Chapter Abstracts

Chapter 1. The road to the election – Gary Murphy

This chapter outlines the background to the election. Starting by briefly sketching the history of the Irish party system, it surveys the main developments of the period 2016–20, covering the lifetime of the Fine Gael-led minority government that had a confidence and supply relationship with the second largest party, Fianna Fáil. These four years saw sustained economic growth and social reform, notably the 2018 referendum removing constitutional restrictions on the provision of abortion, but there were persisting problems in the areas of housing and health. Two of the country's three main parties changed leaders during this period. When the government was formed many expected it to last only a matter of months but, despite occasional alarms, its parliamentary support held up until early 2020.

Chapter 2. Election pledge fulfilment under minority government – Rory Costello, Alice Sheridan and Duncan Casey

This chapter explores the pledges made by Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil at the 2016 election, measures how far these were implemented and also aims to explain why some were fulfilled and other were not. Fine Gael did fulfil more pledges, but Fianna Fáil also realised some key commitments, including some not promised by Fine Gael. Overall, the degree of pledge enactment in this minority government was similar to that by parties in a coalition in previous years, but Fine Gael did make a lot of promises which were discarded as it entered government, suggesting they may never have been serious priorities to begin with.

Chapter 3. Too many, too few: candidate selection in 2020 – Theresa Reidy

Often overlooked by the media and voters alike, the candidate selection phase for general elections has immeasurable consequences in that it shapes the decision presented to voters when they receive their ballots and ultimately structures the choices available to Taoisigh when choosing cabinet members. Candidates are chosen at constituency level by political parties in local selection conventions. Local party members have voting rights but party elites determine the criteria for the decisions to be made. The dynamics of this shared decision making process are explored for all the major parties. Geography, gender and political experience feature prominently in the factors that influence decisions made both by party elites and party members.

Chapter 4. Campaign strategies: the inside story of how the election was fought – Pat Leahy

This chapter assesses the approaches of the parties going into the election campaign and as it developed. The parties prepared against a background of general public dissatisfaction and uncertainty. It examines the strategies adopted by both larger and smaller parties. The campaign soon showed Fine Gael doing badly and Sinn Féin, pushing a strong message of 'change', doing unexpectedly well. As the tide seemed to be running against the two major parties, the leaders' debates, with the final one including Sinn Féin as well as Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, saw the latter parties firmly ruling out coalition with Sinn Féin, and Fianna Fáil also ruling out Fine Gael.

Chapter 5. Brexit and the election: the issue that wasn't – Mary C. Murphy

From the moment the result of the UK's Brexit referendum of 23 June 2016 was announced, Brexit became the top item on the Irish government's agenda as there were widespread concerns that a hard Brexit would seriously damage the Irish economy. Ensuring that the terms of Brexit did not threaten the open border with Northern Ireland was also a priority. The chapter explains why Brexit was not a divisive issue within the country, a consequence of Ireland's strongly Euro-positive attitudes. The necessity of ensuring that the country had a stable government to deal with the issue of Brexit was an important factor in determining the timing of the election. The chapter explains how the absence of division on Brexit meant that it did not become a significant election issue.

Chapter 6. Media and the election: social and traditional media narratives in the campaign – Kirsty Park and Jane Suiter
Documenting the coverage of the campaign in traditional and social media, this chapter provides a particular focus on Sinn Féin, which ran a vigorous social media campaign and provided the narrative of 'change' that dominated election messaging. The chapter demonstrates that Fine Gael received a disproportionate share of coverage in the traditional media relative to its vote share, a finding explained by the party's central role in the outgoing government. Sinn Féin was the dominant actor in social media, with the party and its senior politicians generating a much more significant footprint on Twitter and Facebook than its rivals. Electioneering – which includes party politics, election strategy and campaigning – accounted for 51 per cent of all articles in news media, while housing and the pension age were the issues covered most prominently.

Chapter 7. On the campaign trail – Mairéad Farrell, James O'Connor, Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, Roderic O'Gorman, Marie Sherlock and Jennifer Whitmore
Five candidates who contested the general election to Dáil Éireann and one candidate who contested the Seanad Éireann election provide comprehensive accounts of their campaigns in this chapter and convey the reality of campaigning on the ground. They outline how they were initially selected as candidates, their experiences of door to door canvassing, the execution of their social media, postering and profile raising plans, and the issues that voters raised with them. The candidates are drawn from the largest six parties.

Chapter 8. The results analysed: the definitive end of the traditional party system? – Michael Gallagher
For the third election in a row the Irish electorate delivered a result that marked a profound break from anything that had gone before. This chapter analyses vote shifts and seat gains and losses, assesses the performances of the parties, draws inferences from the pattern of vote transfers, and assesses the utility of the betting market as a results predictor. It also analyses the composition of the new Dáil. The continued decline in the combined strength of the two traditionally dominant parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, and the subsequent formation of a coalition government between them, seem to mark not a temporary interruption to but rather the end of the 1932–2008 party system.

Chapter 9. Geographical factors in constituency voting patterns – Adrian Kavanagh, William Durkan and Caoilfhionn D'Arcy

It has long been known that support for parties and for individual candidates tends to be concentrated particularly in certain parts of geographical constituencies, reflecting both socio-demographic patterns and the 'friends and neighbours' effect. This chapter, based on unpublished sub-constituency data, uses an innovative graphical approach to illustrate the variation of support for candidates and parties within constituencies, a pattern that is especially marked within sizeable rural constituencies.

Chapter 10. Voting behaviour: the Sinn Féin election – Kevin Cunningham and Michael Marsh

This chapter relies on evidence from opinion polls before, during and after the campaign to examine the bases of party support, and in particular to explain why Sinn Féin did so well. It shows when support shifted, but also how fragile is party support today. It explores the social bases of support, the role of economic dissatisfaction, the importance of issues such as housing and health, and the extent to which the voters who chose parties of the left in unprecedented numbers had actually moved to the left in their broad outlook. The role of leaders seemed slight, and candidates seem to have been less important than in the past.

Chapter 11. The evolving nature of the Irish policy space – Lisa Keenan and Gail McElroy

This chapter uses the Irish element of the Comparative Candidates Survey (CCS) of Dáil candidates in the 2020 election to explore policy similarities and differences between Irish parties. Using previous CCS data it also looks at how these have changed since the start of this century. The positions of parties, and the differences between them, are fairly stable with Fine Gael consistently the most right wing and Sinn Féin the most left wing. It also looks at how parties view one another: generally as less centrist than each party views itself. Exploring particular economic and social issues, including housing, crime, drugs and taxation, the chapter concludes that agreements are more apparent than disagreements.

**Chapter 12. The Seanad election: voting in unprecedented times –
Claire McGing**
The Seanad election campaign is usually a unique process requiring
candidates to traverse the country, but in 2020 it was disrupted by the
Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. Campaigning moved online and the election
count took place under strict social distancing guidelines and without the
presence of candidates and campaign teams who followed proceedings
online. The chapter provides a detailed overview of the regulations governing
the complex Seanad electoral process and the strategies adopted by parties
and candidates. An evaluation of the election results and the characteristics
of the senators in the 26th Seanad are provided, along with an assessment
of the potential for future Seanad reform which has been the enduring
debate in, and about, Seanad Éireann almost since its inception.

Chapter 13. The slow process of government formation – Eoin O'Malley
In 2016 it had taken a record 70 days after the election before a government
was formed, but in 2020 it took precisely twice as long. This chapter
outlines the drawn-out process by which the eventual three-party coalition
was formed, explaining how other possibilities fell by the wayside. Based
partly on interviews with key actors, it examines the way the Programme for
Government was put together and how the significant intra-party barriers to
agreement were overcome. The allocation of ministries between parties was
agreed amicably but there were difficulties within each party when it came
to the selection of individuals to fill those posts. The government elected,
with a nine-seat majority over all others in the Dáil, seems to have a good
chance of lasting for its full five-year term.

Chapter 14. The election in context – John Coakley
This chapter looks at the election and its aftermath in historical and
comparative perspective. It considers electoral turbulence in general as well
as the decline of the two traditionally dominant parties. It shows how Irish
voters are now relatively volatile in both historical and comparative terms.
The changes that are associated with high levels of electoral volatility have
fragmented the party system in a manner common elsewhere. This makes
government formation potentially less straightforward as coalition is always
necessary. The chapter considers how real these difficulties are, arguing
that these stem more from challenges to political identities than from actual
policy differences.

Appendices – Samuel Johnston