

# Austerity, Resistance and Changing Values in Ireland: Social Movement Outcomes and Political Polarization

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# The Non-Fighting Irish

- ▶ ‘Every week in Greece or Portugal, people are on the streets ventilating their anger... Ireland, meanwhile seems to have adopted the wartime maxim of its British neighbours—keep calm and carry on’ [Derek Scally](#)
- ▶ ‘If we reacted, it was with surprising acceptance of our lot. We became model Austrians’ [Eoin O’Malley](#)
- ▶ ‘Irish response to austerity has been peaceful’ [Power and Nussbaum](#)

# Social Movement Outcomes

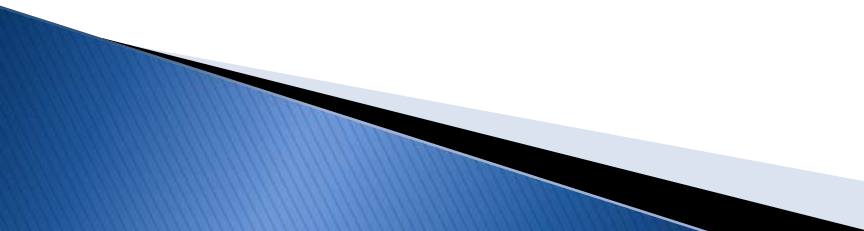
1. Tangible changes to policy
2. Changes to the broader system of interest representation (Gamson, 1975)
3. Generate deeper shifts in Values – (Melucci, Touraine)
  - ▶ Social movement may fail to achieve short term goals but ‘produce significant value change, while a movement that achieves its goals may have only minimal impact on society at large’ (McVeigh et al. 2014)

# Phase 1 – Muted and Single Issue Protest

- ▶ 15,000 pensioners and 10,000 students converge on Leinster House, Oct 22<sup>nd</sup> 2008
  - ▶ 2010 – 50,000 protest at the time of the bailout
- Mandate suggested a campaign of civil disobedience which didn't materialise



# Other reasons for Muted Response

- ▶ Response of the media which suggested there was no alternative to austerity (Merceille, Titley)
  - ▶ Expression of anger through the ballot box in February 2011 General Election
  - ▶ Close alliance between unions and state developed during social partnership (Allen and O'Boyle)
  - ▶ Contrasting approach to managing austerity in Greece and Ireland (Pappas and O'Malley)
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# Phase 2 – Popular Mobilization

- ▶ Campaign against introduction of Household Charge in 2012 and subsequently property tax
- ▶ Street protests
- ▶ Significant levels of non-compliance
- ▶ Half of those liable for the charge did not pay
- ▶ Replaced by Property tax which is collected by Revenue – harder not to comply
- ▶ Although at the beginning of 2015, 200,000 had still not paid

# Water protests

- ▶ Physical installation of water meters sparked community based protests
- ▶ Three mass protests at the end of 2014
- ▶ Election of Paul Murphy
- ▶ Loss of Seanad vote



# Government climbdown

- ▶ Announcement of €100 grant of relief on bills
- ▶ November 19<sup>th</sup> – government announced a revised charging structure with two flat rates in place until the end of 2018
- ▶ Despite these modifications, 30,000 attended December protest
- ▶ Further large street protests in 2015 – most notably on March 21<sup>st</sup> and August 29<sup>th</sup>
- ▶ Considerable level of non-compliance, by July 2015, less than half those eligible had paid



# Phase 3 – Reasonable People v's Sinister Fringe (Power et al)

- ▶ Leo Varadkar in a Newstalk interview made a distinction between those 'people protesting legitimately and reasonably' and what he called the 'sinister fringe' (Nov 7<sup>th</sup>)
- ▶ Power et al 'the term sinister fringe formed a significant part of the state's discursive armoury in the battle for hearts and minds'
- ▶ A number of further incidents have intensified the level of conflict in the water charge campaign (Jobstown, Cork Council, Dail Eireann)

# Protest Outcomes and Austerity

## Achievement of Specific Goals

1. Household charge phased out but always an interim measure
2. Major welfare cuts agreed with Troika have been implemented
3. Although water charges have been changed and grant introduced – no plans to row back on water charges per se
4. Anti-austerity movement has little ‘access responsiveness’ (Schumacher, 1976)

# Changes to Systems of Interest Representation

- ▶ Renewed public engagement with politics prior to February 2011 General Election
- ▶ Local and European elections of 2014, significant test for anti-austerity parties
- ▶ Sinn Féin became the third largest party in local government
- ▶ Anti-austerity Alliance and People before Profit won 28 seats
- ▶ Sinn Féin becomes second largest party at European level

# Impact on Irish Value System

- ▶ Causes of the crisis included weak rules (Regling and Watson, Honohan, Nyberg) and strong relationships (Ross, Cooper, Carswell)
- ▶ 2011 and 2012 – increasing public criticism of cronyism as well as
  1. criticism of tax avoidance strategies by public figures such as U2
  2. Increased reporting of social welfare fraud
  3. Penalty points controversy

# Links to Anti-austerity protest

- ▶ 2015 controversy surrounding the relationship between Denis O'Brien, Siteserv and IBRC
- ▶ Anti-water charge movement featured O'Brien in their placards and chants about 'Denis the menace'
- ▶ However not yet clear whether this will impact long-term on balance between rules and relationships in Irish value system

# Austerity Protest and Political Polarization?

A social movement particularly one that is highly visible, controversial, confrontational and violent can produce or even become a take-off issue within local communities... They can embed people within new social relations that hinge upon support or opposition to a movement and its goals. By aligning themselves with or against a political party or program, such movements can contribute to party polarization (McVeigh, Cunningham and Farrell, 2014)