

The Irish will go to ballot on 8th February in a legislative election that is forecast to be a close-run race

The Irish are due to vote in a snap election on 8 February. *"I have always said that parliamentary elections should be held at the best possible time for the country. This moment has arrived,"* said Prime Minister (Taoiseach) Leo Varadkar (Fine Gael, FG). *"The elections will provide the opportunity to have a government in place for the European Council meeting in March and to have a strong mandate,"* he said, adding that *"We have an agreement on Brexit and after the positive vote by UK MEPs on the text, it is now certain that the UK will leave the European Union on 31 January. However, Brexit is not done. In fact, we are only at halfway there. 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".* January 31, the day Brexit becomes a reality, marks the start of an 11-month transition period until December 31, 2020, during which the British will continue to apply EU rules while London and Brussels agree on their future relationship.

Ireland has feared a no-deal Brexit that would have seriously disrupted its relations and trade with its British neighbour. Prime Minister Leo Varadkar maintains that he helped avoid the re-establishment of a physical border between his country and the British province of Northern Ireland despite the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union. On the subject of Brexit, the two main Irish political parties - Fine Gael and Fianna Fail (FF) led by Micheal Martin - share the same views.

It should be noted that, for the first time, the legislative elections will take place on a Saturday, instead of Thursday. Outgoing Prime Minister Leo Varadkar explained that he had realised that it was sometimes

difficult to vote on weekdays, especially for young people studying away from their parents' home.

HOW IS IRELAND FARING?

The Fine Gael of outgoing Prime Minister Leo Varadkar has governed Ireland since the general elections of 26 February 2016 (the party has been in office since the elections of 25 February 2011). Leo Varadkar replaced Enda Kenny as head of government (and Fine Gael) in June 2017.

Lacking an absolute majority, the party relies on the support of independent MPs and the commitment of Fianna Fail to abstain from voting. However, the government has become increasingly fragile over recent months. For example, the prospect of a no-confidence vote against the Minister of Health may have played a role in the Taoiseach's decision to dissolve parliament and call a snap general election.

"Our economy has never been stronger. The number of people working is the highest in history, wages are rising, poverty is falling, and public finances are stabilized," said the outgoing Prime Minister.

However, the areas of housing and health care remain sources of dissatisfaction for the majority of Irish people. There is a severe shortage of doctors and nurses in Ireland and the cost of health care has been increasing for several years. There is also a serious shortage of new housing, which contributes to the continuing rise in rents. *"We expect just under 20,000 new homes to be built this year, the highest number in a decade,"* said Leo Varadkar.

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Young (41 years old), mixed race and homosexual, Leo Varadkar presents himself as the symbol of Ireland's evolution, long considered as a country locked in its Catholic tradition. In May 2018, the Prime Minister called a historic referendum that ended the ban on abortion (66.04% in favour). In the same year, in October, Ireland voted to remove the offence of publication or declaration of blasphemy from the Constitution (64.85%). On 22 May 2015, Dublin legalized same-sex marriage (62.07%).

The Fianna Fail is relying on Irish discontent for its campaign. "*The time is clearly ripe for a new government that will truly focus its efforts on concrete improvements in health, housing and the reduction of the cost of living,*" said its leader Micheal Martin. The party promises to increase public spending and lower taxes if it comes to power.

WHICH IRELAND FOR TOMORROW?

According to the latest opinion poll conducted by the Ipsos institute for the daily The Irish Times, Fianna Fail should come out on top on 8 February with 25% of the vote ahead of Fine Gael 23%. Sinn Fein (SF), a radical left-wing party led by Mary Lou McDonald, is expected to win 21%, the Green Party (GP) 8% and the Labour Party (Labour) 5%.

Both Fine Gael and Fianna Fail have already declared that they will not govern with Sinn Fein. But none of them seems able to secure an absolute majority. The "small" parties could therefore play a key role in the formation of the future government which, as is now the case in many European countries, could take time. The likelihood of the formation of a new minority government after the elections cannot be excluded.

THE IRISH POLITICAL SYSTEM

The *Oireachtas* (parliament) is bicameral. It includes the *Dail Eireann* (House of Representatives) which has 158 *teachtaí dala* (MPs) elected for 5 years from 40 constituencies. After a reduction in the number of MPs in the previous parliamentary elections of 26 February 2016, the electoral law was amended again

in December 2017 and the next *Dail Eireann* will have 160 MPs.

Each constituency nominates 3, 4 or 5 MPs. The latter are elected by proportional representation according to the single transferable vote system. The voter chooses from a list of candidates to whom he or she wishes to give his or her vote in order of preference. He or she places the digit 1 in front of the candidate who has the first preference and then, if he or she so wishes, 2, 3, 4, etc. in front of the names of the other candidates on the list. The calculation of the electoral quotient, i.e. the minimum number of votes a candidate must obtain to be elected, is the first operation in the counting process. This quotient corresponds to the total number of votes cast divided by the number of seats to be filled (3, 4 or 5 depending on the constituency) plus one. Any candidate who receives this number of votes is elected. Any surplus votes obtained are then distributed among the candidates who have been selected as the second preference.

The Irish are very strongly attached to their voting system, which they share with only two other countries in the world (Malta and Australia), to the extent that they have twice (1959 and 1968) refused to change it. As the single transferable vote was included in the Irish Constitution in 1937, it can only be changed or abandoned by referendum. The single transferable vote system allows for accurate representation of political parties but is sometimes criticised for the strong competition it is said to generate between candidates from the same party. Thus, members sometimes regret that this system forces them to devote a lot of time to the individual demands of their fellow citizens and prevents them from concentrating on national political issues.

A law passed in 2012 obliges political parties to field at least 30% women candidates (40% in 7 years' time) in parliamentary elections, failing which their state funding will be reduced by 50%.

The *Seanad Eireann*, the Upper House, comprises 60 members, 43 of whom are elected by proportional representation (under the single ballot system) by five

major bodies made up of parliamentarians (outgoing senators and newly elected deputies) and locally elected officials (county councillors and county town councillors) representing various sectors of society (culture, education, agriculture, labour, industry, commerce and public administration). 11 members of the *Seanad Eireann* are appointed by the Prime Minister and 6 by citizens on the electoral rolls who have graduated from the National University of Ireland or the University of Dublin (Trinity College) with a third-year degree. The *Seanad Eireann*, which will not be dissolved before the election of the new house, is traditionally elected no later than 90 days after the *Dail Eireann*.

The Irish government may comprise up to 15 members. 2 of them may be members of the *Seanad Eireann*, all others must be Members of Parliament.

9 political parties are represented in the current *Dail Eireann*:

- *Fine Gael* (FG) (Gael Clan), the party of outgoing Prime Minister Leo Varadkar, founded in 1933 and located on the centre-right, has 50 seats;
- *Fianna Fail* (FF) (Soldiers of Destiny), a right-wing party founded in 1926 and led by Micheal Martin, has 44 elected members;

- *Sinn Fein* (SF) (Ourselves) has the particularity of existing (and participating in elections) in two European Union states: Ireland and the United Kingdom. A radical left-wing nationalist party led by Mary Lou McDonald, has 23 seats;
- The Labour Party (Labour), founded in 1912 and led by Brendan Howlin, has 7 seats;
- The Anti-Austerity Alliance-People Before Profits (AAPP), a far-left party, has 6 seats;
- Independents for Change, a radical left-wing party, has 4 elected members;
- The Social Democrats, founded in 2015 and led by Catherine Murphy and Roisín Shortall, has 3 seats;
- The Green Party (GP), led by Eamon Ryan, has 2 elected members;
- The Workers' and Unemployed Action (WUA), a far-left party led by Seamus Healy, has 1 seat.

Finally, 18 independent MPs are members of *Dail Eireann*.

The Irish also elect by direct universal suffrage their President of the Republic. However, the latter only has representative powers. Appointed every 7 years, his mandate can only be renewed once. The current Head of State, Michael Higgins, has been in office since 27 October 2011. He was re-elected as head of Ireland with 55.81% of the votes on 26 October 2018.

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Reminder of the general election results of 26 February 2016 in Ireland

Turnout: 65,2%

Political Parties	Number of votes won	% of votes cast	Number of seats
Fine Gael (FG)	544 140	25.50	50
Fianna Fail (FF)	519 356	24.30	44
Sinn Fein (SF)	295 319	13.80	23
Labour	140 898	6.60	7
Anti-Austerity Alliance – People before Profit (PBP)	84 168	3.90	6
Independents for change	31 365	1.50	4
Social-Democrats	64 094	3	3
Green Party (GP)	57 999	2.70	2
Workers' and Unemployed Action (WUA)	7 452	0.30	1
Renua Ireland	46 552	2.20	0
Independents	345 062	16.30	18

Source : *The Irish Times*

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