

World News Roundup

Ireland

3 tie for seats

Wrangling looms as Sinn Fein seeks to 'form' govt

LONDON, Feb 11, (AP) — Final results in Ireland's general election show three parties in a virtual tie for seats, signalling weeks of tense negotiations ahead to form a coalition government.

With all votes counted Tuesday, the center-right Fianna Fail party had 38 seats in the 160-seat Dail, the lower house of parliament. Sinn Fein won 37 and Fine Gael, the centrist party led by incumbent Prime Minister **Leo Varadkar**, took 35.

Sinn Fein leader Mary Lou McDonald said her party would try to form a government with independent lawmakers and smaller left-wing parties such as the Social Democrats and the Greens.

Saturday's election produced a breakthrough for the left-wing, nationalist Sinn Fein, which has been long shunned by the other parties because of its historic links to the Irish Republican Army and decades of violence in Northern Ireland.

Sinn Fein's radical proposals for tackling Ireland's housing crisis and creaking health-care system proved a powerful draw for young voters in a country that is still dealing with aftershocks of the 2008 global financial crisis, which hammered its debt-driven "Celtic Tiger" economy.

The party took the biggest vote share but ran fewer candidates than Fianna Fail and Fine Gael — a miscalculation that could cost the party its chance to govern.

With no party anywhere near the 80 seats needed for a majority in parliament, some form of coalition appears inevitable, but forming a stable alliance could be tough.

"I think it would be a mighty thing to have a Sinn Fein Taoiseach (prime minister) and also a woman, perhaps, in the job," McDonald said.

But there is no guarantee Sinn Fein will be able to assemble a stable coalition, even with the support of smaller parties.

Election

The election result was a major blow for Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, which have dominated Irish politics since the country won independence from Britain a century ago.

Both parties said before the election that they would not go into a coalition with Sinn Fein because of its links to past violence. But they may now reconsider that commitment.

The vote in Saturday's election essentially split three ways, complicating the negotiations on forming a government that lie ahead.

Sinn Fein, received 24.5% of the first-preference votes, besting the two long-dominant parties. Fianna Fail received 22.2% of the votes. Fine Gael, the party of incumbent Prime Minister Leo Varadkar, got 20.9%.

"I think it's a mess, to be honest with you," said Pat O'Toole, a public sector worker in Dublin. "I think we're going to be in a situation again where we are not going to be able to form a stable government in this country. I really don't know what's going to happen."

Sinn Fein's left-wing proposals for tackling Ireland's housing crisis and creaking health-care system proved a powerful draw for young voters in a country that is still dealing with aftershocks of the 2008 global financial crisis, which hammered its debt-driven "Celtic Tiger" economy.

Vote counting resumed Monday to fill all the seats in the 160-seat Dail, the lower house of Ireland's parliament. Ireland uses a proportional-representation system in which voters rank candidates from first to last, with the lower preferences of elected or defeated candidates redistributed among their rivals.

With more than three-quarters of the seats in parliament filled, Sinn Fein had taken 37, Fine Gael 29 and Fianna Fail 27. No party is likely to reach the 80 seats needed for a majority, making some form of coalition inevitable. But forming a stable alliance looks tough.

Both Fianna Fail and Fine Gael said before the election that they would not go into a coalition with Sinn Fein because of its links to past violence.

Varadkar said Fine Gael's stance was unchanged. "I say what I mean and I mean what I say," he said Monday.

But as the scale of Sinn Fein's surge became clear, Fianna Fail leader Micheal Martin said: "I'm a democrat." "I listen to the people. I respect the decision of the people," he told Irish broadcaster RTE.

Talks among the parties are likely to take weeks, though some hope a new government can be formed by St Patrick's Day on March 17, when the Irish prime minister traditionally visits the White House.

Sinn Fein leader Mary Lou McDonald suggested her party could try to form a government with the support of independents and smaller parties such as the Social Democrats and Labour.

Crisis

"We want to talk to anyone who is interested in delivering a program for government, that is about getting to grips with the housing crisis and solving it, getting to grips with the crisis in health and giving families and workers a break and giving a new lease of life to government," she said.

The IRA was responsible for murders, bombings and other violence for decades during decades of violence known as the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland. More than 3,500 people were killed in conflict between forces that sought to reunify Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland and those who wanted Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK.

Supporters of Sinn Fein point out that it has been more than 20 years since Northern Ireland's 1998 peace agreement and 15 years since the IRA announced the end of its violent campaign. Sinn Fein already sits in government in Northern Ireland as part of a power-sharing arrangement created by the peace process.

Eoin O'Malley, associate professor of political science at Dublin City University, said the party's past meant little to younger voters without memories of living through the Troubles.

He said Sinn Fein had offered the clearest message on social problems in Ireland, which include a growing homelessness crisis, house prices that have risen faster than incomes and a public health system that hasn't kept up with demand.

"It's a direct analogue to the left-wing populism that you see in Greece and in Spain," O'Malley said. "In many ways, Sinn Fein are offering relatively simple solutions to pretty complex problems. Mary Lou McDonald said she was going to form 'a people's government' as if all the other governments that have been formed in Ireland had no connection with the ordinary people. It is classic populism."



Varadkar



Residents vote in the New Hampshire primary at Bishop O'Neill Youth Center on Feb 11 in Manchester, NH. (AP)

Politics

US president primes pump on 2020 reelection effort

Trump campaigns as 2nd Amendment warrior

WASHINGTON, Feb 11, (AP) — After the Parkland school shooting in Florida two years ago, President Donald Trump chided Republican lawmakers for being too "scared" of the National Rifle Association to tighten gun laws — then backed away from the idea.

After back-to-back mass shootings in Ohio and Texas in 2019, Trump embraced calls for "strong background checks" — only to backpedal once again.

Now, as he primes the pump on his 2020 reelection effort, Trump is going all-in on embracing the mantle of gun rights champion, a stark turn from earlier moments in his presidency when he toyed with the idea of pushing Congress to enact stricter gun laws.

There was no public discussion of tighter gun laws when Trump welcomed Parkland families to the White House for a private meeting on Monday, four days before the two-year anniversary of the rampage that left 17 dead. Instead, administration officials unveiled a website intended to help educators, parents and law enforcement address threats to school safety.

In recent weeks, Trump has repeatedly warned supporters at his rallies that Democrats "will take your guns away." Last month, he labeled Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam a "whack job" as gun rights advocates protested the Democratic governor's moves to tighten gun laws in the aftermath of a mass shooting in Virginia Beach.

Drawing a straight line from gun rights to presidential politics, Trump tweeted that Democrats in the state "will take your guns away. Republicans will win Virginia in 2020. Thank you Dems!"

And on Monday night, as he came to the apex of an hourlong campaign speech in New Hampshire, Trump framed his supporters' Second Amendment right to bear arms as being as precious as the rights to privacy, free speech and religious freedom.

Campaign officials believe the effort could help put states like Minnesota, New Mexico and New Hampshire in play. For that to happen, Trump will

need to draw even more rural and white men to the polls — key groups that helped drive his 2016 surprise victory.

Trump's advisers believe his consistent efforts to spotlight his credentials as a Second Amendment warrior can help him draw a contrast with the eventual Democratic presidential nominee. The top tier of Democratic candidates have made bolstering gun restrictions a key part of their platforms.

Mike Bloomberg, a former New York City mayor, has poured millions of dollars from his own fortune into supporting a series of gun control advocacy groups. Former Vice President Joe Biden served as the Obama administration's point man on the president's failed push for sweeping gun reform laws following the Sandy Hook school shooting in Connecticut. Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, who got a D- grade from the NRA, has been knocked by fellow Democrats for not being tough enough on gun restrictions.

Campaign

"Democrats have shown they don't respect the Second Amendment, which will be one of many contrasts drawn during the campaign," Trump campaign spokesman Tim Murtaugh said.

After spending more than \$50 million in support of Trump's 2016 election victory, the NRA is likely to have less impact on this election cycle, said Robert Spitzer, a professor of political science at the State University of New York-Cortland whose research focuses on American gun laws.

The powerful gun rights group has been mired in financial difficulties, internal strife within the organization's leadership, and probes by the New York attorney general's office that threaten the group's tax-exempt status.

Trump's joint campaign committees and the Republican national party committee had \$195 million in cash on hand at the close of 2019, making the NRA's money less significant this election cycle. But with a hard gun-rights pitch, Trump appears to be strategizing that he could persuade some voters who

have become disenchanted with politics to come back to the ballot box to vote for him.

"He really is doubling down not on the broadening of his base but for pushing for higher turnout among his people," Spitzer said. "One of the keys in 2016, but not the only one, was that turnout among rural white voters was a little higher than predicted. This pitch, he figures, will help him get there."

Trump and fellow Republicans are likely to face a deluge of spending from gun control advocates, who think their message will resonate with on-the-fence suburban voters.

Everytown for Gun Safety, an umbrella group of gun control advocacy organizations funded by Bloomberg, recently announced that it would spend \$60 million to beat gun rights proponents on the state and federal level in 2020. The group has not said how much it would spend on the presidential race, but thus far has budgeted \$1.25 million to help reelect North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper and Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro, both Democrats. It also plans to spend some of that first tranche of money toward beating two Republican senators, Cory Gardner of Colorado and Martha McSally of Arizona.

Gun control advocates feel emboldened after the 2018 midterm elections in which more than 30 NRA-backed Republican candidates lost their races.

"His tactic has been to say incendiary things about guns to whip up the base, but he and the NRA haven't been able to pass any of the gun lobby's priority legislation — even with a Republican Congress for two years," said Shannon Watts, founder of Mom's Demand Action, part of the Everytown for Gun Safety coalition.

When Trump met with members of the group Stand with Parkland on Monday, administration officials highlighted the school safety website. Stand with Parkland backed the creation of the website — but it also has urged Congress to require universal background checks on gun purchases.

Trump, Manchin trade barbs: A war of words between President Donald Trump and US Sen **Joe Manchin** is heating up.

The moderate Democrat took to cable news Monday to hurl barbs at the president after a weekend of back-and-forth that ignited when Trump criticized Manchin for voting to impeach him from office.

"I expect every American, and myself, would like my president and our president to act like a responsible adult, and he's not," Manchin told CNN. "And I hope he does, for the sake of our country, I hope he does."

The feud kicked off Friday evening when Trump tweeted that he was "very surprised & disappointed" with Manchin's impeachment votes and that no president has done more for West Virginia. In a subsequent tweet, Trump said Manchin was "just a puppet" for the Democratic leaders in the House and Senate.

"That's all he is!" Trump tweeted. The president's comments were seen as a move to weaken the senator's standing in West Virginia, where Trump won nearly 70% of the vote in the 2016 election.

On Saturday night, Manchin fired back via Twitter, saying "no Democrat has worked

harder in a bipartisan way in the hopes that you would succeed." He added that West Virginia residents "know exactly" who has worked day and night for the last five years to secure their health care and pensions, and "it wasn't you."

Trump then followed up on Sunday, tweeting "they are really mad at Senator Joe Manchin in West Virginia. He couldn't understand the Transcripts."

In another interview Monday morning, this time with MSNBC, Manchin responded to Trump's new nickname for him.

"Well, first of all, the munchkin — I'm taller than him. I think I'm a little bigger than he is, not heavier, he's much heavier than me but I'm a little taller than him so I guess he's got that a little bit off," Manchin said.

Trump was acquitted by the Senate on Wednesday on charges that he abused his office after senators narrowly rejected Democratic demands to summon witnesses for the impeachment trial.

In announcing his decision on the impeachment vote Wednesday, Manchin said the evidence presented by House managers clearly supported the charges brought against the president.

"I take no pleasure in these votes, and am saddened this is the legacy we leave our children and grandchildren," Manchin said. "I have always wanted this president, and every president, to succeed, but I deeply love our country and must do what I think is best for the nation."

At least before the caustic bickering, Trump and Manchin appeared to have a warmer relationship than the president has with most other Democrats. (AP)



US President Donald Trump opens his umbrella before departing Air Force One on Feb 11 at Andrews Air Force Base, Md. (AP)



Melania



Manchin

America

Trump, first lady to visit India: US President Donald Trump and First Lady **Melania Trump** will visit India on Feb 24-25 and travel to New Delhi and Ahmedabad, the White House said Monday.

The latter city is the largest in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state of Gujarat and played an important role in Mahatma Gandhi's life and leadership of the Indian independence movement.

Press secretary Stephanie Grisham said Trump and Modi spoke by telephone over the weekend and agreed the trip would strengthen the strategic partnership between the two countries and highlight the strong bonds between the American and Indian people.

The leaders have developed a warm relationship over the past few years.

During their first White House meeting in June 2017, Modi bear-hugged Trump several times following a joint news conference in the Rose Garden. Last September, Trump traveled to Houston to speak at a rally for Modi before an audience of 50,000 Indian Americans. (AP)

Downpours cause flooding: Storms stretching across the Deep South dumped heavy rains on Mississippi and Alabama on Monday, causing flash floods that covered roads and forced some schools to close.

Dozens of roads were under water in low-lying areas across the Tennessee Valley after an hours of rain, and cars crept along flooded streets in downtown Birmingham. Video showed vehicles leaving wakes behind them on flooded roads, with waves slapping the side of a building in Yazoo City, Mississippi.

Several school systems sent students home early as forecasters warned more downpours were on the way, and some planned to open late on Tuesday.

More than 2 inches (5 centimeters) of rain fell during the day in spots, and the National Weather Service said another 4 inches (10 centimeters) could fall by Tuesday night. After that, potentially severe storms will move across the region, the National Weather Service said.

Flash flood watches and warnings stretched from eastern Texas into the western Carolinas. The Tennessee Valley Authority said some of its rivers and lakes had received as much as 400% of their normal rainfall for this time of year.

Parts of the region are still soggy from heavy rains last week. In north Alabama, some flooded roads were still closed from last week when the rain began Monday. (AP)



A man walks through the snow in Nenthead, north England on Feb 11. (AP)