

**Political Fragmentation on the March; Campaign Effects at the 2016 General Election  
in the Republic of Ireland**

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## **Abstract**

In a world of party fragmentation and electoral volatility, election campaigns are arguably increasingly decisive in shaping voter decisions by raising awareness of new candidates and parties and providing vital information on the policy positions of the competing actors. This paper will examine the 2016 Irish general election campaign, from the perspective of the voter. It will argue that voters were significantly engaged with the campaign and it will show that a plurality of voters report having made their final choice during the election campaign, in line with opinion poll evidence which pointed to notable movements in party support levels over the course of the campaign. We argue that the more volatile voters, whose preferences led to the second most volatile result in recent Irish electoral history, were those who made up their minds during the election campaign, a group we term campaign deciders.

The paper will go on to demonstrate that the campaign was more important for centrist small parties and non-party candidates, or independents, as larger proportions of their voters made their decision during the campaign. Furthermore, it will show that the campaign was least important to voters with anti-establishment leanings many of whom had arrived at their decision a considerable period before the election was called; the direct implication being that support for anti-establishment parties stems from a deeper change in Irish politics.

*Keywords:* media and elections, campaign effects, social media, campaign deciders.

## **Introduction**

Using data from the Irish National Election Study this paper considers the 2016 Irish general election campaign and examines the voters who made up their minds during the campaign, and contrasts them with those who had made up their minds in advance of the election. The 2011 election was the most volatile election in Irish history but as Mair (2011) has discussed it resulted in a re-ordering of the party system. No major new political force emerged and responsibility for governing moved from the long dominant Fianna Fail to Fine Gael and Labour who had alternated in power for many decades. 2016 was very different. The combined share of the vote for the three old parties contracted to its lowest level ever and the election of several new parties and alliances delivered considerable party system fragmentation. Indeed it was the second most volatile in the history of Irish elections and among the top ten most volatile elections in Western Europe since 1945 (Farrell and Suiter, 2016). The election took place as economic recovery was building in Ireland but the longer context stretches back to the economic collapse in 2008, an EU-IMF bailout in 2010, an earthquake election in 2011 and eight successive years of severe economic retrenchment. Despite exiting the bailout officially in 2013, the consequences of eight years of cuts to social support payments, cuts in public services and public sector pay reductions of up to 25 per cent were prominent in the backdrop to the 2016 election. There was a surge in support for small left wing parties, non-party candidates while the main opposition party, Fianna Fail which had been decimated in 2011 made a notable recovery. The government parties of Fine Gael and Labour suffered serious losses. Ireland had a dominant party system for decades and elections were known for the predictability of their outcomes. This is clearly no longer the case. The volatility in 2016 is almost without precedent (Farrell & Suiter, 2016), and would seem to place Ireland squarely in the midst of European experiences of growing party system fragmentation and increasing support for populist political parties.

Given that Ireland was one of the countries most impacted by the Great Recession and imposed austerity it is perhaps not surprising that we would identify considerable levels of volatility in voter decision making. The focus of this paper is the extent to which the campaign mattered for this volatility. The essential case that we make in this paper is that disenchanted voters can be divided into those who made up their minds during the election campaign and that many moved away from the long established parties which were associated with the politics of austerity and transferred their choice to the center left and

candidates with no political affiliation. However, others also moved but were more sure about their vote choice, making up their mind in advance of the campaign to support populist parties of the left. Prime among these were Sinn Fein supporters the plurality of whom had decided to vote for the party in advance of the campaign and over half of these had not voted for the party in the previous election.

While campaigns were dismissed as a spectator sport by early behavior studies of elections, in recent years, researchers have demonstrated that campaigns can play a pivotal role in shaping voter decisions. Section two provides an overview what we know about the ways in which campaigns can affect election outcomes and it outlines the essential features of the analysis that will be provided. Section three outlines some summary information on the 2016 general election while section four provides details of the 2016 Irish National Election Study and the data used in this paper. Section five presents the empirical analysis confirming that a large proportion of voters report making their final voting choice during the campaign period. A majority of voters are campaign deciders. Using data from the RTE exit poll, a profile of campaign deciders is developed. The analysis will demonstrate that the campaign was more important for centrist small parties and non-party candidates as larger proportions of their voters made their decision during the campaign. Furthermore, it will show that the campaign was least important to voters with an anti-establishment leaning many of whom had arrived at their decision a considerable period before the election was called; the direct implication being that support for anti-establishment parties stems from a deeper change in Irish politics. Finally, some tentative implications of the findings for our understanding of voting behavior and the party system in Ireland are included in section six.

## **Section Two – Literature**

The earliest studies of voting behaviour tended to consign campaigns to the end of the list of factors which shaped voter decision making (Lazerfeld et al., 1968) Recent decades have brought a re-evaluation of the hierarchy of voter influences and campaigns have moved closer to the foreground. Campaigns have become highly professionalised with parties investing extensive resources in managing local and national campaigns, both on the ground (personal canvass, leaflet drops, postering) and on the air (broadcasting and most recently social media). Importantly, the advent of campaign panel studies have been critical in

facilitating our growing understanding of the dynamics of voter decision making during campaigns (Faas, 2015).

Declining partisanship is central to understanding the increased relevance of political campaigns. As voter loyalties to the old parties in political systems have weakened, new factors have become more decisive in shaping voter decisions. The personality of constituency candidates and party leaders, new political issues and constituency service are all part of this evolving decision making context along with political campaigns. Campaigns themselves are essential because they operate both as a vehicle of communication for all of the aforementioned aspects as well as providing opportunities for random events to play out during the period of the campaign (Farrell and Schmitt-Beck, 2002).

Of course we know that campaigns do not have a uniform impact. There is widespread agreement that they matter more for voters who have no party attachment (Kenski et al., 2010; Jacobson, 2015). Decades of research have demonstrated that this group of voters is increasing in size and diversity (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002; Schmitt-Beck and Partheymuller, 2012). Furthermore, we know that a growing share of voters are waiting close to election day to make their voting choice and these voters, often termed late deciders, may be particularly susceptible to election campaigns (McAllister, 2002; Blais, 2004; Dassonville, 2012). Partisan dealignment has been identified by McAllister (2002) as the major factor driving late decision making by voters. Party attachment in Ireland is low by international standards (Marsh, 2000; 2006) and we expect that Ireland will have a high number of late deciders. We also argue that the proportion of late deciders should be growing over recent elections as dealignment has developed at pace in Ireland (Farrell and Suiter, 2016).

*H1: The number of campaign deciders is increasing in Ireland.*

However, not all late deciders will be created equal. In common with countries and party systems across Europe and around the world Ireland has experienced a significant disenchantment with politics and growing populism, mostly of a left-wing and anti-elite or anti-establishment variety (Aalberg et al 2017, Suiter 2017). Thus the voters driving volatility will be both those who made their decision later during the campaign and those who have been motivated by deeper seated preferences and decided before the campaign but yet opted for anti-establishment parties or candidates. Disentangling these effects forms the second

aspect of our analysis. Opposition to austerity policies took hold from 2008 but peaked in 2013-15 as a result of a concentrated campaign opposing water charges. This campaign was led by populist parties and alliances from the far left. We hypothesize that voters who voted for these parties were more likely to have arrived at this decision during the water protests and argue that it is centrist voters that would be most likely to make up their minds during the campaign.

*H2: Voters for anti-establishment parties are less likely to be campaign deciders.*

Following McAllister (2002) we hypothesize that late deciders are more volatile in their decision making than other voters. Late deciders are less likely to have a party affiliation and arrive at their decisions based on their experiences and information over the course of the electoral cycle and the campaign. We argue that they should be most likely to switch their voting choice over the five-year election cycle.

*H3: Campaign deciders are more likely to have changed their voting preference to another party since the last election.*

Political campaigns will vary in intensity and effectiveness and be influenced by the type of electoral contest, closeness of the race and regulation environment. The 2016 election was a particularly volatile one (Farrell & Suiter, 2017). There were a number of new parties and alliances which had formed since 2011 contesting the election and the polls projected a fragmented political landscape many months ahead of the election. The new parties were spread across the political spectrum and included the Anti-Austerity Alliance – People Before Profit party on the far left, Social Democrats on the centre left and Renua on the centre right. Additionally, Ireland has a very high number of candidates who contest elections without a party affiliation, in other words independents. In 2016, a number of these candidates came together to form loose alliances and they included the ideologically diverse group known as the Independent Alliance and a far left cluster which registered as a party but contested as a non-party alliance, Independents 4 Change. Some of these parties contained candidates who were incumbent members of parliament but who re-designated for the 2016 campaign. Given that campaigns can be decisive in shaping voter decisions by raising awareness of new candidates, parties and providing vital information on the policy positions of the competing

actors (Jacobson, 2013). We hypothesize that new parties and alliances should be the big winners among late deciders.

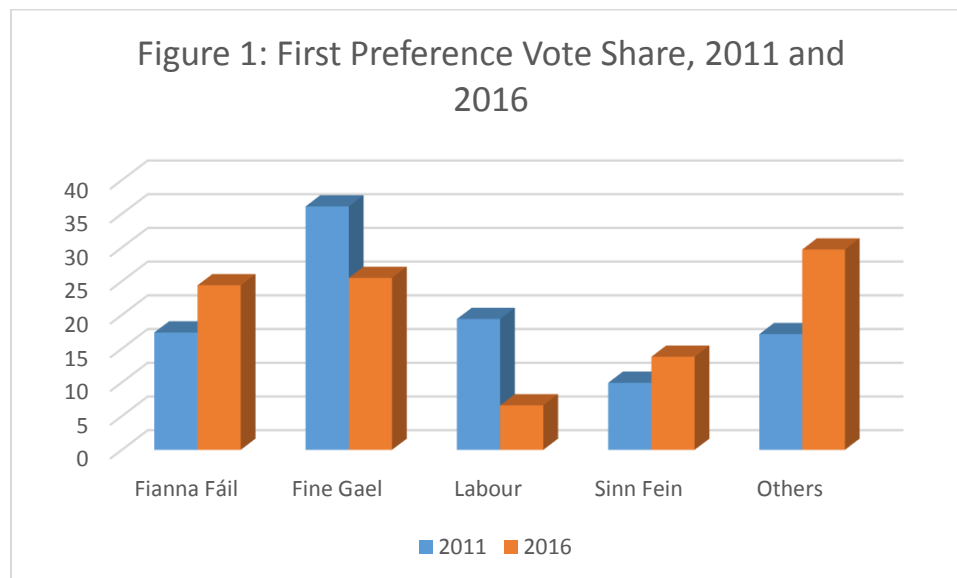
*H4: Campaign deciders are more likely to vote for new parties and candidates than early deciders.*

Finally, Irish politics has long been bedeviled by a tendency among voters to focus exclusively on local issues when making their vote choice. For a significant minority of voters (upwards of 40 per cent in some surveys), candidates who ‘deliver’ or ‘look after’ the needs of their constituency are preferred to those with a national policy focus. Levels of constituency service by public representative are quite high in Ireland (Chubb, 1963; Martin, 2010; O’Leary, 2011). Partisanship is low and the electoral system facilitates a candidate centric approach to voting. Garvin (1991) described an ‘uncivic’ mentality among Irish voters and writing in the aftermath of the 2011 election Peter Mair (2011) spoke of an amoral localism in Irish politics. He argued that the legacy of colonialism had left many citizens feeling that they did not own their own state and ‘getting one over’ on the state was something that was celebrated. Localism was criticized extensively in the 2011 campaign and data from the Irish National Election Study show that there was a sharp drop in the number of voters who cited local considerations as a factor in their decision making. As the crisis has faded, we argue that localism should re-emerge. We argue that localist voters are more likely to have made their decision in advance of the campaign. Knowing the candidate personally and the candidate’s local contribution are most important for localist voters and therefore the campaign is less likely to matter for these voters.

*H5: Campaign deciders are less likely to cite local considerations as the primary factor which shaped their vote choice.*

### **Section Three – Election 2016**

The general election took place on 26 February 2016. The campaign period itself was quite short, just three and a half weeks but election speculation had been at fever pitch for many months when the date was finally announced. The final election result is presented in figure one and compared with the result from 2011. The governing parties of Fine Gael and Labour Party saw a sharp drop in their vote shares. The poll ratings for the Labour Party plummeted within 18 months of it taking up office but Fine Gael had not suffered as severe a collapse in its support levels and was regularly polling 25-28 per cent in the year before the election, albeit still down nearly 10 points from their 2011 support levels. Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and a diverse array of small parties, alliances and Independent candidates all made gains at the 2016 election.

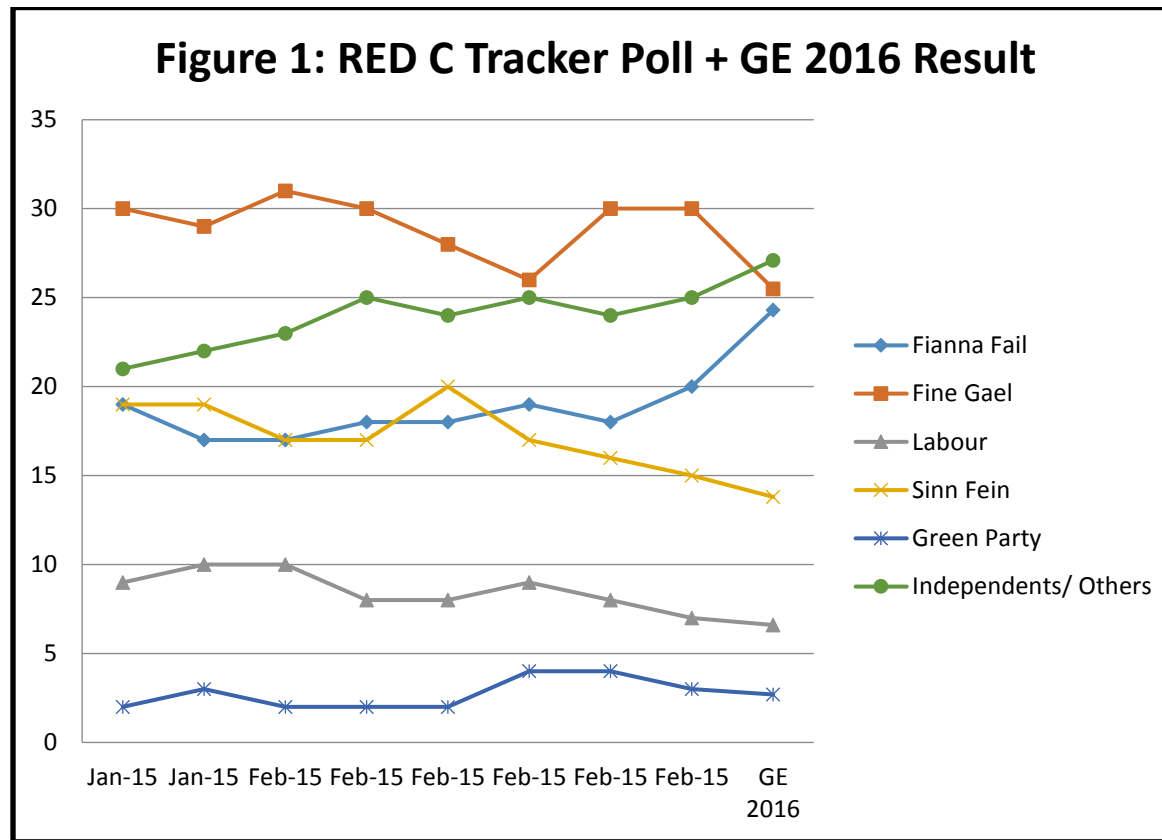


**Figure 1: Election Results, 2011 and 2016**

With such high levels of volatility, it is useful to understand when voters made their decisions. Specifically, we are interested in voters who arrived at their decision during the course of the election campaign, whom we call campaign deciders. Early deciders includes those voters who had arrived at their vote decision before the election and partisans. We look at differences between early deciders and campaign deciders in relation to their voting decision and finally we investigate what factors influenced campaign deciders in their decision making. There were some movements in party support levels over the course of the campaign and as can be seen from figure two they did not favour the government parties.



Figure 2: RED C Campaign Opinion Polls



Entering the election campaign, many commentators confidently predicted that once the campaign began to focus on economic issues, there would be a recovery for Fine Gael and it was expected that the party could approach 30 per cent by election day. This was based of course on the old adage that “it’s the economy stupid” Indeed the government parties relied on a focus-group tested ‘keep the recovery going’ message while the opposition led with ‘a fairer recovery is possible’ during the short campaign.

The general consensus of campaign 2016 was that it was a largely dull affair (Gallagher and Marsh, 2016). Television debates and discussion of opinion polls dominated the airwaves and there were few standout moments. It is useful to note that Ireland has a highly regulated campaign environment (Reidy and Suiter, 2015). There are strict spending limits for election candidates, political advertising is not allowed and there are clear guidelines on balance which must be adhered to by the broadcast media. Print media are reasonably free of

campaign specific restrictions but partisanship is not an especially prevalent feature among print titles. Personal contact with voters is an important aspect of campaigning in Ireland and has been shown to be decisive in shaping voter choices (Marsh et al, 2008). It is especially important for voters with a localist orientation. Thus in many respects 2016 provided an entirely unremarkable campaign. Yet, a great many voters report having made up their mind during the campaign and the outcome of the election was especially volatile. Fifty eight per cent of voters report having made up their mind on their vote choice during the campaign. Most unusually for Ireland, it took many months to establish a very unstable minority coalition government.

#### **Section Four – Irish National Election Study 2016**

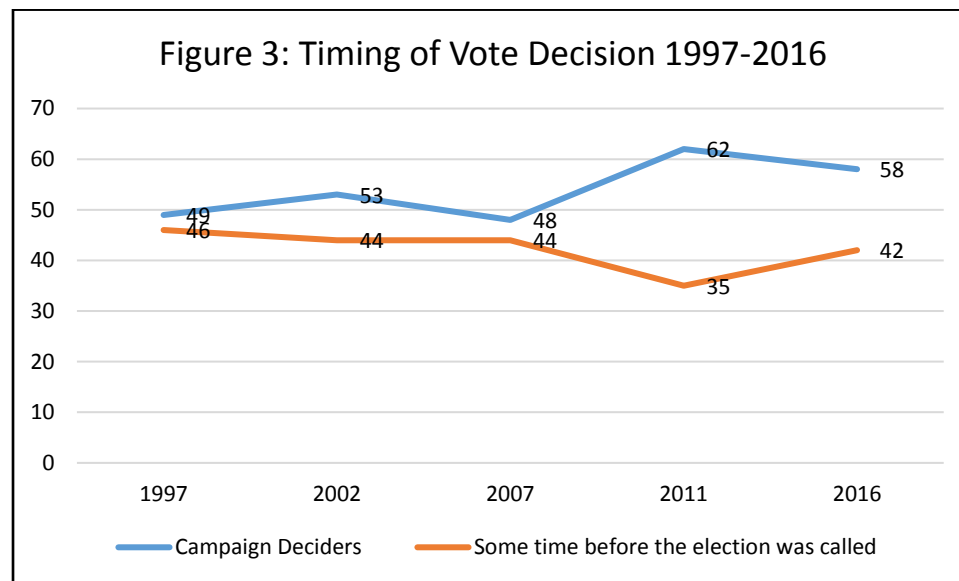
The Irish National Election Study was conducted using three discrete surveys in 2016; a nationwide exit poll of voters as they left the polling station on election day (the RTE exit poll); and two separate post-election telephone polls of representative samples of Irish voters (one of which applied a battery of questions from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems project ([www.cses.org](http://www.cses.org))).<sup>1</sup> The data presented in this paper are taken from two of the INES waves; the exit poll and one of the post-election surveys. The first four hypotheses are considered using data from the post-election survey and the RTE exit poll is the main source of data for the fifth hypothesis. Over 1,000 voters were surveyed for each of the two post-election surveys and just over 4,000 voters were surveyed as they exited polling stations across the country for the RTE exit poll. The dependent variable is timing of vote choice. We divide voters into two groups, campaign deciders who make up their mind during the campaign period and early deciders which includes partisans and all voters who arrived at their decision prior to the start of the election campaign.

#### **Section Five - Results**

In this section we outline the results of the empirical analysis. Beginning with hypothesis one, we look at the timing of voter decision making at recent elections in Ireland. In the RTE exit poll voters were asked to identify when they made their final voting decision. From figure three we can see that 58 per cent of voters report that they made their final decision during the election campaign in 2016. Across the five elections included in the figure, we can see

that the pattern is not linear but there is an increase from 49 per cent deciding during the election in 1997 to 58 per cent deciding at the 2016 election. Therefore, we accept hypothesis one and find that the number of campaign deciders is increasing in Ireland.

**Figure 3: Timing of Vote Decision**



Although the overall numbers of voters who make their choice during the campaign seems high, the trend is consistent with international research which suggests that a growing share of voters are making their decisions during election campaigns. It also aligns with the overall picture of volatility which has been a feature of at least the last two elections in Ireland (Mair, 2002; Farrell and Suiter, 2016). It must be acknowledged that the overall numbers are difficult to reconcile with some other sources of information on when voters make their decisions, such as opinion polls but it is the measure commonly used in comparative studies and the trend is as important as the absolute numbers.

Proceeding with the analysis, we are interested in the features of campaign deciders. Who are they, what are their opinions and who do they vote for? The 2016 election delivered a notable increase in the vote share for anti-establishment and populist political parties but as we have argued earlier, protests all through 2013 to 2015 were very important in mobilizing citizens against a new water tax and these protests were led by the parties of the far left who espouse a particularly anti-establishment narrative (Gallagher and Marsh, 2016). We argue that the

protests should have been decisive in shaping vote choice for the voters of these parties and expect that their voters would have been more likely to make up their minds before the election campaign. Sinn Fein and the Anti-Austerity Alliance led the protests and we can see from the data in table one that a significant proportion of their voters were early deciders. The effect is strongest for Sinn Fein, which is the largest of the anti-establishment parties<sup>1</sup>.

**Table 1: Timing of Vote Choice by Party**

Timing of Vote Choice			
Party	Election Day	Campaign Decider	Early Decider
FIANNA FAIL	30.00	33.68	36.32
FINE GAEL	28.51	31.91	39.57
LABOUR	30.14	30.14	39.73
SINN FEIN	20.37	25.00	54.63
THE GREEN PARTY	38.46	30.77	30.77
INDEPENDENT CANDIDATE	33.59	32.03	34.38
ANTI-AUSTERITY ALLIANCE	28.57	33.33	38.10
SOCIAL DEMOCRATS	36.59	48.78	14.63

Pearson chi2(14) = 26.6448  
Pr = 0.021

Turning to hypothesis three we are interested to see if campaign deciders are more volatile in their voting preferences than early deciders. Our expectation is that voters who make up their mind during the election campaign are more likely to change their party vote choice from the last election. The hypothesis is confirmed. Table two demonstrates that of those who voted for a different party in 2016, 72 per cent made their choice during the election campaign.

<sup>1</sup> It would be interesting to be able to investigate the effects of the water protests in greater details but data limitations make this very difficult.

Overall, the data in table two also speak to the high levels of vote switching which took place at the 2016 election.

<b>Table 2: Timing of Vote Choice by Change of Vote from Previous Election</b>		
	Timing of Vote Choice	
	<b>Campaign Decider</b>	<b>Early Decider</b>
Voted for the Same Party	51.03	48.97
Voted for Different Party	71.65	28.35
Pearson chi2(1) = 40.1385		
Pr = 0.000		

The results are confirmed in the logit regression presented in Table three where we can see that making up your mind before the election campaign is the best predictor of voting for the same party in 2011 and 2016. In other words, the campaign does not matter nearly as much for those who have decided to vote for the same party in advance of the campaign. Gender also matters with men significantly more likely to have changed party between the two elections. Nonetheless, there are still very significant numbers of voters for all parties who are making up their minds during or even at the very end of the campaign.

<b>Table 3: Logistic Regression – Dep Var Vote Switchers from Previous Election</b>			
Number of obs	=	898	
LR chi2(4)	=	51.54	
Prob > chi2	=	0.0000	
Log likelihood	=	-588.90214	
	Coef.	Std. Err.	P>z
Campaign Decider	.2812753	.1792306	0.117
Early Decider	-.7548618	.1645417	0.000
Age	-.0001349	.0000889	0.129
Sex	-.3585716	.1393211	0.010

_cons	1.287533	.2879294	0.000
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Campaigns are especially important for new parties and candidates and we argue that campaign deciders should be more likely to vote for new parties. We return to data considered for hypothesis two in table four. We have added the label ‘oldest’ to Fianna Fail, Fine Gael and Labour. These parties form the core of the party system, have contested elections for some decades and have incumbent members of parliament. Sinn Fein is listed as older. It has contested elections for some years and has incumbents but it does not have the same electoral history as the first three parties. The Green Party has contested elections previously but lost all of its Dáil seats in 2011. So while it was not a new party, it was returning to the national scene after an absence of five years in 2016. The Anti-Austerity Alliance and the Social Democrats were newly formed political parties since the 2011 election but also need a further note in that both parties had incumbents; most of whom had re-designated during the Dáil term. None of the parties or groups were entirely new in the sense that many had very well-known incumbent candidates. There is one striking point from the data in table four; the Social Democrats were the big winners during the campaign. Thirty seven per cent of Social Democrat voters made their vote choice on election day and a further 48.78 per cent of their voters opted for them during the campaign. The Social Democrats are centre left in ideological terms and were big winners from the campaign. The figures for the Green Party and Independent candidates also show that the campaign was important for these groups. Just ten per cent of Independent candidates were incumbents (Reidy, 2016).

Party	Timing of Vote Choice		
	Election Day	Campaign Decider	Early Decider
FIANNA FAIL (oldest)	30.00	33.68	36.32
FINE GAEL (oldest)	28.51	31.91	39.57
LABOUR (oldest)	30.14	30.14	39.73
SINN FEIN (older)	20.37	25.00	54.63
THE GREEN PARTY	38.46	30.77	30.77
IND CANDIDATE	33.59	32.03	34.38
AAA-PBP	28.57	33.33	38.10
SOCIAL DEMOCRATS	36.59	48.78	14.63

Pearson chi2(14) = 26.6448 Pr = 0.021

Again we use a logistic regression to consider these effects in more detail and we can see from Table five that in terms of making up your mind in advance, the two parties with a significant impact are Sinn Fein and the Social Democrats. The former because their voters make up their minds in advance of the campaign and the latter because they do so during the campaign. The effect is significant controlling for age and gender. In addition, how well you feel you understand the issues at the election also impacts with those who feel they have a very good understanding more likely to make up their minds earlier. If we also looked at those who changed their mind from 2011 to 2016 we can see that they too were more likely to make up their minds during the campaign.

**Table 5: Logistic Regression – Timing of Vote Choice by Party Vote**

Number of obs = 848  
LR chi2(10) = 35.33  
Prob > chi2 = 0.0001  
Log likelihood = -546.31356

mindmade	Coef.	Std. Err.	P>z
Fine Gael	.1043142	.2030537	0.607
Labour	.0948376	.2848699	0.739
<b>Sinn Fein</b>	<b>.790946</b>	<b>.247817</b>	<b>0.001</b>
Green Party	-.234674	.3385408	0.488
Independent	-.1005861	.2411389	0.677
AAA	.0783021	.477312	0.870
<b>Soc Dems</b>	<b>-1.265441</b>	<b>.4687846</b>	<b>0.007</b>
<b>issues</b>	<b>-.1778446</b>	<b>.0597456</b>	<b>0.003</b>
sex	.146679	.1462471	0.316
age	-.0000273	.0000941	0.771

_cons	-.331925	.3366825	0.324
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Finally, we turn to what was foremost in the minds of voters when they were making their decisions. Giving priority to local issues has long been part of the calculus of voting for Irish voters. The data presented in Table four confirm some of this effect. Although, the first impression is again that a majority of voters made up their mind during the campaign we can see that early deciders were more likely than late deciders to cite local considerations as a primary factor in their decision making and the effect is significant. Hypothesis five is confirmed, campaign deciders are less likely to cite local considerations as the primary factor which shaped their vote choice.

**Table 6: Timing of Vote Choice by National or Local Policy Considerations**

	Timing of Vote Choice	
	Campaign Decider	Early Decider
National Considerations	62.09	37.91
Local Considerations	56.70	43.30
Pearson chi2(1) = 3.9502		
Pr = 0.047		

## Conclusion

The 2016 general election in the Republic of Ireland was an especially volatile one. It delivered a fragmented political landscape which yielded an unstable minority government. In this paper we have reported that large numbers of voters arrived at their final voting choice over the duration of the election campaign. The number of voters making their decision during the election campaign has been increasing over recent elections. It peaked in 2011 but fell just a few points in 2016.



There are a number of points which emerge from the empirical analysis. Voters who make up their mind during the election campaign are more likely to have changed their vote choice from the last election. New or re-emerging centrist parties such as the Social Democrats and the Green Party were big beneficiaries from the campaign period as larger proportions of their voters making up their mind during the campaign. Independent candidates also performed well among campaign deciders.

Anti-establishment sentiment had become deeply embedded in Irish politics before the campaign and a significant proportion of voters who supported anti-establishment parties had arrived at their voting decision long before the campaign was formally initiated. The campaign mattered less for them. The direct implication being that support for anti-establishment parties stems from a deeper change in Irish politics. A larger proportion of campaign deciders were concerned with national issues than was the case among voters who had made their choice before the election.

Overall, the analysis confirms the high levels of volatility and vote changing at the 2016 election. It also speaks to a movement left in Irish politics. Some centrists were persuaded to vote left by the Greens and the Social Democrats during the campaign but those with strong left leanings and expressing anti-establishment feelings had already made their decision to vote for the Anti Austerity Alliance and Sinn Fein before the campaign had begun.

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<sup>1</sup> The unusual design for the INES in 2016 was due to funding limitations.