

# 7. Austerity, resistance and social protest in Ireland: movement outcomes

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## Introduction

The varying protest responses of European societies to structural adjustment programmes imposed by the European Union/European Central Bank/International Monetary Fund after the 2008 banking crisis have been one of the most intriguing sociological dimensions of the recent global economic recession. During the early years of the crisis, Ireland and Greece were often portrayed in the international media at opposing ends of a spectrum of protest, with Ireland indeed politically positioning itself in this way (Borooah 2014). The Greeks were characterised as taking to the streets in significant numbers to protest against austerity while Irish citizens meekly accepted their fate. Detailed research on protest in each context demonstrates that this contrast has been overdrawn (Pappas and O'Malley 2014; Power *et al.* 2015; Karyotis and Rudig 2015; Hearne 2015). However, a number of distinctive features of the Irish protest response to austerity merit critical consideration.

This chapter begins by mapping the four overlapping phases of Irish anti-austerity protest between 2008 and 2016, which can be

characterised as (1) early single-issue protests, (2) muted protest, (3) popular mobilisation, (4) deepening confrontation leading to political realignment. The achievements of the Irish anti-austerity movement are considered in light of research on social movement outcomes (Gamson 1975; Giugni *et al.* 1999; Amenta *et al.* 2010). Within this literature, the successes and failures of social movements are examined in terms of three key criteria: goal attainment, changes to systems of interest representation, and value transformation. An assessment of the impact of these movements on values will focus particularly on attitudes towards cronyism and corruption that were identified as a contributory factor to the Irish banking crisis (Honohan 2009; Regling and Watson 2010; Nyberg 2011; Ross 2010; O'Toole 2010).

### **Social movement outcomes**

During the mid-twentieth century, social movement theorists tended to portray social protest as the political response of marginalised citizens to grievance. Margit Mayer (1995, p. 172) notes that 'as spontaneous, essentially expressive outbursts social movements are not accorded, in the long run, the capacity to influence societal development or policy outcomes. Only parties, interest groups and leadership strata have this capacity.' However, analysis of the outcomes of social protest in the United States in the post-war period generated increasing optimism about the efficacy of social movements. William Gamson (1975) examined 53 social movements and found that they succeeded in producing significant social and political change. In developing a framework through which 'success' could be measured, he distinguished between 'tangible changes to public policy' and 'changes to systems of interest representation' (Della Porta and Diani 1999, p. 208). Analysts studying European social movements have devoted greater attention to the role that social movements play in generating value transformation (Touraine 1971, 1981; Melucci 1984, 1989). Research on social movement outcomes by these European 'new' social movement scholars has focused on the capacity of social movements to introduce their core ideologies into mainstream public debates (Eder 1996). As well as changing voting patterns and making policy gains, these movements may seek to change the lifestyle and belief systems of ordinary citizens to accord with their values as they believe the 'personal is political' (Scott 1996).

Social movement scholars have more recently focused on the tensions between the three types of social movement outcomes: goal attainment, interest representation and value transformation.

Drawing on Amenta *et al.* (2010), McVeigh *et al.* (2014, p. 1146) note that a social movement that fails to achieve short-term policy change may in fact ‘produce significant social change, while a movement that achieves its goals may have only a minimal impact on society at large’. In addition, Giugni *et al.* (1999) have noted that some of the most significant changes wrought by social movements can be the unintended consequences of activism, envisaged neither by social movement activists nor by political elites. Each of these factors will be considered in assessing the outcomes of Irish anti-austerity protests between 2008 and 2016.

### **Phases of anti-austerity protest**

As outlined in the introduction to the chapter, four overlapping phases of Irish anti-austerity protest can be identified since the crisis in the Irish banking system became apparent in 2008.

#### *Phase 1: Early single-issue movements*

In 2008, international market unease about the stability of Irish banks coupled with the collapse of major European and American banks contributed to a crisis in the Irish banking system. The government tried and failed to rebuild market confidence with the provision of a blanket guarantee of Irish bank debt (Donovan and Murphy 2013). As outlined earlier in this volume, this was accompanied by significant cuts to public spending including the removal of medical cards from some old age pensioners and increasing third-level tuition fees (Allen and O’Boyle 2013). These early austerity cuts were met with a robust protest response. On 22 October 2008, 15,000 pensioners and 10,000 students converged on Dáil Éireann to express their dissatisfaction with these changes. However, as the scale of the Irish banking crisis became apparent in 2009, levels of protest diminished significantly.

#### *Phase 2: Muted protest*

By early 2010 it had become clear that the Irish state would not have the resources to honour its commitment under the 2008 bank guarantee. Rumours of high-level talks about an EU/IMF/ECB bailout began circulating. In November 2010, the Governor of the Irish Central Bank announced on radio that Ireland would have to enter a bailout programme (Donovan and Murphy 2013). The rapidity of the decline

of the Irish economy coupled with poor communication from government officials contributed to a level of shock and panic that appeared to have a muting effect on social protest. As the bailout agreement was being signed, 50,000 people protested in Dublin in November. Pappas and O'Malley (2014, p. 1598) note that after this protest 'one union Mandate suggested that it would plan a campaign of civil disobedience and national strike. However, none ever materialized.'

Occupy camps were visible in a number of Irish cities and the small Co. Cork town of Ballyhea began its long-running 'Ballyhea says No' campaign in response to the bailout. However, these protests received nothing like the popular support for resistance to austerity evident in other bailout countries at the time. The Fianna Fáil/Green coalition experienced one of the worst defeats of any post-war European government at the general election, indicating significant levels of public anger about the bailout (Farrell *et al.* 2011). Hardiman points out in Chapter 5 of this volume that the Fine Gael/Labour coalition that replaced it pursued largely the same policies, supported by the national media which, as Mercille explains in Chapter 4, broadly endorsed the view that there was no alternative to austerity. As the range of cuts and new taxes increased in 2012, it became clear that levels of protest were about to escalate.

### *Phase 3: Popular mobilisation*

The introduction of the Household Charge, an interim property tax, in 2012 changed the dynamic of anti-austerity protest in Ireland. This new tax generated a level of resistance that grew steadily during that year, building popular support for the Irish anti-austerity movement (O'Flynn *et al.* 2013). Half of those liable for the charge did not pay, and in 2013 it was replaced by a centrally collected property tax. If the anti-household charge and property tax campaigns brought more coherence to the anti-austerity movement, the issue of water charges provided the catalyst for much wider levels of protest (Power *et al.* 2015). In 2013 a utility company, Irish Water, was established, taking over the responsibility for water provision from local authorities. The government announced the installation of water meters at every home, 90% of which would be installed by the end of 2014, when water charges would be introduced. The physical installation of water meters in 2014 brought austerity onto the doorstep of thousands of Irish citizens, prompting a robust protest response at local level (Hearne 2015).

The last three months of 2014 witnessed three large-scale national protests which built on support garnered through local community protests against the installation of water meters. On 11 October, the first national day of action, groups organised under the banner 'Right2Water' were expecting about 10,000 to attend their protest in Dublin. The final attendance figure was closer to 80,000. The same day MEP Paul Murphy, who was closely associated with the anti-water charges campaign, won the Dublin South-West by-election. In response, the government announced that Irish Water customers would be entitled to €100 relief on their bills but this concession did little to dampen public anger. On 1 November, the second mass day of action against water charges, over 100,000 protesters turned out. On 6 November the government suffered an embarrassing defeat in the Oireachtas (Irish parliament) when Labour senators backed an opposition motion to decide whether Irish Water should remain in public ownership. In the Dáil (lower house of parliament) on 19 November, the government announced a revised charging structure whereby charges were reduced to two flat rates until the end of 2018. It was hoped that this climb-down would take much of the energy out of the water campaign. While the numbers of protesters were lower at the 10 December march, even official Garda (police) figures estimated an attendance of 30,000 (Hearne 2015).

#### *Phase 4: Deepening confrontation and political realignment*

Irish anti-austerity protest entered a fourth distinct phase in late 2014. On 7 November, Minister Leo Varadkar argued that a more confrontational dynamic was emerging within the anti-water charge campaign led by the 'sinister fringe' of the Irish anti-austerity movement. Power *et al.* (2015, p. 15) comment:

The term 'sinister fringe' (and to a lesser extent 'sinister element') formed a significant part of the state's discursive armoury in the battle for hearts and minds ... it was subsequently used routinely by the political elite in their attempts to fragment and undermine the legitimacy of the protests.

A number of incidents intensified this confrontational dynamic between the government and protesters. Tánaiste (Deputy Prime Minister) Joan Burton was trapped in her car for two hours after

she attended an event in Jobstown on 15 November 2014. On 20 November, Fine Gael TD Noel Coonan compared water protesters to ISIS and commented that Dublin protesters wanted to ‘act like parasites’ and ‘live off country people’. At the end of January 2015, footage emerged of water protester Derek Byrne calling President Michael D. Higgins a ‘midget parasite’ because he had signed the water legislation into law. On 23 February 2015, Gardaí (police officers) had to be called to a meeting of Cork City Council after it was invaded by water protesters. In February 2015, more than 20 people believed to have been associated with the detaining of Joan Burton in Jobstown were arrested. While in prison, three of the protesters went on hunger strike. In July 2015, levels of confrontation increased again when water protesters prevented politicians from leaving Dáil Éireann (Brophy 2015).

The mass protests that had been such a prominent feature of the anti-water charge campaign in 2014 did not entirely disappear in 2015. Protests on 27 March and 29 August in Dublin involved over 80,000 participants according to the Right2Water campaign. After the latter protest, groups associated with Right2Water announced that they were establishing a more broadly based political movement called Right2Change. They released a statement:

Water charges have proven a tipping point, but the hundreds of thousands who have marched since last October—culminating in today’s massive demonstration of people power, which saw between 80,000 and 100,000 take to the streets of Dublin—have been marching about much more. From cuts in Lone Parent payments to the homelessness crisis which this summer saw nearly 2,000 adults and over 1,000 children in emergency accommodation in our capital city, it’s clear that the economic recovery being trumpeted by the Government is not a people’s recovery ... Politics is about choices, and the wrong choices have been made. ([www.Right2Change.ie](http://www.Right2Change.ie))

They also released a policy document which broadened the agenda of the movement, focusing not just on the right to water but also the right to health, education, housing and work, all of which, they argued, had been undermined by austerity programmes. The Right2Change umbrella became a key focus for political alignment among parties and individuals on the left of the Irish political spectrum in the run-up

to the general election in February 2016, though it did not succeed in completely uniting these groups.

As the general election campaign gathered momentum, polls indicated that the water charge issue would have an impact on the outcome (Donnelly 2015). In mid-January, Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin pledged to abolish Irish Water if elected, though his party had supported the introduction of water charges in 2010. However, as Niamh Hardiman explains clearly in Chapter 5, the outcome of the 26 February election was indeterminate. The ruling coalition parties, Fine Gael and Labour, lost too many seats to form a majority government. Fianna Fáil didn't gain sufficient seats to form an alternative government, while Sinn Féin remained broadly aloof from government formation negotiations. Ultimately, Fine Gael formed a minority-led government with the support of a number of independent TDs and the Fianna Fáil, who technically remained in opposition. Crucial to securing the support of Fianna Fáil for this administration was an agreement to suspend water charges for a period of nine months while 'an expert commission considers a sustainable model of funding water services' (O'Halloran 2016).

In June 2016, MEP Marian Harkin tabled a parliamentary question to EU Environmental Commissioner Karmenu Vella asking if Ireland's earlier method of paying for water through general taxation, which was in place when Ireland adopted the EU Water Framework Directive in 2003, was still valid. In his response, Commissioner Vella indicated that Ireland has signed up to Article 9(4) of the Framework Directive, which sets down 'strict conditions' related to water charges. He indicated that as the Irish government had introduced the concept of water charges in 2010, it no longer enjoyed 'flexibility' on the water charge issue and would have to instigate some form of water charge regime under the directive (Downing and Doyle 2016). This robust response suggests that the complete abolition of water charges may be a very difficult goal to achieve in the long term. However, the suspension of water charges led to a very significant reduction in the numbers attending anti-water charge protests in 2016.

## **Protest outcomes**

### *Goal attainment*

An overview of the successes and failures of the Irish anti-austerity movement between 2008 and 2016 from a goal attainment perspective

suggests that the movement did have some capacity to directly alter public policy. All the major welfare cuts identified in the original agreement with the troika were implemented during this period (O’Flynn *et al.* 2014, Hearne 2015). However, the anti-water charge campaign was more successful in terms of generating specific changes to policy (Power *et al.* 2015). In his cross-country analysis of anti-nuclear movements of the 1980s, Herbert Kitschelt (1986) divided the analysis of social movement policy gains into those that were procedural, substantial and structural. In terms of this division, the Irish anti-water charge movement’s policy gains have been substantial so far. Right2Water succeeded in having water charges significantly reduced and then suspended in 2016. The question of whether these policy gains will prove to be structural is, as yet, unclear. While Fianna Fáil and other parties have sought the abolition of Irish Water, the European Commission has maintained a robust stance, insisting that some form of water charge regime must be introduced. Ireland remains locked into the European Water Framework Directive and as Kieran Allen indicates in Chapter 3 of this volume, the Commission along with other European institutions has been successful in imposing a range of top-down austerity measures on the Irish state since 2010.

#### *Changes to systems of interest representation*

During the early austerity period in Ireland, politicians themselves appeared to believe that protest responses to austerity were muted because Irish citizens expressed their discontent so forcefully through the ballot box. Labour Minister Ruairí Quinn commented: ‘Unlike Greece, Spain and Portugal where there were riots in the streets and all sorts of disruptions, the people held their breaths and waited for the ballot box and dropped the grenade silently into the ballot box’ (*Irish Independent* 2014). The general election of February 2011 delivered the sitting coalition one of the worst defeats of any post-war European government (Little 2011). While the new ruling Fine Gael/Labour coalition had a comfortable majority, parties and individual candidates strongly associated with an anti-austerity position also made significant gains. Sinn Féin increased its seats in the Dáil from five to fourteen. Parties gathered under the umbrella of the United Left Alliance won five seats, while nine independent candidates were elected (Farrell *et al.* 2011).

Given the increased levels of activism in 2013 and 2014, the European and local elections of 2014 were a significant test of the

impact of the anti-austerity movement on systems of interest representation. At local level, Sinn Féin won 105 additional seats to bring its total local representatives up to 159, making it the third largest party in local government. People Before Profit and the Anti-Austerity Alliance won 28 seats between them, providing a further endorsement of the anti-austerity position. Government parties lost 186 seats between them; Fianna Fáil, which had been largely blamed for the crisis, gained 49 seats. The European election result presents an even more complex picture. Sinn Féin gained three seats, making it the second largest Irish party in terms of European representation, and independent candidates won three. However, Fine Gael retained its four seats while Fianna Fáil lost two (Kavanagh 2015).

The centrality of the water charge issue to anti-austerity politics in Ireland becomes abundantly clear when the results of the 2016 General Election are examined. Fine Gael and Labour, who continued to champion water charges throughout the campaign, lost 42 seats between them. The Labour Party—led by Joan Burton, who, as Minister for Social Protection, had implemented a range of cuts to welfare payments—lost 26 seats, falling to just seven representatives in the parliament. Parties on the left who were associated with the anti-austerity movement all made gains. Sinn Féin gained nine seats, bringing its total to 23, while the Anti-Austerity Alliance/People Before Profit gained two, bringing their total to six. In addition, the majority of rural independent candidates who were elected opposed water charges (O'Regan 2016). However, Fianna Fáil proved more successful at resisting the encroachment of anti-austerity politics from the left. The party ran its campaign on the slogan 'A Fairer Ireland', communicating a subtle anti-austerity message, and announced its intention to abolish Irish Water before the election. Getting Fianna Fáil to alter its position on the water charge issue is regarded by leaders of Right2Water/Right2Change as one of their most significant achievements (Gibney 2016).

The groups and organisations associated with the Right2Water campaign were drawn from across the ideological spectrum of Irish politics, with socialist parties, community organisations and more right-wing groups such as Direct Democracy Ireland coalescing around the water issue. As parties on the left were more consistent in their opposition to water charges, it is not surprising that they may have benefited more from the momentum that gathered around the campaign. However, the unwillingness of the same parties to engage

in government formation negotiations after the election limited their impact on a broader system of interest representation in Ireland. Rory Costello (2016) has argued that as Fianna Fáil positioned itself in the centre during the campaign, it should have been in a strong position to open government formation negotiations with parties on the left after the election. However, some form of alliance with centre-right Fine Gael became the only option because parties on the left ‘washed their hands of the whole thing’ and ‘ruled out negotiating with civil war parties [Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael]’ in his view. Costello concludes:

Of course, this may be in the long-term strategic interests of those parties. But it is a clear abandonment of their voters, who elected them based on their policies. Once in opposition, these parties will have little or no influence over government policy, yet this is exactly where they seem to want to be.

In their analysis of the impact of social movements on systems of interest representation, McVeigh *et al.* (2014, p. 1148) note that take-off issues (such as water charges) ‘can produce a notable shuffling of social relations and interaction patterns ... Social movements, therefore, may not simply influence individual opinions in the short term—they can also embed people within new social relations that hinge upon support or opposition to a movement and its goals.’ Despite its limited impact on government formation, the anti-austerity movement has provided some support for this analysis. The movement has succeeded in eroding support for established political parties, particularly those who didn’t support its core goals. Fianna Fáil’s *volte-face* on the water charge issue was perhaps the strongest demonstration of the anti-water charge campaign’s political influence. Whether the various independent politicians and parties on the left associated with the anti-austerity movement can develop into a more coherent alliance challenging the dominance of the centre-right parties remains to be seen.

### *Anti-austerity protest and value change in Ireland*

In order to assess the impact of Irish anti-austerity protests on value change, it is important to examine the causes of the banking crisis. One would assume that values perceived to have contributed to the economic crash would be the focus of criticism by social movement activists. The Irish government commissioned a series of reports by

Patrick Honohan (2009), Regling and Watson (2010) and Peter Nyberg (2011), which highlighted how weak rules and poor implementation of regulatory systems contributed to the financial crash. At the same time, a number of Irish journalists published books that suggested that strong personal relationships among Irish political, banking and business elites were the basis for a form of cronyism that contributed to the banking crash (Ross 2010; O'Toole 2010). A feature of the 2011 and 2012 period was increased criticism of cronyism by leaders of the anti-austerity movement. Independent TDs Clare Daly, Luke 'Ming' Flanagan, Mick Wallace and Richard Boyd Barrett devoted particular attention to the practice of penalty points for traffic offences being corruptly cancelled by the police. Their actions, along with the statements of Garda whistle-blowers, resulted in the resignations of both the Garda Commissioner and the Minister for Justice in 2014 (Kelly 2014).

In 2015, the theme of cronyism became a direct focus for the Irish anti-austerity movement. Independent TD Catherine Murphy raised questions in the Dáil about the circumstances surrounding the establishment of Irish Water. She focused on the awarding of the contract for the installation of water meters to Sierra Support Services Group, a subsidiary of Siteserv: a company owned by businessman Denis O'Brien, who has close links with Fine Gael. She demanded details of loan agreements between O'Brien and the state bank, IBRC. In May 2015, Denis O'Brien was granted an injunction against the national broadcaster RTÉ to prevent it from disseminating details of his loan agreements. Murphy subsequently repeated details of these agreements in the Dáil under the mantle of Dáil privilege (McGee 2015). Meanwhile the anti-austerity movement focused some of its street protests on O'Brien, featuring his image on placards and using campaign cries of 'Denis the Menace'. The issue tapped into a deep pre-existing anger about cronyism, which Rory Hearne identified in his survey of activists involved in the anti-water charge movement:

The responses to the survey clearly show that the water protests are an expression of people's anger against the cumulative impacts of austerity, the injustice of the 'socialisation' of the banking debts, inequality, corruption and cronyism, and the 'give-away' of Ireland's natural resources. (Hearne 2015, p. 9)

However, this ideological focus within the Irish anti-austerity movement does not appear to have had significant impact on attitudes to cronyism in the wider Irish population.

Elaine Byrne's (2011) study of corruption in Ireland demonstrated that although Irish citizens have had a keen awareness of corruption since the 1990s, this has not had a significant impact on their voting choices. She cites an MRBI poll conducted in 1991, which found:

A total of 89 per cent agreed that 'there is a Golden Circle of people in Ireland who are using power to make money for themselves'. Some 81 per cent agreed that the people in this Golden Circle were made up in equal measure of business people and politicians. Some 76 per cent thought the scandals were part and parcel of the Irish economic system rather than one-off events. (Byrne 2011, p. 107)

During the 1990s and 2000s, a succession of tribunals in Ireland investigated corruption. However, individual politicians and political parties who had been involved in corrupt practices received little formal sanction, and parliamentarians such as Michael Lowry TD were re-elected following criticism in tribunal reports.

Data on perceptions of corruption in Ireland underline the continuing complexity of public attitudes. Transparency International lists Ireland on its corruption perception index (CPI), while Eurobarometer has carried out two general surveys on attitudes to corruption in Ireland during the austerity period. Even before the banking crisis, Ireland's ranking in the CPI scale had declined from 11th in 1995 to 17th out of the 180 countries listed in 2007. After the bailout, it appeared that Ireland was perceived as more corrupt, with the country ranking 19th in 2011 and 25th in 2012 after the publication of two tribunal reports. Between 2013 and 2014, when the anti-water charges campaign became more active, Ireland's ranking in the CPI actually improved, returning to 17th in 2014, although the country fell one place to 18th in 2015 ([www.transparency.org](http://www.transparency.org)).

The two Eurobarometer studies, which sample a wider selection of the Irish population, also demonstrate a complex pattern. In 2011, the 'Attitudes of Europeans towards Corruption' study (published in 2012) found that 86% of Irish people thought that corruption was a problem in Ireland, up 1 percentage point from 2009. While 70%

of Irish people did not believe the government was doing enough to combat corruption, there was a 3 percentage point decline in those who believed that corruption existed in national and local institutions. There was a further 4 percentage point decline in those who believed that politicians at local and national levels were taking bribes for personal gain. A second Eurobarometer study, carried out in 2013 when anti-austerity protests had become more visible and published in 2014, indicated that 81% of Irish people believed that corruption was a problem in Ireland, a 5 percentage point decline since 2011. Therefore, anti-austerity protests did not appear to have a substantial impact on attitudes to corruption, although the slippage of one place in the CPI index in 2015 might reflect concerns raised by the IBRC controversy (Leahy 2015).

## **Conclusion**

After the 2010 bank bailout, the Irish public surprised international commentators with its relatively muted protest response to the EU/ECB/IMF fiscal adjustment programme. However, as welfare cuts and new taxes deepened in 2012, levels of protest increased. In terms of goal attainment, the achievements of the Irish anti-austerity movement were relatively limited between 2008 and 2016, with no major reversals to the significant welfare cuts introduced during this period. The anti-water charges campaign has been more successful, with an initial reduction followed by a temporary suspension of water charges in 2016. While this represents a substantial achievement for a social movement, it is important to acknowledge that the scale of water charges is small when compared to the broader spectrum of public service, welfare cuts and new taxes such as the property tax introduced under austerity in Ireland.

In terms of changes in values related to corruption, the outcome of Irish anti-austerity protest is also quite mixed. Perceptions of levels of corruption in Ireland that were very high in 2011 and 2012 appeared to decrease from 2013 onwards, the period when the Irish anti-austerity movement was most active.

The most significant legacy of the Irish anti-austerity campaign may be its impact on the system of interest representation. Since 2011, parties and individuals associated with the Irish anti-austerity movement have had considerable success at local, national and European elections. The anti-water charge campaign has served as a very effective

focal point for convergence between independent TDs and parties such as Sinn Féin, People Before Profit and the Anti-Austerity Alliance. It is too early to say whether these linkages will lead to the long-term decline of the so-called 'civil war' divide which has dominated Irish politics since the 1920s (Farrell 1999). Nevertheless, it is clear that the Irish anti-austerity movement has brought a new level of inter-organisational cooperation and political visibility to those on the left of the Irish political spectrum that may have considerable influence on Irish politics for many years to come.