with the era of austerity politics saw a major swing against the government parties in the Republic of Ireland, with notable gains made by Sinn Féin and a number of other anti-establishment parties and groupings. These changes have brought about the formation of new alliances to

control different local authorities, which, in turn, have posed an increasing set of challenges in terms of the governance of such councils, as evident in a number of conflicts over council budgets in the winter of 2014.

Keywords: Putting People First, election boundaries, local elections, voter turnout

Introduction

This article offers a review of the changed political landscape associated with the local election contests of May 2014. As was also the case in Northern Ireland, a series of major changes to local government structures in the Republic of Ireland, with an extensive revision of local election constituency boundaries associated with these, helped shape the context for the local election contests. However, the radically changing political landscape in the Republic of Ireland, associated with the period of economic recession and austerity, brought about dramatic changes in support and representation levels for the different political parties and groupings at these contests, in stark contrast to the more fixed political support trends that were evident in Northern Ireland. The extent of the political change in the Republic of Ireland at these contests, most notably evident in the loss of support by the government parties and the increased support and representation levels won by Sinn Féin and other anti-establishment parties and groupings, in turn, had an impact in relation to the governance of the new local authorities that emerged after these contests.

Putting People First and the Local Electoral Area Boundary Committee Report 2013

The *Putting People First* report, published in October 2012, advocated the most dramatic changes to local government structures in the Republic of Ireland since the establishment of the county council system in 1898. The most significant of these changes saw the abolition of town councils. The report pointed to the weakness of town councils in terms of powers and resources, while noting a 'duplication of functions and membership' in terms of their relationship with county councils. *Putting People First* also noted that, due to historical legacy issues, some of the largest towns in the state, such as Carrigaline, Celbridge, Ashbourne and Maynooth, had no town councils, while

much smaller towns, such as Granard, Kilkee, Lismore, Ballybay and Belturbet, did have councils. The report argued that severe discrepancies in representation levels were arising, meaning that 'members representing 80 towns containing 14% of the population of the State' were accounting for '46% of all councillors', even though the inhabitants of these towns were also being represented at the county council level (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2012, p. 49). *Putting People First* did concede that town councils represented the only sub-county local government structure in the state, since the removal of rural district councils in the 1920s, and that these bodies were in a strong position to build ties with their local communities. But while strengths in terms of accountability, subsidiarity and the facilitation of democratic representation were acknowledged, the report contended that the weaknesses associated with town councils outweighed these strengths, which hence justified their abolition given the economic problems being faced by the state.

The abolition of town councils significantly reduced the number of local representatives within the state, given that there had been 744 members on the 80 different town councils at the time of their abolition, in addition to the 883 members of city and county councils. It was believed that the overall reduction in local representation numbers would be tempered somewhat by the level of dual mandates, namely the number of town councillors who were also holding positions on county councils at the same time. However, research on the extent of such dual mandates revealed that only 160 town councillors fell into this category, with the memberships of some town councils (including Balbriggan, Trim, Ballinasloe, Tuam and Listowel) including no such dual-mandate councillors. Hence, with 584 non-dual-mandate councillors sitting on town councils just before the May 2014 elections, this left a total number of 1,467 local representatives across the state at that time, once the city and county council members were factored in. Even though the number of city and county council members was increased to 949, the overall effective reduction in local representative numbers (with the dual mandates factored out) was 518.

There was a striking geographical dimension in terms of the change in local representation levels across the state, with very dramatic reductions experienced by some of the smaller rural counties while overall representation levels actually increased in Dublin and Galway City (Figure 1). This was due to a decision to also rebalance the notable discrepancies that existed across the state in terms of

population-per-councillor ratios. For instance, prior to the changes, there were population-per-councillor ratios of 11,416 in Fingal, 10,200 in South Dublin County, 10,146 in Dublin City and 8,412 in Kildare, contrasting sharply with levels of 1,445 in Leitrim and 1,857 in Longford. Hence the biggest percentage increase in city and county council member levels tended to occur in the local authority areas located in the Dublin region and in eastern parts of the state. Some of the other larger counties, such as Cork County, Donegal and Kerry, were also allocated additional county council members, but these increases were offset by the reduction in local representation levels due to the abolition of town councils. By contrast, the biggest percentage decrease in councillor numbers tended to be associated with the smaller, more rural counties located in the West and Midlands regions, as well as the newly amalgamated Tipperary, Limerick and Waterford council areas. A number of counties experienced a drop of over 50 per cent in their overall representation levels, including Monaghan, Cavan, Cork County, Tipperary and Offaly (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Percentage change in local representation levels by local authority area following the *Local Electoral Area Boundary Committee Report 2013*
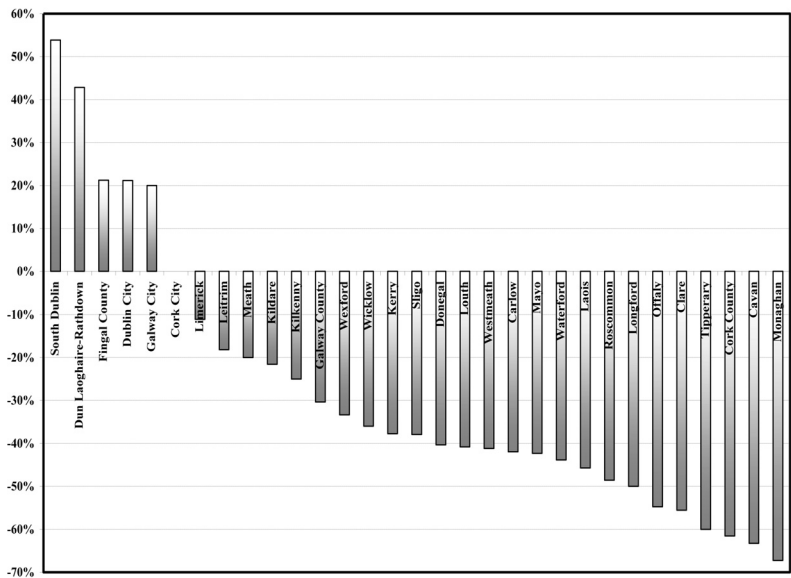
Following on from the recommendations of *Putting People First*, the *Local Electoral Area Boundary Committee Report 2013* was published on 30 May 2013 (Local Electoral Area Boundary Committee, 2013). This report set the context for the following year's local elections in the Republic of Ireland, given that the recommended boundary changes came into effect for these contests. The boundary committee faced a very difficult task, given that the radically changed terms of reference would ensure the most dramatic redrawing of local election constituency boundaries in the history of the state. The committee's remit, in covering the entire state (with the exception of Cork City), was also more comprehensive than that of previous committees. The task of carrying out the 2008 revisions, for instance, had been taken on by two separate committees: one focusing on Dublin and the other city council areas, and the other focusing on the remaining county council areas. The level of work involved required the committee to meet on fifteen occasions during its term. However, it could be argued that the limited amount of time precluded the opportunity to try and tease out the rationale behind the different choices made by the committee at more local levels, such as the decisions made in relation to boundary lines or constituency names.

The committee was required to allocate between six and ten seats to each of the new electoral areas, or municipal districts. This marked a significant increase on the seat range (between four and seven seats) that the two 2008 committees had to choose from, especially given that these committees still had the flexibility to create three-seat electoral areas in exceptional cases. The 2013 committee recommended the creation of 66 six-seat electoral areas, 23 seven-seat electoral areas, 23 eight-seat electoral areas, 13 nine-seat electoral areas and 6 ten-seat electoral areas. (The boundaries and seat allocations for Cork City were not changed and the 31 seats for the city area still remained to be allocated across 2 four-seat, 2 five-seat, 1 six-seat and 1 seven-seat constituencies.) As a result, the number of local election constituencies in the state fell from 171 to 137, while the average number of councillors per electoral area increased from 5.16 in the 2008 revisions to 6.93 in the 2013 revisions, marking a significant increase in overall district magnitude levels.

Given the terms of reference set for the committee, and especially the problems associated with drawing up constituency units with six or more seats in low-density, rural counties, some rather large electoral areas were created, as well as some rather unusually shaped constituencies. The Baltinglass electoral area in West Wicklow was

perhaps the constituency unit that most resembled Governor Gerry's famous salamander (although it probably better resembled an inverted sea-horse). The largest of the constituency units, the South and West Kerry electoral area, covered a very large geographical area and encompassed all of the Kerry peninsulas, with the Dingle peninsula joined to the rest of this electoral area only by a very narrow strip of territory (Kavanagh, 2015a).

Candidate selections

It was argued that larger constituency sizes could allow for higher levels of female candidatures and representation at a local level, as well as allowing for the greater representation of minority groups in some parts of the state. However, this would be offset by the abolition of town councils, given that female and non-Irish national representation levels had tended to be higher on these bodies than on city and county councils. The impact of larger constituency sizes on female candidacy levels was readily evident in Dublin, especially given the overall increase in representation levels in that region. Here significant opportunity spaces opened up for new candidates, including female candidates and younger candidates, to claim places on party tickets. However, the overall reduction in local representation levels in rural Ireland meant that in many cases the number of incumbents seeking places on party candidate lists limited the scope for new candidates (including new female candidates) to be selected in these areas. Indeed, there were a number of electoral areas where the number of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil local representatives exceeded the number of seats being assigned to the new constituencies. For instance, the number of Fine Gael local repre-sentatives in the eight-seat West Cork electoral area prior to the 2014 elections was almost twice as large as the number of seats being assigned to that constituency, while the number of Fianna Fáil local representatives exceeded the West Cork seat numbers by a level of 50 per cent.

The significant reduction in representation levels, added to the radical restructuring of constituency areas, resulted in a stormy series of selection conventions, particularly in the more rural areas. This especially proved to the case with a number of Fianna Fáil conventions, despite – or maybe because of – the introduction of a 'one member, one vote' system by the party. In a number of cases, party headquarters attempted to limit the number of candidates being

selected at local conventions, or to shape the selection process in a certain way. These attempts were opposed – often quite vehemently – by local party members in a number of instances.

The use of 'districting' proved to be controversial in a number of cases. This involved dividing constituencies into different areas for the purposes of candidate selection, with delegates hailing from specific districts only being allowed to vote to select one candidate for their area. While this reflected the need for the party to have geographically balanced tickets, given the strong influence of 'friends and neighbours' voting patterns at local election contests, this also distorted the selection process to the advantage, or disadvantage, of certain candidates. This resulted in conflicts at some conventions, with some being postponed, such as those for Castlebar and Graiguecullen–Portarlington. The controversial districting approach used at the Adare–Rathkeale convention pitted the two strongest contenders, Councillor Kevin Sheahan and Emmet O'Brien, against each other in the 'Askeaton Estuary' district, while the other potential candidates were selected unopposed for the other three districts. At one stage during the convention a human chain was created to prevent the ballot box leaving the convention hall for the count, while a large number of delegates also walked out. Councillor Sheahan was selected, with O'Brien opting to run as an independent. Both of these candidates subsequently won seats at the May 2014 elections, while only one of the three automatically selected candidates proved to be successful. The most contentious conventions in the case of Fine Gael tended to occur in areas where a local gender quota was being applied, with a number of incumbents losing out at the Carlow Town selection convention as a result of this, while controversy over a local gender quota also emerged at the Tralee convention.

As in the case of O'Brien in Adare–Rathkeale, defeats at selection conventions sparked off a series of 'selection defections', where unsuccessful candidates opted to leave their parties and contest the local elections as independent candidates. In the case of Labour, however, such defections tended to precede the party selection conventions. Twenty-nine city/county councillors and town councillors resigned from the Labour Party in the period between that party's entry into government in March 2011 and the May 2014 elections (O'Connell, 2014), with eighteen councillors leaving the party in the year leading up to the local elections. Nineteen former Labour Party councillors went on to contest the local elections, with eight of these winning seats.

A total of 2,038 candidates contested the city and county council elections in the Republic of Ireland, marking a notable increase on the 1,883 candidates who contested the city and county council elections in 2009 (Table 1). Much of the overall increase in candidate numbers was down to the larger number of candidates running for Sinn Féin and the different left-wing, or anti-austerity, groupings (including the People Before Profit Alliance and the Anti-Austerity Alliance). As Table 1 also shows, there was a large increase in the number of non-party candidates contesting these elections, as well as an overall increase in female candidacies from 314 in 2009 to 440 in 2014. Although gender quotas do not apply to local election contests, most of the political parties increased their female candidate levels, with Sinn Féin almost doubling their number of female candidates. With both parties significantly reducing their number of candidates, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party ran a smaller number of female candidates in 2014, although the percentage of female Green Party candidates increased by almost 10 per cent. Fianna Fáil, by contrast, would have run the exact same percentage of female candidates as in 2009 but for the controversial late entry of Mary Hanafin as a candidate for the Blackrock electoral area. As always, there was a notable geography to female candidacy patterns. Over 30 per cent of all the Dublin local election candidates in 2014 were female, while females accounted for just over 18 per cent of all local election candidates in the more rural electoral areas. (Within rural Ireland, there was also a marked

Table 1: Candidate numbers by party and by gender at the 2009 and 2014 city and county council elections in the Republic of Ireland (percentage of female candidacies in italics)

	2009		2014	
	Female (No./%)	*Male (No.)*	*Female (No./%)*	*Male (No.)*
Fianna Fáil	80 *(16.9)*	393	71 *(17.1)*	344
Fine Gael	85 *(18.1)*	385	106 *(22.6)*	362
Labour Party	48 *(23.1)*	160	55 *(28.9)*	135
Sinn Féin	34 *(22.8)*	115	62 *(31.6)*	134
Green Party	17 *(22.1)*	60	15 *(31.9)*	32
Socialist Party/Anti-Austerity Alliance	2 *(22.2)*	7	12 *(30.8)*	27
People Before Profit Alliance	3 *(20.0)*	12	17 *(39.5)*	26
Non-party	43 *(10.8)*	356	91 *(15.6)*	492
Total (including Others)	**314** *(16.7)*	**1,569**	**440** *(21.6)*	**1,598**

difference between the level of female candidacies in the 'County Town' constituencies (just over 20 per cent) and the other, more rural electoral areas (just under 15 per cent).)

There was no increase in the number of migrant, or 'New Irish', candidates in 2014, however, with only twenty-nine New Irish candidates contesting the elections (one candidate, Lech Szczeciński, contested three different electoral areas in the Dublin region). In 2009 nineteen New Irish candidates had contested the city and county council elections, while twenty-three had contested the town council elections, with this latter group admittedly including a number of candidates, such as Rotimi Adebari in Portlaoise, who also contested the county council elections.

Voting patterns at the 2014 elections

As is often the case with mid-term, or second-order, election contests, the share of the votes and seats won by the government parties fell significantly relative to the 2011 General Election (and the local elections in 2009). However, the extent of these losses was particularly severe when compared with government losses at previous local election contests (Kavanagh, 2015b). Despite the overall increase in city and county council seat numbers (from 883 to 949), the combined government party seat losses between the 2009 and 2014 elections amounted to 186. The combined share of the vote won by Fine Gael and Labour fell by almost 16 per cent in relation to the 2009 contest (Table 2). Despite a reduction in the share of the vote won by both parties, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party gained a number of seats at these contests. Fianna Fáil seat numbers increased by close to fifty, as it (once again) became the strongest party in the state in terms of local authority representation levels.

The most significant gains at these elections, however, were made by Sinn Féin, as well as the very diverse 'Independents and Others' grouping, which included non-party candidates and a number of smaller parties and alliances. Sinn Féin came close to trebling their representation levels on city and county councils, while seventy more non-party candidates were elected than in 2009 (Table 2). Seat gains were also made by the People Before Profit Alliance and the Anti-Austerity Alliance/Socialist Party, with the combined vote share attained by these groupings almost doubling between 2009 and 2014. Sinn Féin gains seemed to come largely at the expense of the Labour Party. What was particularly noteworthy about the Sinn Féin vote in

Table 2: Support/representation levels by political party/grouping in the Republic of Ireland at the 2009 and 2014 city and county council elections

Party/Grouping	Local elections 2009		Local elections 2014	
	Vote share (%)	*Seats (No./%)*	*Vote share (%)*	*Seats (No./%)*
Fine Gael	32.2	340 (38.5)	24.0	235 (24.8)
Labour Party	14.7	132 (14.9)	7.2	51 (5.4)
Government parties, 2011–	*46.9*	*472 (53.4)*	*31.2*	*286 (30.2)*
Fianna Fáil	25.4	218 (24.7)	25.3	267 (28.1)
Green Party	2.4	3 (0.3)	1.6	12 (1.3)
Government parties, 2007–11	*27.8*	*221 (25.0)*	*26.9*	*279 (29.4)*
Sinn Féin	7.4	54 (6.1)	15.3	159 (16.8)
People Before Profit	0.6	5 (0.6)	1.7	14 (1.5)
Anti-Austerity Alliance/Socialist Party	0.9	4 (0.5)	1.2	14 (1.5)
United Left	–	–	0.3	2 (0.2)
Workers Party	0.1	2 (0.2)	0.2	1 (0.1)
Direct Democracy Ireland	–	–	0.2	0 (0.0)
Éirígí	–	–	0.2	0 (0.0)
Fís Nua	–	–	0.1	0 (0.0)
Workers and Unemployed Action Group	0.2	2 (0.2)	0.1	1 (0.1)
Independents/Other small parties	16.3	123 (13.9)	22.5	193 (20.3)

2014 was the party's ability to win increased support levels and seats outside of that party's border and Dublin working-class strongholds. As Figure 2 shows, Sinn Féin won more than 10 per cent of the vote in most local authority areas, with the exceptions of Kilkenny and Tipperary (where the party came very close to the 10 per cent level), as well as Clare, Longford, Roscommon, Galway and Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown. While the party polled very strongly in working-class areas within Dublin (and the other larger urban centres), the larger constituency sizes helped Sinn Féin candidates to win seats in some of the more middle-class electoral areas in Dublin, such as Clontarf, Howth–Malahide, Dundrum, Templeogue, Terenure and Rathfarnham.

Figure 2: Sinn Féin support levels (%) by local authority area in the Republic of Ireland at the 2014 city and county council elections
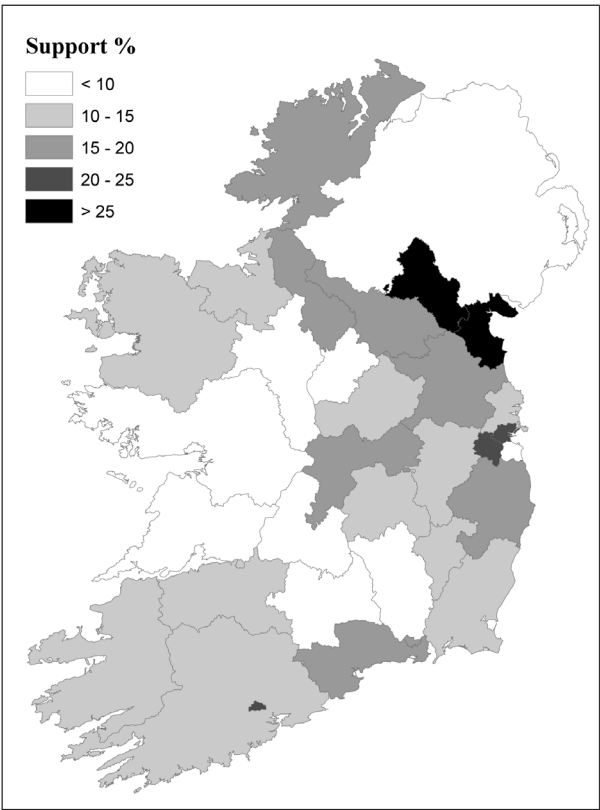
Female representation levels improved notably, with the number of female councillors increasing by just over 50 (from 146 to 197) between 2009 and 2014. Female candidates were more successful in the Dublin region (where they won just under 32 per cent of the first-preference votes and one-third of the seats) than they were in the more rural constituencies. Females won only 1 in 6 of the seats being contested in the more rural constituencies (constituencies located outside Dublin, the other major cities and their immediate commuter hinterlands), with this percentage dropping to 14 per cent when the County Town constituencies were excluded from this grouping.

The New Irish candidates generally struggled in this election, with only two candidates winning seats: Labour's Elena Secas in Limerick City East and Sinn Féin's Edmond Lukusa in Mulhuddart. Fine Gael's Nadine Meisonnave in Pembroke–South Dock and Rotimi Adebari in Portlaoise polled well before losing out on the final count in those electoral areas. However, a number of the other New Irish candidates fared poorly, winning only small numbers of votes and being eliminated early in the election counts.

One other striking trend evident with the May 2014 contests related to voter turnout levels. Turnout levels in the Republic of Ireland had dropped significantly in the 1980s and 1990s, culminating in an especially low national turnout level of just over 50 per cent at the local elections of 1999. This 1999 contest had been marked by very sharp urban–rural turnout variations, while some especially low turnout levels were recorded in the more socially deprived areas in Dublin, such as North Clondalkin, Cherry Orchard and the Dublin Inner City. The average turnout level in Dublin was a low 36 per cent, contrasting with a much higher level of just over 56 per cent for the constituencies located outside of Dublin and the other cities. Voter turnout rates nationally, however, improved notably at the 2004 elections to just under 59 percent, with improved participation levels in urban Ireland proving the main catalyst. Turnout levels remained close to this level at the 2009 elections (at just under 58 per cent nationally), but the turnout rate dropped notably for the 2014 contests to under 52 per cent. However, these elections were characterised by notably less defined urban–rural turnout variations than had been the case in 1999, with the average turnout level standing at 43 per cent in Dublin as compared with an average of just over 55 per cent for the rural local authority areas. Some of the more rural local authority areas recorded even lower participation levels in 2014 than in the low-turnout 1999 contest, meaning that the 2014 elections represented the

lowest ever participation levels for local election contests in these areas since the founding of the state.

Just as urban–rural turnout differentials narrowed at these contests, class-based turnout differences also narrowed within the Dublin region (Kavanagh, 2015a), especially in relation to the 2009 local elections and the 2011 General Election. With the working class electorates accounting for a relatively higher proportion of the votes cast in Dublin, this provided ample scope for Sinn Féin and other left-wing candidates to make significant gains in this region.

Control of local authorities following the 2014 elections

Following the 2009 elections, many councils had been joint-controlled by Fine Gael and the Labour Party, although some rural councils had come under majority Fine Gael control. These alliances at the local level would prefigure the entry of these parties into a coalition government at the national level less than two years later. The extent of government party losses at the 2014 elections ensured that control of the different local authorities would change hands.

No party was in a position to completely control any local authority after the 2014 elections – a testament to the increasingly fractured political landscape in the Republic of Ireland. Having emerged as the largest party nationally in terms of local authority representation levels, Fianna Fáil took control, or rather part-control, of most of the new councils. Indeed, many of the alliances that came to dominate the new local authorities involved both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil (Table 3). These parties were involved in alliances controlling twenty-one of the thirty-one different local authorities in the state – over two-thirds – and they assumed sole control of eleven councils. In all, there were only two local authorities across the state that did not involve either Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael as part of the political alliances controlling these, namely the left-leaning alliances controlling Dublin City and South Dublin County, involving Sinn Féin, Labour and other left-of-centre parties and candidates. If the 2009 experience of alliance formation at the local authority level could be seen as having set a trend for the next general election, then these new alliances could be seen to prefigure a Fine Gael–Fianna Fáil coalition at the national level after the next general election, which would effectively mark the end of 'Civil War politics' just ahead of the centenary of the 1916 Rising (Kavanagh, 2015a). By contrast, Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin have not assumed joint control of any of the different local authorities, even

Table 3: Parties/groupings that controlled the different city and county councils in the Republic of Ireland after the May 2014 elections

City/county council	Control of council
Carlow	Fine Gael, Labour and some independents
Cavan	Rotating chair on a d'Hondt basis (Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Sinn Féin)
Clare	Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and independents
Cork County	Fianna Fáil, Labour and some independents
Cork City	Rotating chair on a d'Hondt basis (Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Sinn Féin, some independents)
Donegal	Rotating chair on a d'hondt basis (all council members)
Dublin City	Sinn Féin, Labour, Green Party and some (eleven) Independents
Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown	Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and Green Party
Fingal County	Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour
South Dublin County	Sinn Féin, Labour, Green Party and independents
Galway City	Fine Gael, Labour and independents
Galway County	Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael
Kerry	Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael
Kildare	Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael
Kilkenny	Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael
Laois	Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael
Leitrim	Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael
Limerick	Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael
Longford	Fianna Fáil and independents
Louth	Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, Labour, Greens and some (two) independents
Mayo	Fianna Fáil and most independents
Meath	Fine Gael and independents
Monaghan	Rotating chair on a d'Hondt basis (Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael)
Offaly	Fianna Fáil and (some) independents
Roscommon	Fianna Fáil and independents
Sligo	Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael
Tipperary	Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael
Waterford	Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour
Westmeath	Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael
Wexford	Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael
Wicklow	Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and some independents

though their combined seat numbers would have made this a feasible prospect on a number of city and county councils. They do, of course, form part of the alliances in councils that have used a rotating chair approach to determine control of these.

The extent to which parties or groupings have managed to gain control of different councils is, of course, a reflection of how well they fared at the local election contests, but this is not a hard and fast rule. There is a mismatch between the level of success enjoyed by Sinn Féin (and the 'Independents and Others', to a lesser degree) at the May 2014 elections and the degree to which they attained, or rather did not attain, controlling positions on the different councils. The same rule also applied in certain cases to the larger parties. For instance, Fine Gael attained their best result nationally at the local elections in Longford, but this council is now controlled by Fianna Fáil and independents – their relatively smaller number of seats making each other a more attractive partner than the larger Fine Gael grouping.

The increasingly fractured political landscape has posed increased challenges for local authorities, with council executives not relishing the prospect of having to negotiate with politically disparate alliances in a number of cases (Quinlivan, 2015). Agreements on key decisions, such as the annual council budgets, have proven increasingly difficult to arrive at, especially on councils where authority is shared across all different parties and groupings using a d'Hondt mechanism. A last-minute agreement in November 2014 was required to ensure that the budget for Cork City Council was passed, thus saving that local authority from being placed under administration (Riegel & O'Connor, 2014). In the same month, Monaghan County Council decided to defer a decision on their budget until a meeting could be held with the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government to seek further funding for the council (McMahon, 2014). A decision on the Westmeath County Council budget was likewise postponed, with an agreement being made on this in December 2014 after 'one of the longest budget meetings in years' ran for well over eight hours (Farry, 2014, p. 11).

Northern Ireland

Local elections also took place in Northern Ireland in May 2014. Local government reforms impacted on these contests, although the extent of these reforms proved to be more radical in the Northern Irish context. As discussed in greater detail in this issue by Knox, the

twenty-six pre-existing local authorities (borough or district councils) in Northern Ireland were rationalised and amalgamated to create eleven large councils, with these new bodies also being allocated increased functions and powers.

The Local Government Act (Northern Ireland), 2014, which established these new councils, also marked the end of the dual mandate in Northern Ireland. Reflecting a process that had been introduced in the Republic of Ireland ahead of the local elections in 2004, MLAs, as well as MPs, Members of the House of Lords and MEPs, were all now barred from being members of the new councils. This effectively provided an opportunity space to allow new candidates enter the field, which, in turn, resulted in a notably higher level of female candidacies than would be subsequently observed at the Westminster elections in May 2015. In all, just under 25 per cent of the candidates were female (Table 4), which represented a higher female candidacy level than in the Republic of Ireland. While the higher female candidacy levels – with the exception of NI21 – tended to be associated with the two Nationalist parties, Sinn Féin and the Social and Democratic Labour Party, the Democratic Unionist Party ran the largest number of female candidates, as Table 4 shows.

Sinn Féin emerged as the strongest party in terms of vote share at these contests, mainly due to the splitting of the Unionist vote between the Democratic Unionist Party, Ulster Unionist Party and a number of smaller parties, such as Traditional Unionist Voice, the Progressive Unionist Party and NI21. (The latter party announced that it would change its designation in the Assembly from Unionist to Other two days before the local elections took place.) Strong transfers between the different Unionist parties and groupings, however, ensured that the Democratic Unionist Party won the largest number of seats across the new councils, with that party's strongest results coming in the Lisburn and Castlereagh, North Down and Ards, Mid and East Antrim, and Antrim and Newtownabbey Council elections. Sinn Féin's stronger results, by contrast, were associated with the new councils in Belfast, Mid Ulster, Fermanagh and Omagh, and Derry and Strabane. The party also polled well in the Newry, Mourne and Down Council area, although the Social Democratic and Labour Party won a similar number of seats on that council. The Democratic Unionist Party, Ulster Unionist Party and the Social Democratic and Labour Party won seats on all of the new councils, but Sinn Féin failed to win representation on the Lisburn and Castlereagh and the North Down and Ards Councils.

Table 4: Candidate numbers by party and by gender, as well as percentage vote shares and representation levels won, for the 2014 local elections in Northern Ireland (percentage of female candidacies in italics)

	Candidates		Votes/Seats	
	Female (No./%)	*Male (No.)*	*Votes (%)*	*Seats (%)*
Democratic Unionist Party	50 *(26.2)*	141	23.1	28.3
Sinn Féin	48 *(31.6)*	104	24.0	22.8
Ulster Unionist Party	17 *(14.9)*	97	16.2	19.1
Social Democratic and Labour Party	42 *(36.5)*	73	13.6	14.3
Alliance Party	24 *(29.3)*	58	6.7	7.0
Traditional Unionist Voice	5 *(10.2)*	44	4.5	2.8
Progressive Unionist Party	4 *(17.4)*	19	2.0	0.9
United Kingdom Independence Party	2 *(9.5)*	19	1.5	0.4
Green Party	3 *(23.1)*	10	0.9	0.9
NI21/Aspire to Better	15 *(29.4)*	36	0.8	0.2
Northern Ireland Conservative Party	0 *(0.0)*	13	0.4	0.0
Non-party	9 *(16.4)*	46	4.3	3.3
Total (including others)	**223** *(24.8)*	**675**	**100.0**	**100.0**

While the institutional changes in the Northern Irish context proved to be even more dramatic than the reforms introduced in the Republic of Ireland, the 2014 elections there proved to be very much a case of *plus ça change*. Politics remained very much defined by the cleavage between Unionists and Nationalists, while the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin still remained the dominant political forces. The opportunity space open to new parties to make a significant impact was especially limited at these contests, as particularly evident in the disappointing election performance for NI21. Even at a time of austerity politics, the vibrations of the political earthquake impacting across the Republic of Ireland were not to be felt across the border in Northern Ireland.

Concluding comments

The results of the May 2014 local elections in the Republic of Ireland proved to be exceptionally dramatic. The extent of this change was driven, in part, by the changes to local government structures brought in by *Putting People First*, with especial reference here to the change in local representation levels across the state and the changes made to electoral area boundaries and district magnitude levels. The election

results, of course, also reflected the highly volatile political landscape in the state, associated with the austerity politics that has characterised the period following the onset of the economic crisis in 2008 (Kavanagh, 2015a). These elections saw increased representation levels for females, as well as for left-of-centre political parties and groupings, including Sinn Féin, while there were significant losses for the two government parties, Fine Gael and Labour.

By contrast, the local elections in Northern Ireland took place in the context of an even more overarching reform of local government structures. But, while these changes – particularly the abolition of the dual mandate – did allow for an influx of new candidates and local representatives, in overall terms the political landscape of Northern Ireland remained largely the same as it had been at most recent electoral contests.

The political landscape in the Republic of Ireland, by contrast, has been radically reshaped. This will obviously have implications in terms of the changing membership of Seanad Éireann after the next general election, given that the electorate determining forty-three of the sixty Seanad seats is largely comprised of city and county councillors. But the results of the elections could also be pointing towards further political changes at the next Dáil election, which could even extend beyond those associated with the 'earthquake election' of 2011.

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