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## Parliamentary volatility in Dáil Éireann – unfreezing the Irish party system?<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The article provides an analysis of the phenomenon of parliamentary volatility during three consecutive terms of Dáil Éireann (2007–2011, 2011–2016 and 2016–2020). The study encompasses all personnel changes in the Irish parliament, including party-switching and replacements resulting from the expiration of mandates before the completion of the parliamentary term. To provide a broader context of the analysis, the article includes an overview of the main features of the Irish party system. The study demonstrates that from the perspective of classical systemic analysis, both types of fluctuations did not lead to significant changes in the party system or disrupt parliamentary arithmetic. More than half of the party-switching cases were a consequence of breaking party discipline. However, such formal provisions were not the primary cause of the second type of fluctuation – the expiration of mandates before the completion of the term.

**Key words:** party-switching, replacement, Ireland, intraparlimentary volatility, Irish party system

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### Introduction

The Irish political system has long been a subject of interest for researchers in political science. According to Freedom House, Ireland is classified as a stable democracy that upholds and protects political rights and civil liberties (Freedom House, 2013, 2017, 2020). In the categories analyzed by the organization to assess the state of democracy, Ireland consistently scores among the highest in recent years. The Democracy Index, which evaluates countries based on five categories including electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties, has placed Ireland in the top 15 countries since 2006 (*Democracy Index*, 2007, 2015, 2020). Consequently, Ireland is regarded as a full democracy. However, according to the Democracy Index, if there are any weaknesses in Irish democracy, they lie in the functioning of government and political participation. Between 2007 and 2020, these indicators received scores ranging from 7.5 to 8.5 on a scale of 1–10, which represents the lowest score among the five categories mentioned.

Ireland is widely recognized as an exemplary functioning democratic system. Extensive research indicates that the essential components of democracy, such as electoral laws, citizen participation in politics, the freedom to exercise parliamentary mandates, and the presence of opposition parties, do not pose a threat to the system's stability (Collins, 2004; Farrell, Suiter, 2021). However, while many analyses have focused on

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election campaigns, general elections, and government formation processes (Barrett, 2016; Field, 2020; Suiter, 2007), relatively little attention has been given to the fate of parliamentary mandates during parliamentary terms. Ireland, if anything, serves as a benchmark for comparison in this regard. This article aims to address this gap in the literature and shed light on this important aspect of Irish politics.

During the parliamentary term, various situations may arise that can potentially undermine two key principles of representative democracy: the principle of representation and the principle of stability in a deputy's ideological affiliation. These situations include instances where a deputy changes their party affiliation or decides to leave their current political party, opting to serve as an independent deputy. Similarly, deputy, who has been elected as an independent candidate may choose to join a political party while performing his or her mandate. There are also cases where a deputy may face disciplinary measures and be expelled from a political party due to a breach of party discipline. Finally, a parliamentary mandate may be terminated, for example, by the resignation or by the death of a deputy. These situations highlight the dynamic nature of parliamentary representation and the potential for shifts in ideological alignment and party affiliations over the parliamentary term.

The aim of this article is to analyze the dynamics and scale of the party-switching phenomenon – understood as any situation in which at the parliamentary level there is a change of party affiliation (a deputy leaves one party and joins another), an independent deputy joins a political party or leaves a political party in order to remain an independent MP and the replacement phenomenon, the expiry of the deputy mandate before the end of the parliamentary term, in three consecutive terms of the lower house of the Irish Parliament – Dáil Éireann: 2007–2011, 2011–2016 and 2016–2020. The case study analysis will be preceded by a presentation of the most important theoretical assumptions of parliamentary volatility that have been developed based on the analysis of countries considered to be consolidated democracies. In order to be able to analyze party-switching and replacement, these phenomenons should be placed in the broader context of the party system structure. For this reason, a necessary overview of the Irish party system at the parliamentary level was made, which is characterized by high party discipline. The analysis is to answer, among others, the question of whether party discipline is an important factor determining the dynamics of parliamentary fluctuations in the form of party-switching and replacement? My ambition is not to analyze the motivation of deputies who decided to switch the party or resigned from their mandate before the end of their term of office. The article is the analysis of the very phenomenon of parliamentary volatility (the term parliamentary fluctuations is used interchangeably), which over the three parliamentary terms may indicate a certain trend of party dynamics and change in the party system at the parliamentary level.

### **Theoretical aspects of party-switching and replacement**

Parliamentary fluctuations have become an increasingly prominent concern among researchers (Dassonneville, Blais, Dejaeghere, 2015; Sevi, Yoshinaka, Blais, 2018). It is important to note, however, that this term generally encompasses a complex phe-

nomenon of electoral volatility. The authors primarily focus on party-switching, which refers to changes in the electoral preferences within individual countries (Dejaeghere, Dassonneville, 2017; Mainwaring, Gervasoni, España-Najera, 2017). While the analysis of electoral behavior in relation to shifts in voter preferences provides a comprehensive understanding of how voters respond to specific actions of deputies regarding their party affiliation during a parliamentary term, less attention has been given to these specific behaviors in the existing literature.

A situation in which at the parliamentary level there is a change of party affiliation (a deputy leaves one party and joins another party), an independent deputy joins a political party or leaves a political party in order to remain an independent deputy is referred to as party-switching. In the event that a parliamentary mandate expires before the end of the term, a vacancy arises in parliament, as a result of which a new deputy is usually sworn in. This process is referred to as replacement (Domagała, 2023). However, it is worth emphasizing that the methodological discussion still requires a way of counting instances of party affiliation changes and addressing the question of whether different events should be assigned different weights based on their impact on the configuration of the political system (Żukiewicz, 2022, p. 145).

Both party-switching and replacement are types of fluctuations in the performance of a deputy's mandate. In this paper, I therefore assume that parliamentary fluctuation is any reconstruction of the composition or structure of the party, formed originally as a result of parliamentary elections in the parliament, resulting either from a change in the party affiliation of a deputy (party-switching), or from the expiration and replacement of the mandate of a deputy (replacement). It should be emphasized that both phenomena generating the aforementioned fluctuations – party-switching and replacement – affect the dynamics of the party system at the parliamentary level, and in extreme cases may also lead to structural changes in the entire political system. However, the above-mentioned actions lead to a violation of the principle of representativeness and distortion of the will of citizens expressed in the act of voting.

In the discussion on parliamentary fluctuations, I adopt a neoinstitutional approach, which points to the individual character of the actions of a parliamentary deputy influencing the stability of a larger structure (parliamentary group). The application of the neoinstitutional approach stems from the primacy of institutions and institutional and legal solutions in relation to the analysis of individual behaviors of deputies (Domagała, 2023). By subjecting the activities of parliamentary groups and parliamentarians to analysis, their activity is within a selected time frame, usually within specified parliamentary terms, and takes place within a broader, institutionalized structure. Institutional solutions regarding the functioning of parliamentary bodies (including parliamentary parties) are not insignificant for the coherence of parliamentary groups and the discipline prevailing within them (Heller, Mershon, 2009a; Laver, Shepsle, 1996; Klein, 2016).

The study of parliamentary fluctuations – changes in party affiliations and terminations of mandates – was possible through the analysis of stenographic reports from parliamentary sessions of three terms of Dáil Éireann, Teachtaí Dála (TDs) listings available on the Dáil website, and analysis of selected newspaper articles. This allowed for the reconstruction of the original personal composition at the beginning of each term, fol-

lowed by tracking the dynamics of individual changes. To discuss selected elements of the Irish party system and the impact of parliamentary fluctuations on the parliamentary party system, I relied on databases prepared and provided by Michael Gallagher (2023) and Fernando Casal Bertoa (2023).

### **Non-standard trajectory of exercising a parliamentary mandate**

As a result of the elections held, a deputy is entrusted with the performance of a parliamentary mandate. The standard trajectory means that the mandate is held by a parliamentarian without changing party affiliation and throughout the parliamentary term. This time is provided for in relevant legal acts, usually in constitutions. Sometimes, however, there is a situation that we can consider non-standard – a parliamentary mandate, for various reasons, is terminated before the end of the term. A deputy may lose his or her seat as a result of personal decision or for objective reasons, such as illness or death, or during the parliamentary term, a deputy changes party affiliation.

Even though party-switching and replacement are individualized, the party-switching process will not be completed unless the new party agrees to accept a new member (this does not apply if the deputy decides to remain independent). Thus, while the beginning of the process is often conditioned by the politician's individual ambitions, its finalization and effectiveness ultimately depend on the party leader or selected party members if such decisions are made collectively.

William Heller and Carol Mershon see the act of changing party affiliation as part of a four-stage process (see Table 1) (Heller, Mershon, 2005, p. 38–46). In the first stage, the key elements for this process are defined. These are: the party system and the distribution of seats. During the second stage, party leaders take action to establish party discipline and maximize the chances of members of the parliamentary group adhering to it. The crucial stage is the third one, in which the researchers focus on the behavior of deputies and indicate that this is a key phase for the analysis of changes in party affiliations. At this stage, deputies make a possible decision to leave a parliamentary group and join another group, or to remain independents.

The decision of whether to adhere to party discipline and respect the coherence of the parliamentary group or to switch party affiliations for potential benefits rests with the deputy, except in cases where deputies have been excluded from their parties. However, this decision-making process is not solely based on the politician's individual choice; it also depends on the response of the leader of the political party they wish to join, unless they intend to remain independent. In multi-party systems, party leaders are primarily motivated to attract new members, aiming to secure more votes during elections and thereby enhancing their bargaining power in negotiations. This phenomenon is also relevant in two-party systems, where the absence of clear party dominance underscores the significance of party-switching. Such shifts can potentially alter the power distribution within the parliament. While research indicates that party-switching is more prevalent in countries with a less institutionalized party system (Kreuzer, Pettai, 2009), it is crucial to include consolidated democracies with a mature political culture and a stable party system in the analysis.

Table 1

**Four-stage party-switching model**

<p>1. Recognition of the post-election configuration:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• specified number of parties</li> <li>• allocation of seats defined party ideologies</li> </ul>	<p>2. Leaders establish party discipline to maximize:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• party unity and cohesion</li> <li>• influence on coalition negotiations impact on policy-making</li> </ul>
<p>3. Deputies decide on changing party affiliation in order to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• increasing the likelihood of re-election</li> <li>• implementation of political goals</li> </ul>	<p>4. Voters vote to minimize the difference between a voter's ideal point and the political plans implemented.</p>

Source: Heller, Mershon, 2009, p. 39.

**Irish party system – an overview**

Ireland’s party system can be characterized as a multi-party system with a rich tradition, pragmatism, a voting formula based on single transferable votes, the dominance of one of the two main political parties and moderate competitiveness. For many years leading up to 2011, this system appeared to be frozen. Irrespective of the country’s economic situation and its bilateral and multilateral relations, the conservative and republican party, Fianna Fáil, consistently emerged victorious in elections, remaining the prominent political force. The party’s influence seemed to have reached a stable point on the Irish political landscape. From the early 1930s until 2011, Fianna Fáil’s electoral support fluctuated between 40% and 50% of the votes cast (Bisztyga, 2007). Despite its notable success, Fianna Fáil only managed to secure over 50% of the vote in a general election on two occasions (McGraw, 2017). Therefore, these victories did not always result in the formation of a majority government. Due to societal reluctance towards forming political alliances, governments led by the winning party until the late 1980s were often minority governments. Fianna Fáil first joined a coalition alliance in 1989 (Murphy, 2016b). One of the factors contributing to the long-standing dominance of this party within the Irish party system was its utilization of a party catch-all strategy while maintaining its conservative “party brand” (McElroy, 2017). It is worth noting that despite the frequent occurrence of minority governments, Fianna Fáil has maintained the most governance experience, solidifying its position as the dominant party.

The rivalry between Fianna Fáil and the Christian-democratic Fine Gael has been determining a debate in the Irish political system for many years. However, coalition behavior patterns did not reflect the program affiliation of the two most relevant parties.

Fianna Fáil is considered a conservative party and Fine Gael belongs to the family of Christian Democratic parties. One might assume that they are natural coalition partners. It turns out, however, that both parties built their own coalition base and from the early 1990s the Green Party was the main partner for Fianna Fáil, and the Labour Party for Fine Gael (Murphy, 2016a).

Table 2

**Irish Parliamentary Elections Results (2007, 2011, 2016)**

Political Party	2007 elections Seats	2011 elections Seats	2016 elections Seats
Fianna Fáil	78	20	44
Fine Gael	51	76	50
Labour	20	37	7
Green	6	0	2
Sinn Féin	4	14	23
Progressive Democrats	2	–	–
Socialist Party	–	2	0
WUA	–	1	0
AAA-PBP	–	4	6
Social Democrats	–	–	3
Independent	5	15	19
Independents 4 Change	–	–	4

WUA – Workers and Unemployed Actions.

AAA-PBP – Anti-Austerity Alliance – People Before Profit Alliance.

**Source:** Elections, House of Oireachtas, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/elections/>

The 2011 general election resulted in a reseal of the two main parties. The ruling Fianna Fáil has given way to Fine Gael. From the point of view of classical systemic analysis, such a change does not cause significant changes to the party system. In the case of Ireland, however, this was a significant change. The loss of the Fianna Fáil was a consequence of the global economic crisis in 2008. Ireland, considered the “Celtic Tiger,” had to face the consequences of the economic collapse – unemployment, insolvency of the banking system. Nevertheless, the 2011 general election marked a significant change in the ruling party, demonstrating the strong institutionalization of Ireland’s two largest political parties, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. Both parties managed to sustain consistent support levels, primarily due to the transformation of their program profiles, aligning closely with the ideology of modern conservatism or “enlightened” conservatism. Notably, politicians from Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have unequivocally supported constitutional amendments allowing same-sex marriages. Additionally, the majority of leaders from these Christian-conservative parties favor the removal of Article Eight, Point Four from the Irish Constitution, which would signify the liberalization of anti-abortion laws (Żukiewicz, Domagała, 2018, p. 103). A noteworthy success was achieved by the Labour Party, which received more votes than Fianna Fáil. The Labour Party once again became a coalition partner, this time with the winning Fine Gael, forming a majority government together.

Tabel 3

**Electoral party dominance 2007–2020**

Political Party	2007	2011	2016
Fianna Fáil	216,32	94,5	137,295
Fine Gael	122,85	169,67	126,225
Labour	52,52	105,3	37,29
Sinn Féin	15,525	24,255	37,26
Green Party	10,575	4,41	7,29

Source: Casal Bértoa F. (2023), *Database on WHO GOVERNS in Europe and beyond*, PSGo, whogoverns.eu.

Taking into account the electoral party dominance indicator, one cannot ignore the growing power of the left-wing nationalist and eurosceptical Sinn Féin. It is the only party listed in the table to steadily increase its electoral support and build its position in the parliamentary arena. The advantage of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil over the other parties at the parliamentary level is not as strong as in the 20th century. Ultimately, in the 2011 elections, the two main parties together achieved more than 50% support, which may indicate a further freeze in the Irish party system, which remains non-polar. The lack of polarization is evidenced by the ideologically unobvious coalition between the Christian democrats and conservatives as well as the left-wing parties – for example between Fine Gael and the Labour Party or Fianna Fáil and the Green Party (Żukiewicz, Domagała, 2018, p. 103). The ideological distance between the two main parties is also not characterized by fierce competition. The political struggle is largely based on clearly defined economic slogans. Similarly in the case of the Labour Party, which eschews radical accents in its political programme.

**Party discipline and party-switching**

Party leaders largely decide on the strategy of parliamentary groups. One of the very important instruments that allow leaders to influence the behavior of deputies affiliated with a given parliamentary group (in such a way that their activity is in line with the assumptions of the party strategy) is party discipline (Hagemann, 2007; Heller, Mershon, 2005; 2009).

According to Kenneth A. Shepsle, in parliamentary parties that care not only about maintaining the current number of members, but also about attracting independent deputies or those leaving from other parliamentary groups, and which at the same time would like to maintain a high level of cohesion, the decision to establish discipline is partly conditioned by the possibility of achieving this goal (Shepsle, 1972, p. 559). Excessively restrictive party discipline may discourage deputies from joining a particular parliamentary group. K. A. Shepsle gives an example of extremist parties whose leaders can freely discipline other members. There are two consequences of this: firstly, it is unlikely that deputy of an extremist party will change his affiliation from far-right to centrist – so leaders are not afraid of frequent changes within the group; secondly, the lack of rivals with similar ideological convictions does not lead to the dispersion of the electorate

(Shepsle, 1972, p. 559; Heller, Mershon, 2009a, p. 45). As Maurice Duverger stated: “Before a deputy is elected by his voters, he is elected by the party [...] the party mandate seems to be more important than the electoral mandate” (Duverger, 1954, p. 353). A politician who runs for another term of office is to a greater or lesser extent (depending on the adopted electoral system) dependent on party leaders who co-decide, among other things, on the placement of candidates on electoral lists.

A deputy who is considering a change of party affiliation may be guided by criteria relating to party cohesion, not limited to the discipline often required during voting. Although the decision to change party affiliation is by definition an individual decision, it affects a wider group of parliamentarians – hence the MP planning a change will probably pay attention to the level of cohesion in the parent party and the target party. As indicated by W. Heller and C. Mershon, parties with a high level of cohesion are more valued by parliamentarians (Heller, Mershon, 2009a, p. 41). The authors also emphasize that deputies who are likely to change affiliation will mostly seek membership in a selected parliamentary group. Thus, they will give up the possibility of remaining independent parliamentarians. Membership in a parliamentary group (especially when moving from a smaller parliamentary group to a larger one) maximizes the chance for an MP to realize his or her political ambitions (Heller, Mershon, 2009a, p. 42).

Party discipline in Ireland traces its origins back to the country’s independence in the 1920s. It is enforced through strict measures, imposing significant penalties on those who deviate from the party’s official stance, with expulsion from the parliamentary party being the most severe consequence. Researchers highlight that the rule in Ireland is quite clear-cut: typically, rebellion results in the removal of the party whip. Instances where a TD (Teachta Dála) is permitted to retain the party whip despite voting against the party are exceedingly rare.

David M. Farrell, Peter Mair, Séin Ó Muineacháin and Matthew Wall (2015) analyzed parliamentary cohesion in Ireland from the 1980s to the 2020s. The researchers showed that there were 54 TDs who lost the whip or resigned it voluntarily (which is also common practice in such cases) due to breaking with the party line in the entire period studied. They represented only 3.3% of the total number of TDs elected in that period. This proves that Irish deputies are loyal to their parties and that voting cohesion seems to be very high. Relatively often, those who lost party whip and are expelled or resign from their parliamentary party as a result, are not readmitted to their original party. Such a TD may join another party, remain independent, or decide to found a new party which, thanks to his or her presence in parliament, may immediately have representation in Dail.

Party leaders have a huge impact on the further career of TDs of their parties. One could say that they control the path of their political careers. In addition to the leaders, TDs are also responsible for their political activity to voters who hold them accountable for their parliamentary activities during the elections. D. M. Farrell, P. Mair, S. Ó Muineacháin and M. Wall (2012, p. 6) argue that, overall, the electoral consequences of losing a party whip appear to be minimal. Although the electoral consequences for parliamentary fluctuations such as party-switching are not the subject of this analysis, it should be noted that this is a field of study that would require extended research in a broader social context. Especially as traditionally electoral politics in Ireland has been viewed as a candidate-focused “politics without social bases” (Whyte, 1974).

### Parliamentary fluctuation in Dáil Éireann 2007–2020

The issue related to the extent to which a deputy represents the interests of their constituents and how much they care about the interests of the entire society remains a topic of discussion in the literature (Van der Hulst, 2000). In Ireland, however, like in many other democratic countries, deputies are provided with a free mandate, which also serves as a guarantee of parliamentary democracy (Šturanović, 2018; Van der Hulst, 2000; Kędzia, Hauser, 2007). The free parliamentary mandate, as opposed to the imperative mandate<sup>2</sup>, is characterized by the independence of the deputy from the voters. Orders and instructions from the voters are not allowed. The deputy is politically bound to the voters, and this bond does not have a legal character. This means that it is up to the politician to decide whether to maintain contact with his or her voters and fulfill electoral promises. The deputy should carry out their function in accordance with their own moral values and ethical convictions. However, most importantly, the deputy holds an irrevocable mandate. This means that the only formal instrument in the hands of the electorate through which they can hold the deputy accountable for their work is through subsequent parliamentary elections (Domagała, 2023; Kędzia, Hausner, 2007, p. 5).

A similar relationship applies to the parliamentary mandate and Irish institutional and legal solutions. According to Irish law, TDs have the freedom to change party affiliation while carrying out their mandate, and this activity is not restricted by any orders or prohibitions from the Irish legislature. These findings are confirmed by the research of Kenneth Janda, Gabriella Montinola, and Csaba Nikolenyi, which indicates that formal legal solutions that permanently restrict or prohibit party-switching are more often adopted by parliaments of countries where democracy is not consolidated and the party system is weakly institutionalized, as opposed to parliaments of countries that can be described as consolidated democracies (Nikolenyi, 2016; Janda, 2009; Montinola, 1999).

Although the parliamentary mandate is not revocable, any Irish deputy can voluntarily resign from membership in the Dáil. In such a situation, written notice must be given to the Ceann Comhairle. The resignation takes effect upon receipt of the notice by the Ceann Comhairle, who immediately informs the Dáil about it. At the request of the Ceann Comhairle, the resulting vacancy may be filled. Under the Electoral (Amendment) Act 2011, the writ for the by-election must be issued within six months of the vacancy.

During the analyzed period of 2007–2020, the mandate of 20 deputies expired before the end of their term. The most common reason for resignation was election to the European Parliament – seven cases, and appointment to the European Commission – two cases. This is governed by the *incompatibilitas* principle. Deputies resign from their parliamentary mandates in situations where there is a prohibition on combining a parliamentary mandate with holding certain positions in the state apparatus or various public functions. The justification for its introduction was to ensure the proper independence of deputies in the exercise of their mandate, including the elimination of the possibility of

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<sup>2</sup> The imperative mandate is characterized by a high degree of dependency of the deputy on the voter and a stronger sense of responsibility of the deputy towards the electorate. In this case, the deputy represents only those voters who have cast their votes for them. Such a politician may receive instructions and guidelines from their voters and may also be recalled by the voters before the end of the term (Grajewski, 2006, p. 15).

conflicts of interest and corrupt practices. There is a risk that such conflicts would negatively affect the efficiency and impartiality of the tasks performed by the parliamentarian (Urbaniak, 2016).

In five cases, the reason for the expiration of the mandate was the death of the politician. The remaining cases were related to other reasons. These could be health concerns, such as in the case of Brian Walsh from Fine Gael (McConnel, 2016), or more controversial issues, as in the case of Patrick Nulty's resignation. P. Nulty resigned as a TD with immediate effect in 2014. According to Nulty's statement, he had sent "inappropriate messages via Facebook," including "inadvertently sending one to a 17-year-old woman." Taking responsibility for his actions, P. Nulty decided to resign his seat in the Dáil (Nulty..., 2014).

Table 4

## Replacement in Dáil Éireann 2007–2020

Dáil Éireann	Outgoing TD	Political Party	Cause	Date of by-election	New TD	Political Party
30th Dáil	Séamus Brennan	FF	Death	5.06.2009	George Lee	FG
30th Dáil	Tony Gregory	Ind	Death	5.06.2009	Maureen O'Sullivan	Ind
30th Dáil	Pat „the Cope” Gallagher	FF	Elected to the European Parliament	25.11.2010	Pearse Doherty	SF
30th Dáil	George Lee	FG	Resignation	–	–	–
30th Dáil	Martin Cullen	FF	Resignation	–	–	–
30th Dáil	Jim McDaid	Ind	Resignation	–	–	–
30th Dáil	Seán Ardagh	FF	Resignation	–	–	–
31st Dáil	Brian Lenihan Jnr	FF	Death	27.11.2011	Patrick Nulty	Lab
31st Dáil	Shane McEntee	FG	Death	27.03.2013	Helen McEntee	FG
31st Dáil	Patrick Nulty	Ind	Resignation	23.05.2014	Ruth Coppinger	AAA-PBP
31st Dáil	Nicky McFadden	FG	Death	23.05.2014	Gabrielle McFadden	FG
31st Dáil	Brian Hayes	FG	Elected to the European Parliament	10.10.2014	Paul Murphy	AAA-PBP
31st Dáil	Luke „Ming” Flanagan	Ind	Elected to the European Parliament	10.10.2014	Michael Fitzmaurice	Ind
31st Dáil	Phil Hogan	FG	Appointed to the European Commission	22.05.2015	Bobby Aylward	FF
31st Dáil	Brian Walsh	FG	Resignation	–	–	–
32nd Dáil	Billy Kelleher	FF	Elected to the European Parliament	29.11.2019	Pádraig O'Sullivan	FF
32nd Dáil	Clare Daly	I4C	Elected to the European Parliament	29.11.2019	Joe O'Brien	GP
32nd Dáil	Frances Fitzgerald	FG	Elected to the European Parliament	29.11.2019	Mark Ward	SF
32nd Dáil	Mick Wallace	I4C	Elected to the European Parliament	29.11.2019	Malcolm Byrne	FF
32nd Dáil	Dara Murphy	FG	Appointed to the European Commission	–	–	–

**Source:** Own elaboration based on Dáil Éireann debates for all sittings, [https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/find/?debateType=dail](https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/find/?debateType=dail;); *Dáil Éireann elections results*, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/publications/?author=dail-eireann&topic%5B0%5D=election-results&topic%5B1%5D=elections>.

Only in five cases of the replacement phenomenon the new deputy who received a mandate as a result of conducted by-elections had the same party affiliation as the deputy whose mandate expired or was an independent TD. The low number of expiry of mandates, with as many as five resulting from deaths, testifies to the stability of the mandate exercised by Irish TDs. What is more, the personnel changes that took place as a result of replacement in none of the three parliamentary terms did not clearly shake the parliamentary arithmetic. In total, the 30th Dáil's term ended with four vacant seats, the 31st Dáil with one vacant seats, the same as the 32nd Dáil. These six vacant seats were the result of the resignation of TDs a maximum of one year before the end of the term. In this situation, there is no obligation to organize by-election.

During the years 2007–2020, in Dáil Éireann, there were 55 cases of party-switching, for which 48 TDs were responsible, accounting for 9.8% of all deputies across the three terms (taking into account the number of TDs at the beginning of each term). The term party-switching encompasses all changes in party affiliation. According to the previously proposed definition, situations were recorded in which a TD left a party or was expelled and joined another existing party in the parliament, remained an independent deputy, or formed a new political party. If a TD left a party and remained independent for some time but later decided to rejoin the party or join another party, different from their original one, two instances of party-switching were recorded. This means that every personnel change in the personel composition was noted. As an example, in November 2007, Ned O'Keeffe resigned from the Fianna Fáil parliamentary party. After three months as an independent TD, he decided to rejoin Fianna Fáil in February 2008.

In Irish parliamentary system, similar to many others, the role of the Chairman of the parliament (Ceann Comhairle) exists. They are elected from the members of the Dáil in the first session after the elections. Any TD who assumes the role of Ceann Comhairle loses their party affiliation at the parliamentary level, in accordance with the requirement of impartiality. The Constitution of Ireland stipulates that the Ceann Comhairle, in order to avoid pressures from other TDs and other political actors, does not have to contest elections and thereby automatically extends their mandate for the next term (Art. 17, Constitution of Ireland, 1937). In the 2007–2011 term, John O'Donoghue from Fianna Fáil was elected as Ceann Comhairle. On October 13, 2009, he resigned, and on the same day, Séamus Kirk, also from Fianna Fáil, was elected to the position. Throughout the subsequent 2011–2016 term, Seán Barrett from Fine Gael served as Ceann Comhairle. His successor in the last analyzed term of 2016–2020 was Seán Ó Feargháil from Fianna Fáil. This issue remains subject to debate – to what extent the impartiality resulting from holding the position of Ceann Comhairle can be considered as an argument for party-switching. In this article, the impartiality and thereby resignation from party affiliation at the parliamentary level resulting from the election of a deputy as Ceann Comhairle is treated as a form of party-switching. Ultimately, the decision to assume this position lies with the deputy who has been indicated through voting by other members of the Dáil. The changes have been reflected in the table below.

The 31st Dáil's term was the most restless in terms of the dynamics of party affiliation changes, with 31 such cases recorded. In the 2007–2011 term, party-switching took

Tabel 5

## Number of TDs of parliamentary parties at the beginning and end of the Dáil Éireann terms 2007–2020

Political Party	30th Dáil 2007 – number of seats held by the party	30th Dáil 2011 – number of seats held by the party	31st Dáil 2011 – number of seats held by the party	31st Dáil 2016 – number of seats held by the party	32nd Dáil 2016 – number of seats held by the party	32nd Dáil 2020 – number of seats held by the party
Fianna Fáil	78 (G)	71	20	21	44 (C&S)	45
Fine Gael	51	51	76 (G)	66	50 (G)	47
Labour Party	20	20	37 (G)	33	7	7
Green Party	6 (G)	6	–	–	2	3
Sinn Féin	4	5	14	14	23	22
Progressive Democrats	2 (G)	0	–	–	–	–
Independent	5	8	14	19	19	22
Workers and Unemployed Action	–	–	1	1	–	–
Anti-Austerity Alliance – People Before Profit	–	–	4	6	–	–
Renua	–	–	–	3	–	–
Social Democrats	–	–	–	3	3	2
People Before Profit – Solidarity*	–	–	–	–	6	6
Independents 4 Change	–	–	–	–	4	1
Aontú	–	–	–	–	–	1
Ceann Comhairle	–	1	–	1	–	1
Seats together	166	162	166	165	158	157

\* Until march 2017 People Before Profit – Solidarity was known as Anti-Austerity Alliance – People Before Profit.

(G) means government coalition parties; (C) means that political party gives confidence and supply to the winning party, which formed minority government.

**Source:** Own elaboration based on Dáil Éireann debates for all sittings, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/find/?debateType=dail>, Dáil Éireann TD, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/members/tds/>; Elections Ireland, <https://electionsireland.org/>.

place 16 times, while in the last analyzed term (2016–2020) only eight such cases were recorded. In as many as 19 cases, the change of party affiliation was a consequence of losing or resigning from the party whip. As a result of the loss of the party whip, three new political parties were created – one founded by three TDs, the other founded by one TD, the third one joined by one TD on its foundation (described in more detail in the following paragraphs). Seven TDs remained independent until the end of the term. The 31st Dail was the most turbulent in this regard. Fine Gael Taoiseach Enda Kenny lost five TDs over the abortion bill (three of these TDs subsequently formed their own party). Although the abortion bill comfortably passed its first stage in the Dáil, it ultimately turned out to be the biggest parliamentary rebellion in two decades (Kelly, Telford, 2013). Similarly, the Labour Party lost five TDs who opposed the party line on budget and fiscal policy votes. The 30th Dail seems to be much calmer in this regard. There have been four reported party whip losses, three of which involved abstaining or voting against the party line on a health issue.

In all three parliamentary terms, only in two cases, during the 2011–2016 term, did two TDs change their party affiliation within the before existing in the parliament parties (excluding new parties such as Renua, Social Democrats, or Aontú). One transfer belonged to former Labour Party TD Colm Keaveney, who, after a year as an independent deputy, joined Fianna Fáil in December 2013 (*Former...*, 2013). The second case involved Stephen Donnelly, an Independent TD for almost six months and founder of the Social Democrats, who decided to join Fianna Fáil in February 2017 (Leahy, 2017).

During the analyzed parliamentary terms, three parties were dissolved or lost their representation at the parliamentary level. In November 2009, the Progressive Democrats<sup>3</sup> ceased their activities. They were coalition partners with the Green Party in the government led by the victorious Fianna Fáil. During the 30th Dáil the remaining parties survived until the end of the term. Another notable party was the People Before Profit Alliance, formed in 2005, with the Socialist Workers Party as a core element, but also including a variety of independent socialists and trade union activists (Coakley, 2010, p. 535). In April 2013, Jean Collins left the party, which had two TDs in the parliament. Together with former Socialist Party TD Clare Daly, they decided to form a new party called United Left<sup>4</sup> (*Two...*, 2013). However, both TDs remained independent in the parliament until the end of the term. Although People Before Profit, similar to the Socialist Party (which became part of the new Anti-Austerity Alliance), lost its parliamentary representation to some extent, the party itself did not cease to exist. In 2015, People Before Profit decided to join forces with the left-wing Anti-Austerity Alliance (Bardon, 2015), and they together contested the subsequent general election. In 2017, the Anti-Austerity

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<sup>3</sup> Political party founded in 1985 by Desmond O'Malley, a former Fianna Fáil minister expelled from the party for unspecified „conduct unbecoming” a member of the party. It won the greatest number of votes ever for a minor party in the 1987 general election (Lyne, 1987; Collins, 2004). Almost half of its support initially came from former Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil voters. The party has neo-conservative ideological position, emphasising the need for cuts in taxation and public expenditure (Coakley, 2010, p. 535).

<sup>4</sup> Formed in 2013 the United Left ran in the 2014 local elections, with one successful candidate. The party was removed from the register of parties at the end of 2015.

Alliance transformed into Solidarity, and in the following 32nd Dáil, the party operated under the name People Before Profit-Solidarity (*Anti-Austerity...*, 2017).

The 31st Dáil, in comparison to the other two terms, witnessed the emergence of several new political parties. In addition to the merger of the Anti-Austerity Alliance and People Before Profit (eventually operating under the name People Before Profit-Solidarity), two new parties were formed in 2015: Renua and the Social Democrats. It is worth noting that neither of these parties participated in the 2011 elections. Their representation in the Dáil was a result of the formation of new groups during the parliamentary term, rather than as a consequence of by-elections.

The founders of Renua, TDs Lucinda Creighton, Terence Flanagan, and Billy Timmins, departed from Fine Gael amidst disagreements over the discussion on the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Bill 2013. Prior to the establishment of Renua, they had served as independent deputies for nearly two years. Renua positions itself as a Christian-democratic, conservative party that opposes pro-abortion policies. However, in the 2016 general election, none of the party's candidates secured a seat, resulting in Renua losing its parliamentary representation (*General...*, 2016).

The aforementioned Social Democrats party was also formed in 2015, with a co-leadership arrangement among its three founding members. These included Róisín Shortall, a former Labour Party TD and former Minister of State at the Department of Health, Catherine Murphy, and Stephen Donnelly, both of whom had been independent since the commencement of the 31st Dáil's, although C. Murphy was associated with the Labour Party from 1993 to 2003. The party had a somewhat unconventional structure, with all three founders sharing leadership responsibilities until the subsequent general election. Similar to Renua, the Social Democrats attracted a range of local politicians and senators. Its policy platform leaned towards the left of center (Barrett, 2016, p. 423).

In January 2019, approximately one year before the election, Peadar Toibín, former Sinn Féin TD formed Aontú. The new party was to become an anti-choice alternative to Sinn Féin – highly disciplined party, with its members rarely out of step with what the leadership commands (Field, 2020). P. Toibín resigned from Sinn Féin on 15 November 2018 due to his anti-abortion views after opposing the party whip on the Health Act (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) 2018 (*Peadar...*, 2018). He remained an independent TD for almost three months. Founder of Aontú was re-elected for another term under the affiliation of the new party, becoming its only representative in the 32nd Dial (Field, 2020).

Tabel 6

#### Selected indicators of the Irish party system

	Least squares index	Effective number of parties at the electoral level	Effective number of parties at the parliamentary level	Party institutionalization
2007	5.85	3.77	3.03	0.405
2011	8.69	4.77	3.52	0.3448
2016	5.62	6.57	4.93	-0.2163
2020	2.22	6.16	5.98	-0.1334

**Source:** Michael Gallagher, *Election Indices*, Database Department of Political Science Trinity College Dublin 2018, [https://www.tcd.ie/Political\\_Science/about/people/michael\\_gallagher/EISystems/Docts/ElectionIndices.pdf](https://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/about/people/michael_gallagher/EISystems/Docts/ElectionIndices.pdf); F. Casal Bértoa (2023), *Database on WHO GOVERNS in Europe and beyond*, PSGo, whogoverns.eu.

Parliamentary fluctuations did not significantly disrupt the Irish party system at the parliamentary level. The position of the two main parties remained unshaken in the longer perspective. Although Fianna Fáil lost its stable position in 2011 to Fine Gael and the temporary strengthening of the Labour Party, subsequent general elections showed that Fianna Fáil's decline was actually a “crump” that the party managed to recover from. Nearly half of the party-switching cases resulted from the violation of party discipline. They involved votes contrary to the party line on key ideological issues such as abortion, public policies, and fiscal policy. These are just selected issues that form the basis of inter-party competition and a few internal factional divisions within parliamentary parties. The more recent development of the Irish party system is thus fundamentally shaped by the historical structure of Irish party competition, especially the very weak left-right structure (Pedersen, Little, 2023).

The value of the effective number of parties at the parliamentary level – especially at the end of the analyzed period – confirms the multiparty nature of the Irish party system. It was characterized by a slightly increased fragmentation, particularly evident in the case of the 31st Dáil, as well as a decline in the institutionalization of political parties. This can be attributed to the emergence of new minor parties on the political stage. As new parties with a small number of members (as well as deputies) and first-time parliamentary experience, they cannot be considered institutionalized. While Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, remained strongly institutionalized and electorally stable, these parties created space for the emergence of new groupings. The sphere of political rivalry was used by the left-nationalist Sinn Féin, which position strengthened significantly. Similarly, independent TDs, whose number of seats increased in subsequent general election. The 30th Dáil began with five independent TDs, but by the end of the 32nd Dáil, they had reached 22 seats. However, it is worth noting that not every independent TD remained unaffiliated. In the 2016 general election, a new political party, left-wing Independents 4 Change, successfully entered the Dáil, bringing in four TDs. Nonetheless, this party did not seem to exhibit much evidence of a formalized structure (Barrett, 2016, p. 422).

## Conclusion

The aim of the article was to analyze the dynamics of parliamentary volatility in three terms of Dáil Éireann (2007–2011, 2011–2016, 2016–2020). In the analyzed period, there were 55 cases of party-switching and 20 cases in which the mandate of the TD expired before the end of the parliamentary term. Three new political parties were formed (not counting the new parties that appeared in Dáil as a result of the general elections, such as Independents 4 Change).

Among the reasons for changes in party affiliation, opposition to the party line in votes stands out. Party discipline in Ireland undoubtedly influenced the dynamics of parliamentary fluctuations. On one hand, the strict rules regarding voting according to the party line fostered loyalty among the deputies. On the other hand, breaking away and opposing party discipline typically resulted in expulsion from the parliamentary party or the resignation of TDs, as evidenced by the conducted analysis. As a result of non-compliance with party discipline, 19 TDs were either expelled from their parties or resigned

from parliamentary party affiliation. The violation of discipline usually stemmed from programmatic disagreements that emerged between the party majority or party leader and specific deputies, and became apparent during parliamentary votes. However, it is worth noting that this accounted for nearly 53% of all party-switching cases (considering only leaving a particular party, excluding joining another group). Although the violation of party discipline cannot be unequivocally attributed as the sole cause of parliamentary fluctuations in Ireland. The expiration of deputies' mandates before the end of their terms was largely dictated by formal considerations (elections to a positions in the EU structures) or natural causes such as death or health issues. No situations were recorded in which a TD resigned from further serving their mandate due to a breach of party discipline.

Parliamentary fluctuations in Ireland did not bring about revolutionary changes in the party system. Rather, it should be pointed out to changes of an evolutionary nature. Although the analyzed period, particularly the years 2008–2016, is considered by many researchers as a time of reformulation of the Irish party system. Carefully, one can venture to say that the Irish party system began to thaw. However, these changes rather do not stem from the phenomena of party-switching and replacement that have been discussed. The party system became somewhat more fragmented, but the responsibility for this fragmentation generally lies with relatively small parties that entered the Dáil through elections or emerged during the existing terms. The strong position of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael within the entire party system remained unshaken. However, it should be noted that after the switch in governing power in 2011, there was a subsequent reversal in 2016, which restored Fianna Fáil to a dominant position. Specifically, during Fine Gael's term in office.

This paper has raised more questions than it has even attempted to answer. A more in-depth analysis of the changes that have taken place on the political scene in Ireland in recent years would require expanding the analysis to include the ongoing parliamentary term at the time of writing this article, as well as focusing on programmatic issues that are a significant determinant of the dynamics of changes in the relationships between political parties in Ireland (Pedersen, Little, 2023). This article serves as a starting point for further considerations, including research on the motivations of TDs who decide to change party affiliation or resign from further exercising their mandate.

### **Author Contributions**

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## Niestabilność parlamentarna w Dáil Éireann – odmrożenie irlandzkiego systemu partyjnego?

### Streszczenie

Artykuł zawiera analizę zjawiska chwiejności wewnątrzparlamentarnej w trakcie trzech kolejnych kadencji Dáil Éireann (2007–2011, 2011–2016 i 2016–2020). Badanie obejmuje wszystkie zmiany personalne w irlandzkim parlamencie, w tym zmianę afiliacji partyjnej oraz zastępstwa wynikające z wygaśnięcia mandatów przed zakończeniem kadencji parlamentarnej. Aby dostarczyć szerszego

kontekstu analizy, artykuł zawiera przegląd głównych cech irlandzkiego systemu partyjnego. Badanie pokazuje, że z perspektywy klasycznej analizy systemowej oba rodzaje fluktuacji nie doprowadziły do istotnych zmian w systemie partyjnym ani nie zakłóciły arytmetyki parlamentarnej. Ponad połowa przypadków zmiany partii była konsekwencją złamania dyscypliny partyjnej. Formalne przepisy regulujące pracę parlamentarzystów nie były główną przyczyną drugiego rodzaju fluktuacji – wygaśnięcia mandatów przed zakończeniem kadencji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** zmiany afiliacji partyjnych, wygaśnięcia mandatów, chwiejność wewnątrzparlamentarna, system partyjny Irlandii