


Independents day as major parties lose out

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Anti-establishment are now well placed to translate strong national support into major gains at the next general election, while Government parties face losses, says **Adrian Kavanagh**

THIS weekend's by-election contests produced two obvious winners – Paul Murphy of the Anti Austerity Alliance and Michael Fitzmaurice, the independent candidate from Luke Ming Flanagan's grouping.

But a few more winners may emerge from these contests, looking ahead to the next general election contests in the enlarged Dublin South-West and the new Roscommon-Galway and Sligo-Leitrim constituencies – in some cases emerging from the list of other by-election candidates, but in other cases emerging from a group of other contenders who did not contest Friday's elections.

But the overall trend is of a continuing anti-establishment shift in support patterns, with impacts both for urban and rural constituency areas.

Government parties traditionally fare poorly in by-election contests, although three of the four preceding contests were won by Fine Gael and Labour.

While their candidates performed credibly and well within expectations, support levels for the two government parties at these contests were notably lower than these parties' combined vote share at the 2011 General Election.

The combined Fine Gael-Labour vote fell by 46.8% in Dublin South-West relative to their 2011 vote, with the raw number of votes won by these on Friday coming in at less than one-seventh of the number of first preference votes won by them at the general election.

Government party losses were less dramatic in Roscommon-South Leitrim, but their combined share of the vote was still 25.0% lower than their 2011 vote there. While a week is a long time in politics and a year – or more – can amount to an eternity, it looks as if Fine Gael and Labour may need to reconcile themselves to the loss of a seat in the new Roscommon-Galway and enlarged Dublin South-West respectively.

Fine Gael can still entertain hopes of taking one seat in both of these, but are by no means certain of doing so in the face of strong independent challenges from Fitzmaurice, Denis Naughten and possibly also Tim Broderick in Roscommon-Galway and Ronan McMahon in Dublin South-West.

Labour won no council seat in May in the Rathfarnham area, which will form part of the five-seat Dublin South-West at the next general election, and may need to reconsider their strategy here.

If Pat Rabbitte does not contest, Labour may need to consider adding Alex White, whose base is in the Rathfarnham area, to the Dublin South-West ticket alongside Eamonn Maloney.

Many commentators thought the Roscommon-South Leitrim contest was Fianna Fáil's to lose, though this did under-estimate the traditional strength of independent candidates in Roscommon. Fianna Fáil could argue that their share of the vote increased here by more than 7% relative to 2011, but this also marked a drop of over 10% relative to their strong showing here at the May local elections.

Some of the north Roscommon or east Galway-based councillors may feel that this result strengthens their claims to be on the party ticket at the next general election in addition to, or instead of, Ivan Connaughton. By contrast, John Lahart's position will be strengthened in Dublin South-West, given that his own Rathfarnham electoral area, where he enjoys a strong personal vote, was not part of the constituency for this contest, but will be at the next general election.

Sinn Féin's failure to win the Dublin South-West contest was the main surprise of the weekend, but this loss was more down to the massive swing to the Socialist Party/Anti-Austerity Alliance here rather than a major loss of support by Sinn Féin. That party still won more than 30% of the vote here (well up on their 2011 vote share and only a few percent less than their May result, and a similar vote share at the next general election would see them in contention for two seats, though this may be a tougher ask with the addition of the Rathfarnham area where the party is not as strong as they would be in the Tallaght area.

Martin Kenny's strong showing in Roscommon-South Leitrim may have little bearing ultimately on the Roscommon-Galway constituency given his base in south Leitrim, but it may leave Sinn Féin with a decision on

whether to run two Leitrim-based candidates (Kenny and Michael Colreavy) at the next general election.

Support levels for the Independents and Others group at these contests was in line with that group's strong showing in recent national opinion polls and may suggest this grouping is now well placed to translate strong national support into major gains at the next general election.

Independents and others emerged as the largest grouping in both by-elections, taking over 37% of the first preference votes in Roscommon-South Leitrim and close to 44% in Dublin South-West. As with local elections, this group traditionally fares better in by-elections than in general election contests, however, having accounted for close to 25% of the vote across all the by-elections held since the 2000s. So the next 12 months, or so, will ultimately decide whether the promise shown in these by-election contests translates into a successful general election for the independents and smaller parties, or not.