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The current Government of Ireland – the 34th in the state’s history – took office on April 9th, 2024, following the shock resignation in March of Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar. Holding back tears, Varadkar insisted that his reasons for stepping down were “*personal and political, but mainly political*”, in the vein of New Zealand’s Jacinda Ardern or other leaders who opt to resign in their prime, citing the many demands and challenges of modern political life.

At 37, Simon Harris became the 16th and youngest ever Taoiseach. Harris heads a coalition composed of his party Fine Gael (EPP), Fianna Fáil (Renew Europe), and The Green Party (Greens-European Free Alliance). The coalition came into being following the general election which took place in February 2020, in the narrow window between the new year and the onset of the global pandemic in March. Indeed, all Irish governments in modern times have been coalitions, but the current government unites Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael for the first time. These parties have led every Irish government since the foundation of the state a century ago, but never together. The opposition is led by Sinn Féin (GUE/NGL) alongside a number of smaller parties including the Labour Party (S&D), the Social Democrats, People Before Profit (GUE/NGL), and 20 members (from 160) who sit as independents.

Euro-enthusiasm in Ireland

The Irish public remains *among the most enthusiastic* about their country’s continued membership of the EU. For many in Ireland, EU membership is associated with the country’s economic and social transformation since the 1980s from being one of the poorest in Europe to one of the richest in the world. It has also allowed the country to gain an international profile and to differentiate itself from the UK, its erstwhile colonial power and near neighbour. There is no organised opposition to membership of the EU in parliamentary or local politics in Ireland.

Critical voices exist, particularly on the left, where the role of the EU in undermining sovereignty or in promoting free market economics is standard fare. The highpoints for such criticism were the 2001 and 2008 referendum

campaigns which saw “no” votes in the first rounds of both the Nice and Lisbon Treaty referendums. Notably, Irish enthusiasm for EU membership has held in spite of the country’s financial bailout by the EU and IMF in 2010 and the years of austerity which followed. It is also widely accepted that Ireland received steadfast support from EU member states for its position vis-à-vis the Irish border amid the UK’s protracted withdrawal (2016-2020).

The campaign

Ireland will elect 14 MEPs in June, one more than the current number, making it among the smallest parliamentary delegations. Seats are divided between three constituencies with four seats elected in the Dublin area, and five each in two sprawling constituencies in Midlands-North-West and the South. By convention, elections for the European Parliament and for all of Ireland’s local authorities take place on the same day, and referendums are occasionally scheduled at the same time (although not this year, following the postponement of a vote on [the proposal for a Unified Patent Court](#)).

As is often the case with elections falling short of a general election, European elections in Ireland are widely viewed as second order in nature and do not play by precisely the same rules. That said, the next general election will take place by March 2025, and the June elections will be seen as an important indicator for what the next government might look like.

General and local elections in Ireland remain highly rooted in constituencies with candidates expected to interact directly with electors in the run-up – and between – campaigns. However, given the scale of the constituencies, European elections tend to be more presidential in nature. This can see high-profile candidates with a ready-made image in the Irish public eye seeking election, including from the worlds of sport (e.g. Sean Kelly MEP, or [Nina Carberry](#), a well-known jockey), television and media (e.g. Commissioner Mairéad McGuinness, and Maria Walsh MEP, a former winner of the [Rose of Tralee international festival](#)), or from frontline national politics (e.g. Barry Andrews MEP or Billy Kelleher MEP).

Candidates begin campaigning months in advance of the election but national attention turns meaningfully to the poll in the month leading up to the poll. RTÉ, the national broadcaster, [initiates a series of television and radio debates with candidates](#) in the four weeks leading up to the elections.

Transnational elections in a very local context

The transnational dimension of these elections and candidates’ affiliations to groups at the European Parliament is more likely to be emphasised by candidates on the left and centre-left. Discussions of any depth of how MEPs and political groups form and operate are unlikely to happen outside specialist discussions and debate among experts and enthusiasts. For the most part, amid the noise of a busy election where dozens of candidates are competing for attention alongside hundreds of local election candidates, budding MEPs are more likely to emphasise their leadership qualities, technical expertise and how they can be a “voice” for their constituents.

Candidates typically include Europarty branding on their election materials but the strongest association is by far with the national party organisation. It would be unlikely to see European political party lead candidates featuring meaningfully in the campaign and it would be difficult to explain the modalities of this to an Irish audience.

The recently established [Coimisiún na Meán](#) (the Media Commission) is responsible for regulating broadcast media in Ireland and strict guidelines exist as regards objectivity, balance and fairness in the coverage of elections. This will also be the first election to take place since the establishment of [An Coimisiún Toghcháin](#) (The Electoral Commission) in 2023 which is responsible for the oversight of elections, including as regards electoral operations, constituency reviews and electoral integrity.

Primarily, media coverage predictably focuses on the relative strengths, weaknesses and campaign commitments of different candidates, as well as the track record in office of those seeking re-election. In addition, in 2024, and in keeping with convention, attention at these debates and throughout the campaign will be paid to the role the EU plays in traditional issues relating to agriculture, the environment and the economy. Environmental regulation and land use, following the passage of the landmark Nature Registration Law in 2023, will feature prominently, particularly among rural communities and farming groups, which are well organised in Ireland.

Migration and asylum policy, including the EU's pact for migration, which the [Irish government has supported](#), has [increased in salience](#) and will feature prominently in the election campaign, following [coverage of increased rates of applications for asylum](#) over recent months. This is the first time that migration will feature prominently in the discourse in advance of a national election in Ireland. Issues relating to Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform, housing and the cost of living will also feature, as will security and defence policy given Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine and the ongoing [national debate in Ireland regarding the country's security posture](#), but less so than in other parts of Europe where the threat perception posed by Russia is higher. Ireland is historically a strong supporter of EU enlargement and the question of "where Europe ends" is also likely to be debated.

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Possible outcomes

Seventy-three candidates will be competing for Ireland's 14 seats at the European Parliament, with 23 candidates running in each of Dublin and Ireland South, while 27 candidates will contest the Midlands-North-West constituency. Two sitting MEPs (both Fine Gael) will not seek re-election.

At the European elections in 2019, five Fine Gael MEPs were returned alongside three independents, two from Fianna Fáil and two Greens. Sinn Féin underperformed, returning only one MEP. As mentioned, the constituencies for the European elections are large, and given the use of proportional representation by the single transferable vote within multi-seat constituencies, granular data are hard to come by. That said, reference to [opinion polling](#) regarding voting intention is still instructive. Sinn Féin, the main opposition party, has consistently led the polls

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so far in 2024 with 27-29% support, ahead of Fine Gael (19-20%), and Fianna Fáil (15-17%). The existence of three “large parties” is a relatively new phenomenon in Irish politics given the steady gains made by Sinn Féin since the party's breakthrough in 2011, when the country was in the midst of its financial bailout. Remaining party support is divided among the Social Democrats (5-6%), the Green Party (3-4%), the Labour Party (3-4%), the social conservative Aontú (3-4%) and leftist People Before Profit (2-3%). Support for independent candidates remains remarkably high by European standards at 16-19% in most polls, and as high as [24% in some recent polling](#).

Thus, Sinn Féin, consistently the largest party by vote share on both sides of the Irish border, will likely pick up seats in June. The party's position has evolved from one of traditional Euroscepticism, having campaigned against subsequent EU referendums, to behaving like a more conventionally critical social democratic party. Indeed, some in Sinn Féin have proposed seeking a move to the [S&D group](#) after the next election, which has been without an Irish member since 2014.

In sum, it feels likely that Sinn Féin will see gains while Fine Gael, who have been in government since 2011, will lose ground. The Fianna Fáil and Green MEPs, whose parties have served in government for the past four years, will try to maintain their positions. In one version of events, both Sinn Féin and Fine Gael could both emerge as “winners”, depending on how much ground Sinn Féin can make and how much ground Fine Gael can hold. Each of the other returning MEPs have prospects for re-election with some of the independent candidates – old and new – expected to perform well.

A party dubbed “Independent Ireland” has emerged around a group of previously independent members of parliament representing rural interests. As a nod to the presidential nature of these elections mentioned previously, this party secured the nomination of [Ciarán Mullooly](#), a well-known former RTÉ correspondent, to contest the Midlands-North-West constituency. In addition, given the increased salience of migration, voices from the anti-migration hard right, which have been largely absent from the Irish political landscape heretofore, have also surfaced and will feature in the campaign.

Implications for Ireland

These elections, and the Commission's work programme which follows, will be enormously consequential for all Europeans, given the pressing policy demands relating to climate change, Russia's war in Ukraine, competitiveness, security and defence matters, public health and much else. That said, speaking domestically, the results of these European elections will inform the narrative of what government will emerge after the next Irish general election – which is likely to be a version of the current government or a left-wing alternative led by Sinn Féin. As above, it is also highly likely that issues of particular importance in rural Ireland, including as regards agriculture and land use, will feature prominently, as will questions relating to migration policy which will continue to influence and shape public discourse beyond these elections.

Conclusion

It is possible that Ireland's place within the EU will be more contested during these elections than has been the case in the past, but there will still be no anti-EU bloc of meaningful size within the country's politics. The elections are likely to confirm Sinn Féin – who currently hold the office of first minister in the Northern Ireland Executive but have never served in government in the Republic – as the largest party on both sides of the border.

EU membership has always been a mainstay of Irish foreign policy and this is likely to only increase after June. These are the first European elections to take place without the UK, Ireland's nearest neighbour. Given the UK's withdrawal and the potential for political change in the US, a country with which Ireland maintains strong economic and political links, Ireland's EU membership is likely to become only more important as the country seeks to position itself in an ever more contested world.

