

European
Elections monitor

Uncertainty about the outcome of the Irish referendum on 31st May on the European budgetary pact.

Corinne Deloy

D-7
7 days before
the poll

The Irish are being called to ballot on 31st May next in a vote on the European budgetary pact – the so-called treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance (TSCG), signed on 2nd March in Brussels by the Heads of State and government of 25 EU Member States (except for the UK and the Czech Republic). The European budgetary pact will enter into force as soon as at least 12 Member States have ratified it.

Ireland is the only country to submit the European budgetary pact to referendum. Moreover the vote will happen only once since Dublin will not have any right to veto over the European treaty. Agriculture Minister Simon Coveney, Fine Gael's campaign director, has repeated that the popular consultation comprised a one off vote. "The only ones to suffer in the event of a win for the "no" vote will be the Irish," he declared.

Fine Gael (FG), the party led by Prime Minister Enda Kenny, Labour Party led by Foreign and Trade Minister, Eamon Gilmore and member of the government coalition and also Fianna Fail (FF), the main opposition party led by Micheal Martin, are all in favour of the ratification of the European budgetary pact. "We are benefiting from an aid programme; as a result present and potential investors see Ireland as a part of Europe. They want security, clarity and the guarantee of Dublin's ability to take decisions. The earlier we are able to give them a clear sign over our future, the earlier we shall see investors continuing and starting to invest in Ireland," repeats Enda Kenny. The Taoiseach (head of government) knows that his fellow countrymen have suffered and are still suffering from the serious economic crisis that has affected the country: Dublin has witnessed 5 austerity plans since 2008. "Limiting the public deficit is one of our biggest challenges at present. But once we have overcome this challenge we will be able to invest in the sectors of employment and

growth," he said reassuringly, adding "the message that the 'yes' vote will give is that Ireland is an open country and that the worst of our problems is now behind us."

Micheal Martin (FF) stressed that the European budgetary pact "belonged to a growth and job creation agenda." "The 'yes' vote will enable Ireland to borrow at better prices and give it access to more funds for our public services," he declared.

As for those against the treaty three parties are represented in the Dail Eireann, the lower chamber of the Oireachtas (Parliament): Sinn Fein (SF), a far left nationalist party led by Gerry Adams, the Socialist Party (SP) led by Joe Higgins and the People before Profit Movement (PBP), the latter two have formed an alliance – the United Left Alliance (UL). In the "no" camp there are also several independent MPs such as Declan Ganley, the millionaire and founder of the Libertas organisation who maintains that "voting 'yes' is like taking a ticket on the Titanic."

Gerry Adams, the Sinn Fein leader, believes that the budgetary pact is an austerity treaty. In his opinion the ratification of the text will condemn Ireland to a "continuous cycle of public spending cuts and tax increases," which will "open up a wide gulf in Irish society". Gerry Adams has asked the Irish to join their Greek counterparts by rejecting the austerity policies that have failed to solve the debt crisis. "A powerful 'no' on 31st May could strengthen all of those in Europe who are against the austerity policies," he declared.

"Sinn Fein is strategically the best placed party in Parliament because it is against austerity and Europe. This allows it hope for votes on the part of all of those who are discontent," analyses Eoin O'Malley, a political analyst at the University of Dublin. The timing is lucky: the nationalist party is holding its Ardfeis (congress) on 25th and 26th May next which will provide it with an additional chance to air its view as the referendum campaign is in full swing.

The True Finns (PS), a Finnish populist, euro-sceptic party and the Party for the UK Independence Party (UKIP), a British anti-European party – both members of the delegation of the Europe Freedom and Democracy group (EFD) in the European Parliament are guests in the 'No' campaign in Ireland.

The most recent poll by the Millward Brown Lansdowne institute, published on 17th May last by the daily The Irish Independent shows that 37% of the Irish are going to vote in support of the ratification of the European budgetary pact whilst one quarter (24%) say they will vote 'no' to the treaty. One third of those interviewed, a high percentage, are still undecided.

"It will be a tightly run vote" anticipates Charlie Flanagan, former chairman of Fine Gael's parliamentary group. "The Fine Gael and the Labour Party have to undertake a real information campaign which will require an amount of energy and commitment as great as that used in the general elections," he added.

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