

## ANALYSIS

# Robinson's rainbow

## ANALYSIS PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

A phenomenal capacity to draw cross-party support — a veritable 'rainbow coalition' — helped Mary Robinson make history on Wednesday, the first woman elected President, the first Fianna Fail defeat in the Presidency, a humiliation for Fine Gael and a personal triumph for Dick Spring. Our Political Correspondent JOSEPH O'MALLEY reports.



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## How the race was won and lost

**W**HAT lost the Presidency for Brian Lenihan and won it for Mary Robinson — his tapes gaffe, her rainbow coalition, or some combination of both?

First Brian Lenihan beat himself when he opted for dismissal, rather than resignation as Government Minister over the tapes controversy.

Emotionally, it may have seemed the right response, but politically it was the wrong move, and his most critical mistake of the whole campaign. On Wednesday, his remarkable recovery of lost support stalled just two per cent short of the minimum 46 per cent he needed for success.

By being dismissed as Minister, he lost the sympathy of the floating voters so crucial for victory. And what he re-gained was the loyalty of Fianna Fail's basic general election vote. But at 44 per cent, that was insufficient.

The Presidency was an election that could never be won by Fianna Fail without some cross party support, either on first or second preferences. And Brian Lenihan's dismissal, effectively, cost him that.

It left the Opposition with the claim that someone unfit to be a Minister was not fit to be President. Only his resignation, much sooner, might have made the crucial two per cent difference.

Nevertheless, Brian Lenihan fought a brilliant campaign in the last week, pulling his support back up from 31 p.c. to 44 p.c. But he could not overcome the handicap of his own earlier mis-judgement.

### Flynn's gaffe proves so costly

**T**HE first count winner became the second count loser, as the Opposition combined to tighten up the transfers from Currie to Robinson, greatly boosted by Padraig Flynn's gaffe in attacking her family image.

For Mary Robinson, to defeat the two major parties (Fianna Fail and Fine Gael) who at general election time win three out of four votes cast, and to do so, supported by two left wing parties who win fewer than one in six, is just one measure of her staggering achievement.

Tactically, her best decision was made at the very outset, last May. When she accepted Dick Spring's offer to stand, she resisted Labour pressure to re-join the party she left in 1985 — and which was nominating her.

It was an inspired decision, and the key to her huge electoral success. And Dick Spring recognised and accepted the wisdom of the move from the outset, if the party hoped to win the election, and broaden the base of its general appeal.

For Mary Robinson, it enabled her to exploit her own political independence and thereby win votes from the natural supporters of all other parties in a national election.

Last week's MRBI/Irish Times poll which accurately mirrored the final outcome, showed just how successfully she managed to do this. On her core vote of 39 p.c. — including undecided voters — the poll showed a phenomenal capacity to draw cross party support from all quarters.

It was the strength of her rainbow coalition, Brian Lenihan claims, that beat him and it even included dissatisfied Fianna Fail supporters who switched to her in significant numbers.

Remarkably, over half of those who say they would support Fine Gael in a general election voted for Mary Robinson last Wednesday, despite the presence of Austin Currie on the ticket.

That MRBI poll suggests her total Presidential vote was made up as follows: some 28 p.c. from Fine Gael supporters, 21 p.c. from Fianna Fail, 21 p.c. from Labour, 8 p.c. from the PDs, 5 p.c. from the Workers Party, and the remainder (17 p.c.) from the Greens, others, and the undecided.

Or stated another way, 52 p.c. of Fine Gael supporters were backing her, along with 85 p.c. of Labour, 80 p.c. of the Workers Party, 73 p.c. of the PDs and 18 p.c. of Fianna Fail.

But the latest MRBI figures showed Mary Robinson (41 per cent) with no clear advantage over Brian Lenihan (40 per cent) among women voters, yet recording a significant increase in her level of support in recent weeks — up from just 30 per cent a month earlier.

Analysis of her support among those under 34, showed Mary Robinson with a clear lead over Brian Lenihan (43 to 35 per cent). And that clearly suggests strong female support for her among that younger age group.

### Personality mattered more than party

**B**OTH Labour and Mary Robinson's success reflected their correct joint analysis that personality could matter more than party in the Presidential election, and therefore the need for a campaign strategy based on maximising her appeal to the supporters of other parties.

By being first into the Presidential race last May, Mary Robinson had the whole Summer to establish a national presence. And by the time Austin Currie was finally selected in September, he had already lost more than half of his party's vote — which had defected to the candidate of the left.

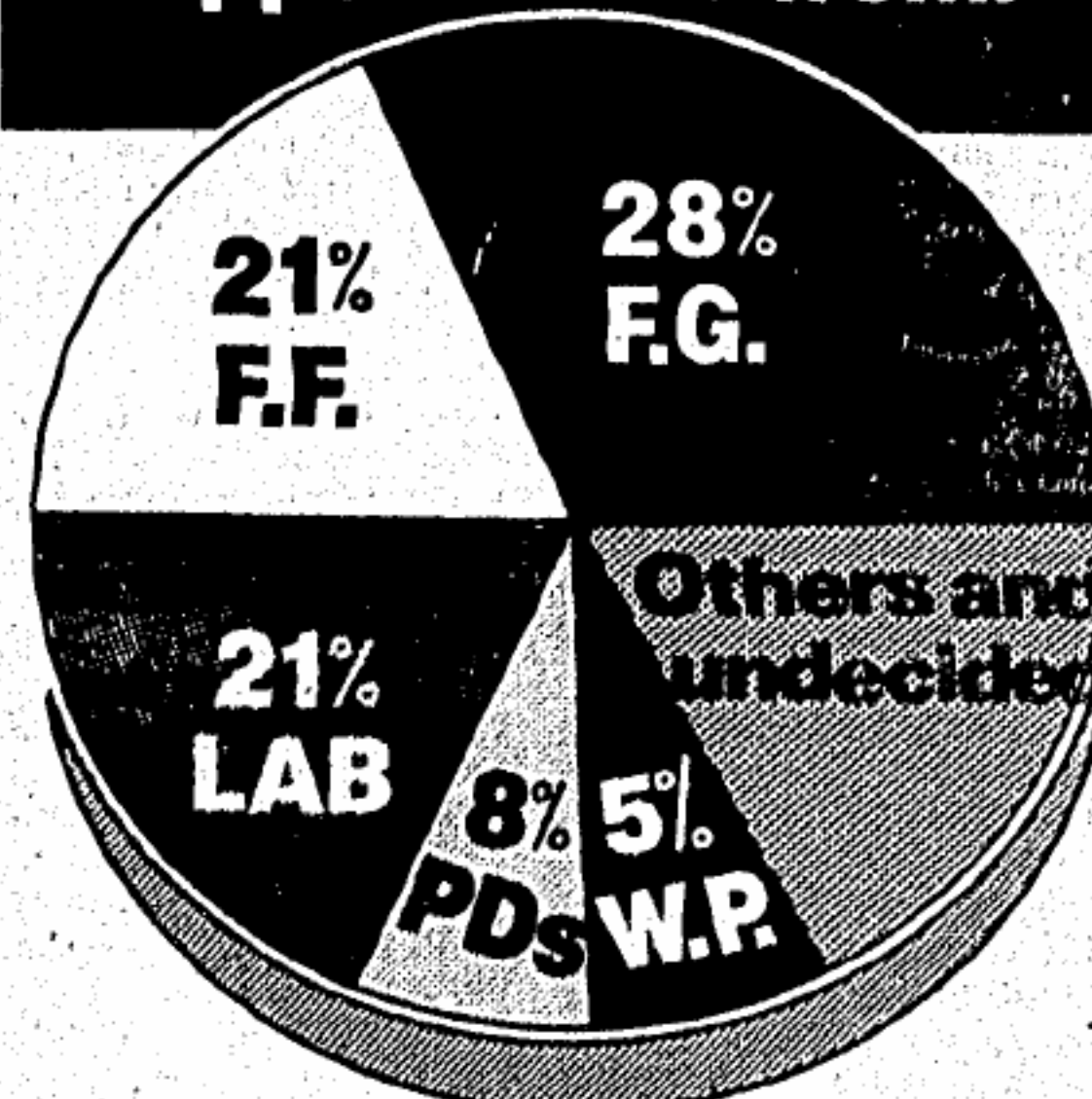
For Fine Gael, Austin Currie's 17 per cent vote is a humiliation for the party, which on the Presidential election result now finds its support divided between the broadly social democratic side which defected to Robinson, with the conservative element staying loyal to the party-candidate.

Having broken from the party once in a national election, Fine Gael voters have shown an independence which suggests that in future their strict loyalty cannot be taken for granted. And for Alan Dukes, this result signals the end of his leadership of Fine Gael.

For Labour and the Workers Party, the lesson of success in the Presidential election must be to try and broaden their appeal to increase public support for the Left. Both have learned that politics is about winning.

For Fianna Fail, yet again in a national election it illustrates that winning either a Presidential election or an overall majority in a general election, means above all the ability to win cross party support. And that neither Charles Haughey on five attempts in a general election, nor Brian Lenihan — this time — have yet managed to do.

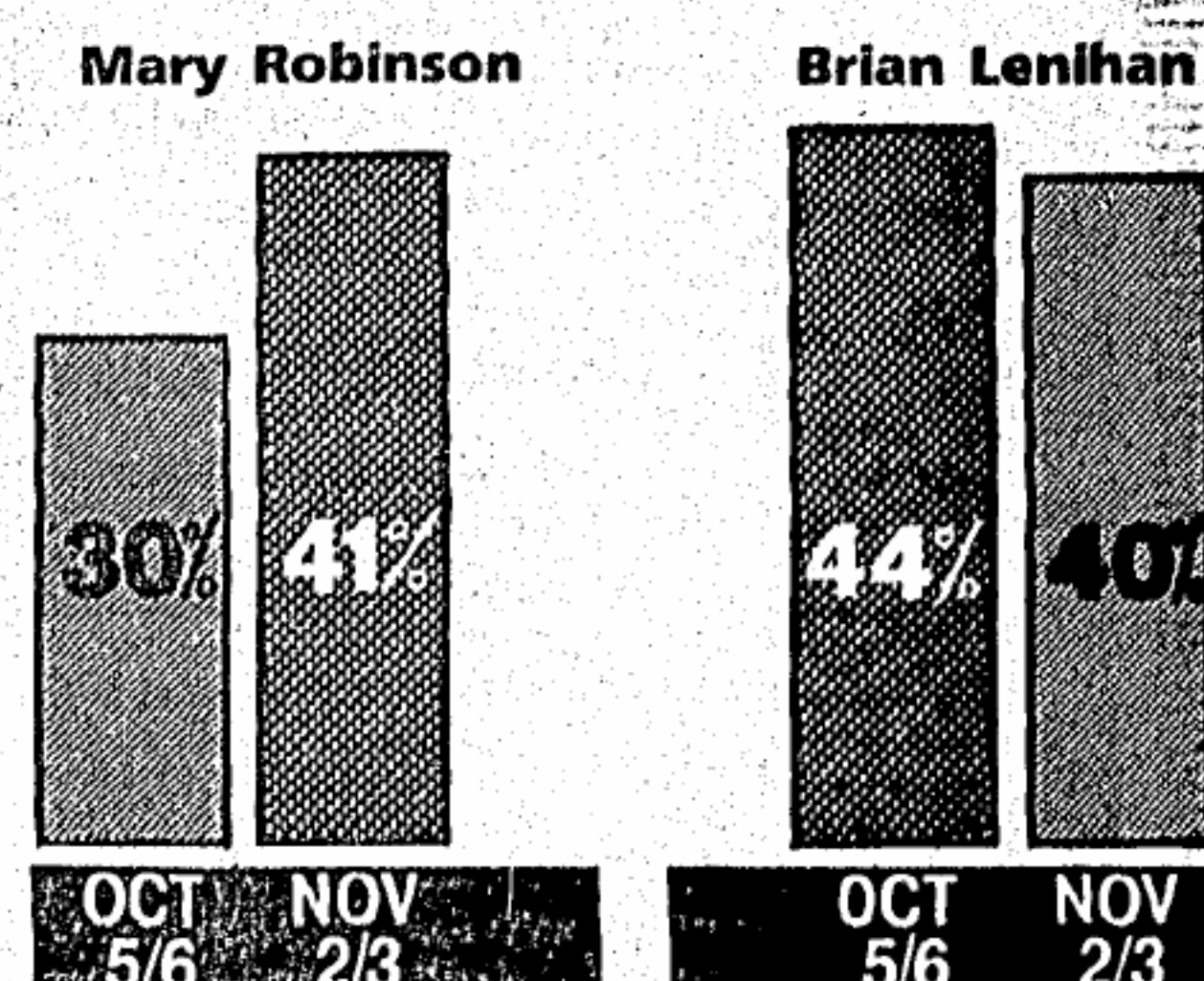
### Where Mary Robinson's support came from.



The graphic shows how support for Mrs. Robinson was constituted according to voters' party loyalty.

Source: Irish Times/MRBI

### How the women's vote changed



How the women's vote changed in the four weeks between the beginning of October and the Presidential election.

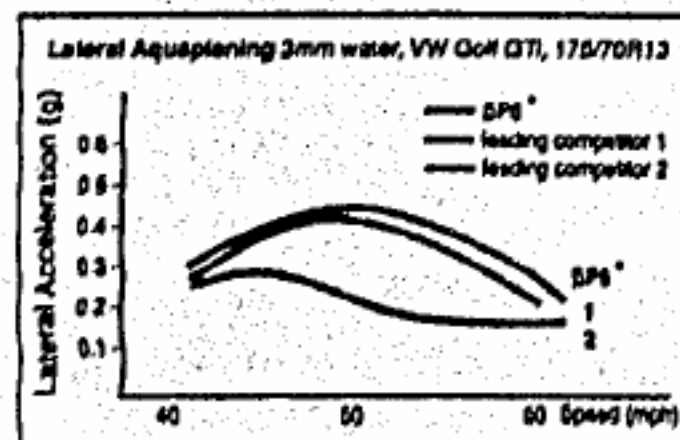
Source: Irish Times/MRBI



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