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Ireland

Five Takeaways from the Recent Elections in Ireland

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For the second election in a row, dramatic political changes took place in the course of the local and European elections in the South of Ireland. Sinn Féin started the year polling around 30% and yet ended up with less than 12% nationally in the local Elections. Independents and Others started the year with around 15%, but won close to 25% on June 6th. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael both hit 23%, coming from the high teens and around 20% respectively. In many ways, these appear to be the opposite political trends to what we saw in the General Election of 2020. Back then, Sinn Féin grew dramatically as hope for an end to 100 years of Fianna Fail and Fine Gael rule propelled them to be the biggest party in vote share for the first time ever. Volatility is clearly in the air.

However, what we saw in the five weeks of the election campaign did not come from nowhere. The election catalysed and accelerated existing processes. In the absence of major progressive social struggles, with the exception of the Palestine solidarity movement, the political terrain has undoubtedly shifted rightwards. Ireland has caught up with most of the rest of Europe and the Global North, with the emergence of a reactionary social movement in opposition to asylum seekers and the growth of a racist, climate denialist, anti-LGBTQ, and sexist far-right.

Both have fed off the failure of the government to address the housing crisis and the failure of the left to build a mass housing movement. All that has happened in a country that is getting wealthier and wealthier but where precious little is “trickling down” to working class people hammered by the rising cost of living. These are precisely the conditions that breed anger and resentment - which the far right has consciously worked to direct downwards to refugees and other oppressed groups rather than upwards to landlords, bosses, and the government.

Sinn Féin has paid a heavy price for both its attempt to position itself as a responsible party ready for capitalist governance and its major blunders on migration. Meanwhile the so-called ‘political centre’ has displayed a cynical willingness to weaponise migration to bolster its own position, regardless of the legitimisation of the arguments of the far-right. In light of this, the modest gains made by the socialist left on local councils in these difficult circumstances is a bright spot.

Government parties successfully played the immigration card

In a reversal of fortune, the main two government parties Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael stabilised their support. Even though their respective vote shares are down by 4% and 2% respectively since 2019, and they lost 41 Council seats between them in their worst ever local election, they are eager to portray this election as a victory. Their representatives, boosted by the media, have run a celebration lap, proclaiming that ‘the centre is holding’. Importantly for them, they are now trending positively and will be licking their lips looking at Sinn Féin’s results. Rumours are starting to spread that the emboldened coalition may look to capitalise on this situation and call a General Election in November.

This moderate turnaround can largely be attributed to the government’s successful use of the manufactured panic around immigration. While directly responsible for the record breaking levels of homelessness and the disgraceful conditions migrants and refugees have found themselves in, many establishment politicians have at the same time postured about immigration concerns.

The two months before the election saw a new measure of performative cruelty announced almost every week. Cuts were made to accommodation and supports for Ukrainian refugees (overwhelmingly women and children). Means tests for asylum seekers (which would cost more money to implement than they would save) were announced. Men seeking asylum were left homeless on the streets as a policy choice was made to deny them accommodation. Repeatedly the government then destroyed their tents and closed off areas of Dublin City beside the canal to prevent them from coming back. All of this was designed to centre the issue of migration while at the same time posing the government as the most hardline in terms of response.

Cynically, while themselves centring the issue of migration, they have also sought to capitalise on fear of the far right by continuing to present themselves as progressive opponents of the 'barbarians at the gates' of both far right and far left. Some portion of their recovery can be put down to people voting for what they perceive as stability. In classic 'divide and conquer' terms the government has shifted the blame for their own failures onto the most marginalised in society.

Sinn Féin has paid the price for moving to the right

The most striking outcome of this election has been the collapse of Sinn Féin's vote to under 12%. This is in stark contrast to the polls, which had them in the mid-30s from 2022 when it seemed likely they would cruise into councils and ultimately government. Instead of building on the anti-establishment mood which catapulted them to the top of the polls, Sinn Féin have moved to establish themselves as a 'safe' replacement for Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. Leading party reps have reassured big business, investors, and vulture funds that Sinn Féin 'won't go after them' and that they have 'nothing to fear'. They initially resisted the call for the Israeli ambassador to be expelled from Ireland and then shook the hand of Joe Biden in the White House, despite his support for the genocide of Palestinians.

The rise of racist ideas and fear of asylum seekers presented Sinn Féin with an undoubted challenge. They were consciously and effectively targeted by a far-right smear campaign on social media, intent on posing them as 'traitors to Ireland'. No matter what they did, they likely would have lost some support. However, how they responded led to a deepening collapse of their vote as the election went on.

When the government consciously moved to make migration the central issue of the campaign, through their repeated implementation of new policies of cruelty that would not improve the lives of anybody (Irish or not), Sinn Féin should have stood against it. They should have pointed back to the government's responsibility for all of the crises facing working class people and rejected their divide and rule tactics. They would have undoubtedly lost some support, but by holding the line they could have maintained their focus on the government and fought the election on the grounds of housing, health, and the cost of living.

Instead, they welcomed each and every new measure of performative cruelty. Not only that, each time they promised that Sinn Féin would go even further - seeking to appear even harder against asylum seekers than the government. In line with the speeches of their TDs, their election material prominently featured a section highlighting their 'opposition to open borders'. In some instances they went further - Martin Browne, Sinn Féin TD for Tipperary, addressed an anti-migrant protest in Roscrea.

This was not only morally and politically wrong, it was a strategic disaster. It not only meant that migration became a key issue in the election, but that Sinn Féin could be portrayed and understood as 'turncoats' and 'flip-floppers'. For those that viewed opposition to immigration as a key issue, they would not trust Sinn Féin in any case because of the party's relatively proud history of opposition to racism. Its acceptance of immigration as a major problem simply

accelerated the ebbing of some of its support towards independents and others who were putting forward an anti-immigration viewpoint . It also resulted in Sinn Féin losing some support from progressive people who were appalled at their new positioning.

They hoped that the mere mention of 'change' would allow them to sail into government. The reality is that Sinn Féin's failure to mobilise their supporters for this change or to even outline what an alternative to FF-FG would look like has squandered their momentum and left them in a blind alley. The party failed to build on the anti-establishment energy that emerged in 2020 and is now paying the price for it.

But it's not too late. Sinn Féin still maintains a strong base of support in communities across the country. If Sinn Féin, in combination with the trade union movement, put conscious effort into building a movement for housing and against the government they would increase the chance of reigniting the anti-establishment mood of 2020. Of course many of their more craven representatives will be calling for the party to take a further step to the right.

The far-right has taken a concerning step forward

In the aftermath of the election, there has been much media commentary suggesting that the far-right has not made a significant breakthrough. However, while they may not have achieved their own bloated expectations, they have taken a major step forward. In the European Elections across the country, 91,000 people (or 5%) cast their first preference vote for a candidate of the far-right, while an additional 196,000 (11%) voted for populist right candidates (including Aontú and Independent Ireland). The same sort of results are seen in local elections across the country. That is a remarkable breakthrough for political forces which were previously almost non-existent in Ireland.

In the run up to the election, and after months of far-right agitation and a simultaneous media circus, 'immigration' polled as the second highest concern among voters in multiple samples, trailing behind 'housing'. If you canvassed enough doors during the election you were sure to be asked about immigration at least a handful of times. Sometimes as a question of what all the fuss was about and more often as a concern. It is only thanks to the far-right's own fractured nature and incompetence, with multiple far-right candidates competing in various local election wards, that they have not turned those votes into more seats.

In total those parties and independents which can be considered 'far-right' took five seats. This breaks down to one seat for the Irish Freedom Party (IFP) in Palmerstown-Fonthill, one seat for the outrightly fascist National Party (NP) in Blanchardstown-Mulhuddart, and one seat each for anti-immigration campaigners Malachy Steenson in Dublin North Inner City, Gavin Pepper in Ballymun-Finglas, and Tom McDonnell in Kildare. In contrast with these parties, the more amorphous and right-populist 'Independent Ireland' fared significantly better, securing 23 seats and an MEP position. Their European election candidate for Midlands North West, Ciarán Mullooly, was elected on the final count beating the Sinn Féin candidate Michelle Gildernew. Their other MEP candidate for Dublin, Niall Boylan, also polled concerningly well but narrowly missed out in the final stages. Independent Ireland entered the election with thirteen councillors and finished with twenty three. This represents 40% of the total number of candidates they ran. While Independent Ireland is less politically coherent than the forces to their right, the party's success is concerning. In contrast to this, Aontú slightly underperformed expectations, ending up with only eight seats, perhaps due to not dog whistling quite loudly enough.

Equally concerning are the many thousands of votes received by many far right candidates and individuals who failed to get elected. In many scenarios far right candidates were close to winning seats and in a handful of cases this was despite the fact that there were multiple far right candidates running in the same ward. Most strikingly, candidates

from the Hitler-quoting National Party got hundreds of first preference votes in multiple different wards. In the European Elections Derek Blighe, leader of 'Ireland First', secured 25,000 first preference votes representing 3.6% of the vote in Ireland South. When combined with the three other far right candidates their collective vote share was 8%. In Midlands North West, the Independent Ireland candidate Ciarán Mullooly received nearly 58,000 first preference votes, securing 8.4%. Again this was achieved with five other far right candidates on the ballot.

While the far right did not make the gains they would have hoped for, they are now discussing the need for greater collaboration and could present a more significant threat in the next elections. A clear takeaway is anti-racist and anti-fascist forces must get serious before they do.

The socialist left found relative success in difficult circumstances

In the context of a rightwing social movement against immigration and a media-circus parroting the same narrative, it was an uphill battle for the socialist left, centrally People Before Profit (PBP) and Solidarity (electoral group of the Socialist Party - ISA), to gain from this election. However in key areas PBP has managed to make important gains picking up four extra council seats for a total of ten. Solidarity has made a return of three council seats, losing one overall. In total this will amount to thirteen seats for the collective grouping of People Before Profit-Solidarity.

PBP ran campaigns across the country calling to 'evict Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael' and to 'put campaigners on the council'. Particular focus was given to the housing crisis with emphasis on the massive amount of derelict and vacant homes that have been neglected by establishment-dominated councils. It was pointed out that far from Ireland being 'full' there are more than enough houses lying empty. This messaging was consistently combined with anti-racist arguments. In the context of relatively low levels of class struggle nationally, local community campaigns for housing, amenities, and resources assumed an important role in boosting the profile of our candidates as proven fighters for working people. In Dublin South West, we had impactful campaigns to save the Tallaght Post Office, for funding to Kiltalown Park, and for zebra crossings in Kingswood. All of them played an important role in demonstrating the impact that PBP could have at a local level.

While there were important victories in Carlow, Sligo, and Cork, it should be noted that the vast majority of seats were won in Dublin. It remains a vital task for the socialist left to lay down roots in the other key urban areas as a stepping stone to becoming a truly national force. The experience in Dublin shows that where there is consistent community-based campaigning, we can carve out support for socialist ideas, and help to resist the rise of the far right in working-class areas. It should also be noted that across the country a number of left independents and other small left parties managed to retain seats. Unfortunately, in a loss for the anti-war and Palestine solidarity movements, Clare Daly lost her MEP seat after a vicious campaign in the media to portray her as 'Putin's puppet'.

In the context of a difficult period, this election can be considered a relative success for the socialist left. With manufactured panic around immigration, and the momentum behind the far right, these modest gains represent an important achievement. The many socialist and left candidates played a vital role in cutting across the immigration narrative with anti-establishment and anti-racist messaging. The collapse of the Sinn Féin vote may make it easier for our TD seats to be defended, but it is still undoubtedly the case that we will enter the next General Election in a broadly defensive posture. We need now to work to convince many of those who supported People Before Profit to join it and to build it as a significant eco-socialist force with roots in working class communities.

There is a lot more to be done

Five Takeaways from the Recent Elections in Ireland

After weeks and months of campaigning it's important for all those who have been active in campaigns to take a breather, reflect on the election itself, and prepare to continue building. However, we will not have long before another general election is upon us. Three things are vital:

We urgently need to mobilise people on the issue of housing, pointing people's anger towards the corporate landlords, developers, and the government which allows them to grow rich off people's misery. Pressure should be placed on Sinn Féin to drop their dead-end slide to the right and recommit to mobilising their supporters against the government. Together with the trade union movement, left parties, and grassroots housing activists, we should seek to organise a major protest before October's budget seeking massive investment in social and genuinely affordable housing, rent controls that actually reduce rents, and a state construction company. This could serve to raise people's sights again and give people hope.

The electoral breakthroughs of the far and populist right will have alarmed many. All anti-racist and anti-fascist forces now need to be organised in a real united front rooted in working class communities. A grassroots social media operation is needed to counter the lies and hatred spouted by the right's outlets and redirect working class anger away from migrants and refugees.

PBP should champion a left alliance or a "vote left, transfer left" pact for the next elections. If a fundamental change of government is on offer, many more people can be mobilised to vote than in these local elections which saw the lowest turnout ever. In order for this not to lead to more betrayal and disappointment it must be based on a commitment not to go into government with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael (a commitment that unfortunately Sinn Féin and the Social Democrats refuse to give), agreement to oppose the scapegoating of asylum seekers for the failure of the government, as well as a combative programme of taking on the capitalist elite responsible for the crises in housing, health, and climate.

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This is a slightly enlarged version of the article in [Rupture](#) published on 14 June 2024.

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