

Irish ruling party 'set for defeat'

Opposition Fine Gael likely to lead next government as unpopular financial bailout takes its political toll.

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Desire to punish the ruling Fianna Fail for their economic policies was foremost on the minds of Irish voters [AFP]

Exit polls show Ireland's ruling party heading for a crushing defeat in elections, with public anger over the economic crisis and an EU-IMF bailout set to bring the opposition back to power.

Fianna Fail, the party of Brian Cowen, the prime minister, which has ruled Ireland for 21 of the last 24 years, dropped to just 15.1 per cent of the vote, its worst ever general election result, the poll by RTE, Ireland's state broadcaster, said.

Saturday's surveys shows Fine Gael at 36.1, Labour at 20.5 per cent, Fianna Fail at 15.1 per cent, Sinn Fein at 10.1 per cent, Greens at 2.7 per cent and Independents at 15.4 per cent.

The RTE/Millward Brown Lansdowne poll was released an hour before counting of ballots began at centres around the country and traditionally provides an accurate picture of voting.

The results reflect what polls during the campaign have found - that Fine Gael, the main opposition party, will form the next government, most likely with Labour.

Coalition partner

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Enda Kenny, leader of Fine Gael, is on course to be prime minister, with a promise to renegotiate the terms for repaying the \$92bn bailout from the European Central Bank and the IMF, but will have to form a coalition or an alliance with independent parliamentarians to form a government.

He has also promised to create 100,000 new jobs in five years, and to make holders of senior bonds in Ireland's nationalised banks share in the catastrophic losses racked up when Ireland's property bubble burst.

Long-dominant Fianna Fail, which had won the most seats in every previous election, had 15.1 per cent support. In elections going back to 1932, when the party led a government for the first time, it had never done worse than 39 per cent.



Counting of ballots is expected to continue through Sunday [Reuters]

The Labour Party, Fine Gael's likely coalition partner, had 20.5 per cent, which would be its best performance ever.

"The political landscape of Ireland is completely and utterly redrawn," Roger Jupp, the chairman of Millward Brown Lansdowne poll, said.

The poll was based on face-to-face interviews with 3,500 voters at polling stations on Friday, and has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.5 points.

In the last national election in 2007, the exit poll numbers were within a point of the official results.

"However bad people thought it would get for Fianna Fail, nobody thought it would get this bad," Michael Marsh, a professor of comparative political behaviour at Trinity College Dublin, said.

"That is highly significant."

Counting of ballots is expected to continue through Sunday as officials work through Ireland's proportional representation system.

In each round of counting, the last-place candidate is eliminated, and those ballots go to the candidates marked as the second choice.

The process continues until all the seats are filled; Irish constituencies have three, four or five seats.

Under Ireland's proportional representation voting system, it is not exactly clear how these results will translate into seats in the 166-member Dail (Irish parliament).

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