Far-right discourses, right-wing populism and the question of housing in Ireland

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Summary

This report examines the evolving political discourse in Ireland in the lead-up to the 2024 local, general and European elections, focusing on the potential rise of far-right populism. Traditionally dominated by centrist parties, and with an increasingly progressive trajectory of referendums, Ireland has long been viewed as an exception to the European trend of far-right mobilisation. However, recent developments — including the 2023 anti-immigration riots in Dublin — suggest a shifting political landscape.

The report situates these changes within Ireland's broader economic and social transformation since the 1980s, including the Celtic Tiger boom, increased immigration, and the decline of the Catholic Church's influence. Despite economic growth, persistent structural issues — particularly the housing crisis — have fuelled public frustration. The report argues that this discontent is being exploited by far-right actors who link housing shortages to immigration, creating a potent narrative that resonates with disenfranchised voters.

Through an analysis of party strategies, electoral outcomes, and discursive shifts, the report explores how mainstream parties are responding to these challenges. It also considers the role of social media and international far-right networks in spreading disinformation and amplifying local grievances. By tracing how housing has become a central issue in populist rhetoric, the report sheds light on the conditions under which far-right populism could gain traction in Ireland.

This study will be of interest to those examining the intersection of structural inequality, political discourse, and the rise of populist movements in liberal democracies.

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Introduction

Ireland is often considered an exception to the broader European trend of rising far-right populism (Shehaj et al., 2021; Mudde 2015: 297; O'Malley & FitzGibbon 2014; O'Malley 2008). Traditionally, Irish politics has been dominated by two centre-right parties (Müller & Regan, 2021) while radicalism has largely been associated with the left-wing Sinn Féin, a party long viewed as the 'political front' of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) (Richards, 2001). However, recent factors – notably, increased immigration, a worsening housing crisis and the proliferation of far-right disinformation on social media – have created the conditions for a potential political shift. In late 2023, riots driven by anti-immigration sentiment erupted in inner-city Dublin, signalling a possible opening for far-right populist discourses.

This report takes stock of the Irish political discourse ahead of the 2024 local, general and European elections, and examines the electoral outcomes. In assessing the discursive shift following the riots, the report highlights how grievances in the electorate can be used by far-right actors to mobilize voters, and how majority parties can successfully navigate a shifting electoral landscape.

The Irish liberal trajectory stands out in a European context. In recent referendums on abortion and LGBT+ rights, the Irish electorate embraced distinctly progressive values.[1] This shift can be seen in the light of a broader financial, social and political transformation in Ireland since the 1980s. Unlike in the neighbouring United Kingdom, membership of the European Union (EU) is often connected with positive societal developments (FitzGerald, 2023). The Irish economy experienced significant growth in the early 1990s, due to increased foreign investment following the creation of the EU single market. At the beginning of the 'Celtic Tiger' era – from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s – Ireland's GDP grew by more than 9 percent per year (World Bank, 2023). The country also underwent substantial social change. Irish emigrants who had left the country due to lack of employment returned home and the economic boom attracted labour migrants from both inside and outside the EU. Finally, the Catholic church – long embedded in Irish society – incrementally lost its central standing following a series of scandals (Savage & Smith, 2003).

Despite these economic and social advances, Ireland suffers from notable structural challenges that are commonly linked to a rise in populist sentiment (O'Malley & FitzGibbon, 2014). While far-right populist actors in other European states often tap into citizens' fears about crime,[2] law and order is not a key concern among Irish voters (McDermott, 2024a). Instead, a notable grievance is housing. The end of the Celtic Tiger era saw a deep economic downturn triggered by the 2008 international financial crisis. When the property market collapsed, many citizens found themselves unable to pay back their mortgages (Waldron &

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[1] Although in March 2024 a clear majority of Irish voters said no to proposed changes to references to family and women in Ireland's constitution (BBC, 2024).

[2] Ekström et al. (2023) for instance describe how 'criminality' has become 'one of the central foci of contemporary right-wing populist discourse' in Sweden.

Redmond, 2016). Although the Irish economy has experienced a recent boom (CSO, 2023), housing remains a problem that governing parties have failed to adequately address (White, 2024). The situation echoes recent scholarship suggesting that housing issues might shape 'political attitudes and preferences' and generate an 'acceptance of populist rhetoric' (Waldron, 2021). A lack of access to affordable housing can be regarded as a key 'structural condition' producing disenchantment with established political parties. Crises around housing allow for the emergence of a 'politics of place', at both the local and the national level (Adler & Ansell, 2020: 344). Such debates can activate different definitions of 'community', thereby playing a central role in structuring populist votes (Ansell, 2019: 181).

Taking the housing issue as a point of departure, this report considers how Irish political parties are navigating the current context of increasing far-right sentiment. The 2023 Dublin riots, and the protests which both preceded and followed them, marked a shift in the Irish political landscape. Existing structural issues in Ireland combined with emerging discourses linking anti-immigration sentiment with an issue like housing have the potential to generate support for far-right populist parties. By examining the shifting views of the Irish electorate, how party strategies mobilized to address the emerging housing-migration nexus, and how these issues have been discursively employed in party rhetoric, the report throws light on the potential for a rise in far-right populism in Ireland.

In addition to examining the Irish political landscape, the report should be of interest to those seeking to understand the conditions by which far-right actors that capitalize on explosive local events to spread disinformation could shape national political discourses surrounding immigration. Significant here is the role played by domestic vulnerabilities in enhancing the receptivity for anti-immigration discourses. Analyses of the 2024 UK riots following the Southport murders, for instance, indicate that exploiting local events to spread anti-immigration disinformation is a tactic employed by international far-right actors (Baker et al., 2024).

Section 2 outlines the key characteristics of populist ideology, the differences between far-right and far-left populism and the structural conditions driving populist politics. Section 3 introduces the Irish political landscape. Section 4 discusses the Irish housing crisis as a political driving force and outlines how Sinn Féin mobilized voters in the 2020 election using populist rhetoric in relation to housing as a structural problem. Section 5 outlines how right-wing populist actors redefined the housing problem as a problem of immigration, and how this redefinition subsequently reshaped the Irish political debate. Section 6 describes the response to the emergence of right-wing populist discourses by established political parties. The final section elaborates on the potential for the growth of far-right populist parties in Ireland.

Populism, Key Characteristics and Causes

In conceptualizing populism, this report draws on a minimalist definition outlined in Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013), which describes populism as a 'thin-centred ideology', the expression of which is heavily dependent on the national political context (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013: 509). A thin-centred ideology has 'a restricted core attached to a narrower range of political concepts' (Mudde, 2004: 544). While populism looks different in different settings, populist ideology builds on three core concepts: the people, the general will and the elite (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013: 501-505). Using discourses and policy characterized by an anti-establishment critique and a questioning of the status quo, populist actors claim to speak for 'the people' (Mudde, 2004: 543). This discourse generates distinctions between two homogenous groups and can be employed to pit the '*pure*' people against a '*corrupt* elite' while claiming to channel 'the general will' of society (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013: 503. Orig. italics).

Populism is neither a far-right nor a far-left ideology. The characteristics of populist parties instead depend on a combination of 'thin' populist ideology and other 'thick' ideologies. For instance, far-right populism combines the central aspects of populism with 'nativism' and authoritarian ideas (Mudde, 2015: 296). Nativism is characterized by an idea of 'supreme power for the nation', commonly defined 'in exclusionary terms of blood and essence' (Krzyżanowski et al., 2023: 422), while authoritarianism sets out ideals of strong leadership and societal order (Mudde, 2015:

296). By drawing on these thick ideologies, far-right populist actors pit an envisaged homogenous nation against 'alien' elements and promote visions of a strictly ordered society. Left-wing populism merges populist ideology with socialism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013: 503), rejecting capitalism by highlighting a corrupt financial and political elite and employing references to 'the people' to advocate for political and economic alternatives.

Whether populist parties should be considered a threat to democracy is an ongoing topic for debate. Mudde (2015: 303) for instance argues that populism is not necessarily anti-democratic, but rather 'anti-*liberal* democratic' due to the ideological embrace of a homogenous 'people' and disregard for pluralism and minority rights. The current populist turn therefore generates questions about 'what kind of democracy we should have' (Krzyżanowski et al., 2023: 422). At the same time, however, several scholars claim that democracy without pluralism is an oxymoron (Urbinati, 2019). In addition, recent empirical studies show that populist parties in government 'tend to erode the levels of electoral, liberal and deliberative democracy' (Ruth-Lovell & Grahn, 2023: 692), highlighting the potential effects of governing parties embracing populist ideologies on a broader set of democratic models.

The common discourse often links the current rise in populism to the emergence of political and economic crises. However, crises can be regarded as 'catalysts' rather than a fundamental cause of populism (Mudde, 2021). What is more, the causality between crisis and populism may sometimes

be reversed. Ideology can act as a 'trigger' for crises, as actors use populist discourses to mobilize a sense of crisis. Moffitt (2016) for instance argues that the 'performance of crisis' constitutes a central feature of the populist ideology. In this context, far-right actors often have an interest in sustaining crises to pave the way for a 'strong leadership' (Krzyżanowski et al., 2023, 424).

While crises can act as triggers, more fundamental conditions that allow for the growth of populism can be found at the structural level. Broader structural causes pinpointed in the literature are globalization and neoliberal policies – societal changes that have moved certain issues away from the political agenda and allow for technocratic rule while producing economic and political grievances in the population (Mudde, 2021). Mudde (2021) describes these developments as a growth in 'undemocratic liberalism'. Seen in this way, the rise of populist parties is essentially a problem *internal* to liberal democracy. If the electorate increasingly regards political parties as unable to address core issues of concern, or see them favouring technocratic solutions (Mudde, 2021: 581), populist actors can draw on anti-establishment critiques to find opportunities to exploit citizens' dissatisfaction. In such a context, novel information and communication technologies and the rise of social media facilitate the emergence of populist actors by broadening agenda-setting power beyond traditional media outlets that previously acted as gatekeepers. Furthermore, this new media landscape gives disproportionate visibility to spectacular messaging, a feature that allows anti-establishment actors to use spectacular communication strategies to

reach a wider audience at a low cost (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2018).

Populist discourses and populist political parties represent different forms of power. While actors outside parliament that draw on populist discourses might be able to influence agenda-setting, populist parties in government have the power to form policy. Studies suggest that populist parties gain parliamentary power in a certain set of circumstances. For instance, far-right populist parties tend to be more successful where they are able to mobilize nationalist voters' 'cultural grievances' related to immigration using nativist rhetoric and policy, while also harnessing mainstream voters' economic grievances over immigration (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2020). Like any party, populist parties need to broaden their base beyond a small set of core voters.

How established political parties should respond to the emergence of populism is an open question. This is especially problematic since populism is 'inextricably tied *to* the development of liberal democracy' (Malkopoulou & Moffitt, 2023: 853. Orig. Italics.). One strand of research suggests that mainstream parties should embrace left-wing populist discourses to address far-right populism (Mouffe, 2018). Others propose a way of 'parroting the pariah' by adopting the populist party's core policies while ostracizing it (van Spanje & de Graaf, 2018). The latter would be in line with viewing populism as a symptom of structural failure but comes with a risk of amplifying and legitimizing illiberal demands (Malkopoulou & Moffitt, 2023). Mudde instead suggests a move away from technocratic solutions to

'repoliticize' liberal democratic politics (Mudde, 2021: 590) while trying to address the long-standing structural issues that are causing the grievances. Recognizing the existing grievances among the electorate would therefore be a necessary liberal democratic component of any strategy to counter the rise of far-right populism.

The Irish Political Landscape

The Irish voting system

Ireland uses a system of proportional representation known as single transferable vote (PR–STV) in all elections except for referendums. The system means that "The voter's first preference vote – the candidate they give their number 1 vote to – is most important and is always counted. A voter's second (and further preferences) may be counted if their preferred candidate is eliminated at the end of a round of counting, or is elected with a surplus" (Irish Electoral Commission, 2025). The intricacies of the PR-STV system mean that it can take up to a week to count the votes following an election.

For a long time, Ireland did not have a clear left-right divide in parliament (Müller & Regan, 2021). Until the general election of February 2020, Irish politics was instead dominated by two centre-right political parties: Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, both of which have their roots in the 1917–1921 independence movement. The parties have been described as 'catch-all parties, prone to a degree of populism' (Suiter, 2016: 127) and have taken turns to lead the country, often in coalition with smaller parties. Until the financial crisis of 2008–2012, Fianna Fáil was the most successful of the two; between

1932 and 2011 it was in power for 61 of the 79 years, and it sees itself as more in touch with ordinary people than Fine Gael. From 1948 to 2002, Fianna Fáil received, on average, 45 percent of the vote (Suiter, 2016: 130). Together Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael received more than 71 percent of the vote (ARK, 2007).

Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael used to be bitter rivals (Farell, 2020). Their relationship was defined by positions taken on the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty that paved the way for an Irish Free State within the Commonwealth. Fine Gael was seen as pro-treaty while Fianna Fáil represented those who wanted an independent republic. The two sides fought a short but bloody civil war in 1922–1923.

From the outset, the Catholic Church played an important role in shaping the new state, not only on moral issues, but also its laws and basic systems of education, health and welfare (Ó Corráin, 2022). The central role of the Catholic Church in Irish society 'didn't just give the Church political power – it also gave Government a kind of spiritual glow as the political wing of the Church militant' (O'Toole, 2023).

Fianna Fáil has traditionally had strong support among small farmers in rural Ireland and among the working class, but was also able to reach voters across the class divide (Suiter, 2016: 130). Fine Gael, in turn, has had its main support within the business community, and from large farmers and upper-middle class voters in urban areas.
Ireland's political history is also closely tied to the longstanding conflict in Northern Ireland. The left-wing nationalist Sinn Féin did not participate in formal elections in Ireland until

the 1980s. Widely considered to be the 'political front' of the IRA (Richards, 2001), the party did not recognize the legitimacy of the parliaments in Belfast, Dublin or London. However, a shift in strategy in the early 1980s led Sinn Féin to enter formal Irish politics (Whiting, 2016: 544). In 1997, Sinn Féin gained its first seat in Ireland's national parliament – the Dáil – with 2.5 percent of the vote (Election Resources, 2025). Following the historic peace settlement in Northern Ireland – the 1998 Good Friday Agreement – support for the party continued to grow at a slow pace, as Sinn Féin managed to build a base of support in working class areas.

The differences between the two dominant parties in the Dáil have diminished over time. Support for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael has also declined as voters increasingly turn to parties with more secular visions, such as Labour, the Green Party, Sinn Féin and the Social Democrats on the left and the Progressive Democrats on the right (which dissolved in 2009). Since the 1980s, the electorate has incrementally moved to the centre-left (Sinn Féin, the Green Party, the Social Democrats and Labour) (Cunningham, 2021). The 'average' Irish voter now 'self-identifies on the centre-left' and Irish politics, for the first time, has a 'left-right ideological split' (Müller & Regan, 2021: 549).

This shift in voting preferences has given Sinn Féin a larger share of the vote. Sinn Féin won the popular vote in the 2020 general election. The party received 24.5 percent of the first preference votes, almost 11 percent more than in 2016 (RTÉ, 2020). However, Fine Gael got one seat more than Sinn Féin in the Dáil and Sinn Féin's electoral success did not translate into political power. Instead, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael agreed to rule together for the first time in Irish history, in coalition with the much smaller Green Party (McCullagh, 2020). A first step towards closer cooperation had been taken after the 2016 election, when Fianna Fáil agreed to support a minority Fine Gael government over three budgets through a confidence-and-supply agreement (Kelly, 2016). This gave Sinn Féin the opportunity to present itself as the only alternative to what it called an "FFG" government (O'Malley, 2024).

A special feature in Irish politics is the large number of independent politicians in the Dáil (Sheridan, 2024a). Today, independents mainly attract voters who identify themselves as on the right (Müller & Regan, 2021: 550). However, there are also a small number of parliamentarians focused on left-wing issues. Independents commonly have limited influence in Irish politics, but there are examples of politicians gaining influence when they hold the balance of power (Bray, 2020). Independents can also increase their speaking rights in the chamber by creating technical groups, often around a common manifesto.

The Housing Crisis

The housing problem has been referred to as the 'driving force in Irish politics'. The government's lack of progress in resolving the housing crisis was the main factor behind Sinn Féin's electoral success in 2020 (Mueller, 2020). Five years later, housing is still one of the biggest issues for Irish voters, often the most important one.

Traditionally, local authorities played a leading role in providing social and affordable housing for low-income households. This changed in the 1990s, when the Irish economy boomed and property prices rose in an unprecedented way. The economist and writer David McWilliams describes the recipe for this rise in property prices as: 'Build loads of houses, reward developers, allow the banks to over-lend, look the other way and garner the political premium associated with a burgeoning class of first-time buyers who thought they were getting richer'. This was a winning strategy for the Fianna Fáil-led governments that governed Ireland in 1997–2011 (McWilliams, 2024).

Everything changed with the economic downturn triggered by the international financial crisis in 2008, which exposed severe weaknesses in the Irish economy and banking system. The property market collapsed and Ireland had to be bailed out by the EU and the International Monetary Fund. By March 2014, more than 16 percent of all mortgages had gone into default (Central Bank of Ireland, 2024). Waldron (2021: 1224) describes how 'The Irish State nationalised €74bn of toxic property debt from the Irish banks and has resold these assets to global investors at fire sale prices, leaving taxpayers exposed for the shortfall'.

Irish families also found themselves in debt, amid high interest rates on mortgages and dwindling property prices. House prices plummeted, many construction companies went bankrupt and housing projects were abandoned before they were finished. Support for Fianna Fáil collapsed: The party lost 57 of its 77 seats in the 2011 election (the Dáil then had 166 seats).

Housing construction has yet to reach the level of the 1990s and early 2000s (Quinlan, 2024). In 2022, house prices were on average almost eight times the national average wage (J. Moore, 2024) and prices continue to rise (MyHome, 2024). As a result, many young adults are unable to purchase a home, even if they are in work. According to data from Eurostat, more than two-thirds of 25–29-year olds in Ireland still live with their parents, compared to 4.4 per cent in Denmark and 6.3 per cent in Sweden (RTÉ, 2023).

Rental costs have also risen steeply, as the prevalence of private sector landlords has increased. While rents increased by 22 percent across the euro area between 2010 and 2023, in Ireland they increased by 98 percent (Eurostat, 2024). Even people on middle incomes, such as teachers and social workers, have been priced out of the housing market. For low-income households the situation is even more precarious. This has also led to increased costs for the Irish state as tenants unable to afford rents receive government subsidies.

Migration has increased the demand for housing. This mainly affects the private rented sector, where most migrants find accommodation. According to a 2022 report from the Economic and Social Research Institute, 56 percent of all migrants and 75 percent of Polish migrants were living in private rented accommodation, compared to 13 per cent of individuals born in Ireland (ESRI, 2022).

The private sector offers little security. A landlord can evict a tenant to sell the property or if a family member wants to

move in. Landlords are also known to evict their tenants to increase the rent or to use the property for short-term lets, such as through Airbnb. Of the 11,868 Notices to Quit (NTQs) in 2022, only 14 percent were related to tenant behaviour (Hearne, 2023). Ireland now has a 'record number' of homeless people and more than 15,000 individuals living in emergency accommodation; the majority in the Dublin area. (This figure excludes homeless asylum seekers, people sleeping rough and those in domestic violence refuges.) More than half of the adults in emergency accommodation were Irish citizens, although in the Dublin area citizens from other countries were in the majority (56 percent, 24 percent from EEA countries or the UK and almost 32 percent from non-EEA-countries) (Department of Housing, 2025).

Left-Wing Populism and the Housing Crisis

Sinn Féin's unprecedented result in the 2020 general election reflects some fundamental changes in the Irish political landscape following the global financial crisis (Coulter & Reynolds, 2020). In the aftermath of the crisis, Ireland saw a 'clearer populist narrative' and a growing appetite for left-wing rhetoric focused on corrupt politicians and financial elites (Suiter, 2016: 131). Sinn Féin's success nonetheless came as a surprise to many and was linked to 'a sudden and unanticipated turn in voter preferences' (Coulter & Reynolds, 2020: 67). This is especially true among younger citizens (Horgan-Jones, 2020). Apart from the general increase in income inequality, which has been mentioned as a possible factor (Müller & Regan, 2021: 550), the surge in votes for

Sinn Féin has been attributed to the party's policies and rhetoric on the housing issue (O'Leary, 2020).

Leading up to the 2020 election, Sinn Féin described the housing crisis as a failure of the dominant centre-right parties. Tapping into grievances related to housing, the party launched its 'Manifesto for Change' with a promise to 'deliver the biggest Council-led house building programme this state has ever seen' (Sinn Féin, 2020). The policies suggested in the manifesto have been described as those of a 'relatively "robust" centre-left party' (Coulter and Reynolds, 2020: 70). In promoting these policies, however, Sinn Féin used distinctly populist rhetoric, for instance pitting 'politicians and bankers who use the system to pursue their own interests' against 'ordinary people' (Fernández-García & Luengo, 2018: 68). When describing the politics leading up to the Irish housing crisis (and other welfare issues), the manifesto also argued that '[s]uccessive governments have delivered for their friends and cronies. They have delivered for big business, for vested interests and for golden circles'. In contrast, Sinn Féin promised to 'deliver for the people' (Sinn Féin, 2020).

As Waldron (2021) notes, the lack of affordable housing is a deep-seated structural issue that, if left unaddressed, has the potential to generate political grievances and shape political attitudes. By linking the housing issue to a corrupt financial and political elite, and promising rent freezes, public housing programmes and a cap on mortgage interest rates, Sinn Féin successfully tapped into the widespread

discontent with housing among the Irish electorate (Bray, 2020).

Many of Sinn Féin's traditional supporters have the same background as people who vote for right-wing populists in other European countries (Suiter, 2016: 133). In the 2020 election, its voters were mainly working class or on middle and low incomes – those left behind by the booming Irish economy but at the same time not very loyal to the party (Cunningham, 2021). A significant proportion of voters reported a lack of trust in politicians in general and voted for Sinn Féin because they wanted change. Especially for young males from low-income households, voting for Sinn Féin was seen as a vote *against* the political establishment (Cunningham, 2021).

The question of housing was important among Sinn Féin voters. Almost one-third of those who saw housing as the most important issue voted for the party. Sinn Féin was especially successful among voters under 35. In 2020, however, it was the most popular party among all age groups except those 65 years or older, but it increased its share of the votes even in that age group (RED C, 2020). Older Irish voters are often reluctant to vote for Sinn Féin because of its historical links to the IRA and the violence in Northern Ireland.

O'Malley (2008) has previously argued that the lack of a successful far-right populist party in Ireland is due to Sinn Féin occupying the 'populist' position, and this party's particular strand of nationalism. In contrast to many other nationalist parties in Europe, which are positioned on the far-right, Sinn Féin does not promote anti-immigrant ideologies. This lack of 'nativist' rhetoric is linked to the broader non-nativist characteristics of Irish nationalism. As Eagleton (1999) notes, Irish nationalism has been 'civic rather than ethnic in character. […] 'Irish' has on the whole denoted citizenship of a putative political state rather than membership of an ethnic group'. With its historical connections with the IRA, Sinn Féin's nationalist ideology is anchored in historical struggles for independence. The focus on a united Ireland has the effect of producing a 'more inclusive concept of the nation' (Fernández-García & Luengo, 2018: 70) and a form of nationalism that does not readily allow for nativist rhetoric.

While Sinn Féin's election result in 2020 did not lead to government power, it did put the housing crisis on the political agenda. Crucially, the incoming Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael-Green Party coalition recognized housing policy as a political failure. In response to citizens' concerns, the government launched the Housing for All initiative in 2021. The initiative describes housing as 'increasingly unaffordable for the so-called "squeezed middle" who would once have expected to be able to purchase their own home' and admits to a problem with widespread homelessness (Department of Housing, 2021). New measures were introduced on affordable and social housing, as well as a 'Help to Buy' incentive to help first-time buyers, with the aim of supplying 33,000 new homes each year (Department of Housing, 2021). Billions of euros has since been spent to tackle the housing crisis, but the problem persists.

Linking the Housing Crisis to Immigration

The housing crisis was not linked to immigration during the 2020 election. An exit poll by Ipsos MRBI shows that only 1 percent of respondents described immigration as a key issue of concern, despite high levels of migration (Gallagher, 2020). A discourse merging immigration with housing arose only with the spike in migration following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. There was also a substantial increase in the number of asylum seekers during the same period.

In 2023, Ireland experienced a wave of anti-immigrant protests across the Dublin Metropolitan Region, as well as in smaller cities and rural areas (RTÉ, 2024). However, the public debate intensified following the Dublin riots in November. Influential far-right figures on social media falsely linked a violent attack on schoolchildren in the inner city to an asylum seeker. This misinformation fuelled unrest and contributed to inner city riots where approximately 500 individuals (*The Independent*, 2023) set public infrastructure on fire, looted shops and caused property damage costing millions of euros (Coughlan & McDonald, 2024). Driven by online disinformation and far-right rhetoric, the 2023 riots marked a significant escalation in xenophobic violence in Ireland. While far-right disinformation in Ireland does link male asylum seekers to crime (Healy, 2024; Sheridan, 2024b; Gallagher, 2024), anti-immigration sentiment has primarily been interpreted in the context of a broader set of societal concerns (Duggan, 2023). The question of migration – especially by asylum seekers and Ukrainian nationals – has been related to the ongoing housing crisis, and linked to a lack of accommodation and rising house prices, as well as increased rental costs that disproportionately affects young people (Duggan, 2023). This focal point in political discourse can be read in the light of the relatively low concern with crime in Ireland compared to longstanding grievances pertaining to housing (McDermott, 2024a).

Ireland has seen rising rates of immigration since 2022. More than 113,000 Ukrainians have arrived in Ireland in accordance with EUs Temporary Protection Directive. There has also been a sharp increase in the number of asylum seekers from other regions. While 13,649 and 13,277 people applied for international protection in 2022 and 2023 respectively (International Protection Office, 2024), more than 18,000 people applied for asylum in Ireland in 2024, an increase of almost 40 per cent (International Protection Office, 2025).

This surge in asylum seekers and Ukrainian nationals placed greater demands on the Irish state to find accommodation. At the beginning of 2024, Ireland was accommodating more than 101,000 people, including almost 75,000 Ukrainians (A. Moore, 2024). A lack of facilities for migrants meant that the authorities had to rely heavily on the private sector, managing contracts with hundreds of accommodation operators while trying to secure local acceptance for migrant placements.

The lack of appropriate accommodation for Ukrainian nationals and asylum seekers led to emergency solutions and inappropriate living standards. The Irish Refugee Council warned of a consistent deterioration in the standard of accommodation provided for

asylum seekers. Since 2022, the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) has at times declared that it can no longer provide accommodation for adult single males seeking asylum, in violation of international law (Irish Refugee Council, 2022). A number of male asylum seekers have ended up living in tents, some of them gathering in makeshift camps in Dublin where they have become targets for right-wing extremists. In December 2024, there were more than 3,000 homeless asylum seekers in Ireland (Irish Refugee Council, 2024).

In the lead-up to the 2023 Dublin riots, far-right actors were able to gain ground by merging anti-establishment critiques of the government's handling of the housing issue with nativist messaging. According to Angela Willis, Assistant Garda Commissioner, anti-migrant protests increased in the Dublin Metropolitan Region from 'just over 300' in 2022 to 617 in 2023 (RTÉ, 2024). While most of the protests have been peaceful, the country has also seen more than 20 arson attacks linked to properties designated for housing asylum seekers and/or Ukrainians since 2018 (The Journal, 2024a).

Nativist discourses exploded following the 2023 Dublin riots, which were ignited by an attack outside a primary school in which a five-year old girl and her teacher were critically injured. Shortly after the attack, social media platforms were filled with xenophobic messages falsely alleging that the perpetrator was an asylum seeker. Many of the posts expressed calls for action and messages such as 'Ireland is full', 'Ireland belongs to the Irish' and 'Irish lives matter' (Gallagher, 2023). Such messaging promoted an Irish nationalism defined in nativist terms, linked to ethnicity.

Highlighting the link between structural issues and the new nativist discourse, a 2023 report by an Irish parliamentary committee describes the housing crisis as 'a key catalyst for anti-immigrant sentiment' (Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023: 34). While the increase in immigration to Ireland clearly puts pressure on the Irish authorities, direct competition between asylum seekers and Irish nationals without the resources to buy a home is limited. Recent reports show that immigrants suffer discrimination in the private rented market and disproportionate levels of homelessness (Lima, 2025). Individuals arriving in Ireland can only be placed on a waiting list for social housing when they have gained a right to asylum or permanent residency. In 2023, the waiting time for social housing in south Dublin was an average of 9.8 years (*The Echo*, 2023). Although many migrants are on waiting lists, the system therefore favours long-term residents.

In line with new research on populism, the Irish case shows how a situation of scarce housing allows far-right actors to open up a debate on different definitions of community. The 2023 parliamentary report notes that the current contention over housing 'creates an impression of resource scarcity and competition for services, which hampers integration and feeds into racist and far right narratives and an "us and them" mentality' (Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2023: 34). This illustrates Ansell's (2019: 181) argument that struggles 'over access to

public housing can heighten the importance of immigration for native-born citizens', generating favourable conditions for far-right actors to mobilize nativist rhetoric.

Beyond displaying how structural issues can be harnessed by far-right actors, the emerging far-right discourse shows the role played by domestic structural vulnerabilities in increasing receptivity to foreign disinformation campaigns. The bulk of the social media content originated from outside of Ireland. Analyses show that messages were spread by influential right-wing figures in the UK and the US (Gallagher, 2023). Nonetheless, the disinformation disseminated 'harnessed a deeper set of grievances among young people, struggling with spiralling prices and a desperate lack of affordable housing' (Duggan, 2023). In this way, online disinformation by influential *foreign* actors generated a sense of crisis about immigration in the Irish context.

Finally, the riots, and the novel link between housing and immigration, contributed to pinpoint immigration as a key issue among Irish voters. This demonstrates how 'nativism can drive voting behaviour' when immigration is linked to other socioeconomic issues (Mudde, 2024). In December 2023, the question of immigration moved up to the top of voters' agenda (Leahy, 2024a). An *Irish Times*/Ipsos B&A poll in May 2024 found that 63 percent of respondents were in favour of a more restrictive policy on immigration; 38 percent said that they would consider voting for a candidate who voiced concerns about migration to Ireland. However, it is worth noting that 46 percent of respondents thought that immigration has benefited Ireland (O'Leary, 2024).

Party Responses to the Anti-immigration Discourse

The introduction of nativist messaging opens up space for a far-right populist explanation of the housing crisis as a crisis of immigration. This framing in turn offers competition for the left-wing explanation of the housing problem as linked to a corrupt political and financial elite, the explanation promoted by Sinn Féin.

As the issue of immigration surged on the voters' agenda, Sinn Féin began to lose support (Politico, 2024), although other issues also played a part. The emerging political discourse left Sinn Féin walking a tightrope to retain the heterogeneous coalition of voters it had recently gained. As O'Malley (2008) notes, to embrace anti-immigrant views would have been 'dissonant to its nationalist mythology'. An *Irish Times* poll from May 2024 showed that supporters of Sinn Féin (44 percent) and those who backed independents/smaller parties (52 percent) were most likely to vote for an anti-immigration candidate (O'Leary, 2024).

While some scholars describe the 'leftist credentials' used by Sinn Féin's to mobilize support for the housing issue as 'at best, highly questionable' (Coulter & Reynolds, 2020: 71), the party's centre-left policies and rhetoric resonated with the younger, progressive and more left-leaning part of the Irish electorate. Consequently, playing on anti-immigration sentiments, which might work with the nationalist base of the party, would have scared away younger and more liberal support (McDonald, 2023).

Responding to the new discourse on housing, the Sinn Féin leader, Mary Lou McDonald, recognized the electorate's frustration with both housing and immigration, while linking the issues to a failure of the political establishment. Decoupling the housing crisis from 'the new people' coming to Ireland, she stated that: 'All of that anger about housing, I share that anger. […] But that's on the government, not on new people coming into the state' (Pogatchnik, 2024). This stance on housing was also evident in another interview, in which McDonald argued that 'the government made a huge mistake in the way in which they brought vulnerable people, sometimes in large numbers, sometimes in the dead of night, into communities, to house them there, without going and saying to the community, "listen, here's what's happening, here's who's coming, here's why"' (Finn, 2023).

At the same time, however, Sinn Féin moved to take a tougher stance on immigration with reference to the housing crisis. The party positioned itself as being 'opposed to open borders', stating that it wanted a system that is 'fair, efficient and enforced' (Sinn Féin, 2024a). Highlighting the lack of housing, it stated that Ireland cannot 'continue accommodating people who should be in other EU countries' (Sinn Féin, 2024a).

In July 2024, the party presented a new immigration policy, demanding an audit of local services – housing, transport, health and education – before the opening of any accommodation centre for asylum seekers. The policy states that centres should be placed 'where the capacity and the services exist to support them not deprived communities that are already struggling'

(Sinn Féin, 2024b). Another important aspect was abolition of the two-tier system that gives Ukrainian refugees more rights than asylum seekers (Sinn Féin, 2024b). The party also opposed parts of the EU Migration and Asylum Pact, which was approved by the Irish Parliament in June 2024 by 79 votes for and 72 against (O'Halloran, 2024).

Sinn Féin is known for its strict party discipline. The leadership asked lawmakers to follow the party line on the issue of immigration. However, discontent continued to simmer within the party on several progressive issues. In 2018, two parliamentarians opposed to the right to abortion had left Sinn Féin because of the party's position on the referendum on this issue. Peadar Tóibín founded a new party, Aontú, and Carol Nolan became an independent. Both linked the Irish housing crisis to immigration and both were re-elected to the Dáil in 2020 and 2024. Carol Nolan argued for an immediate 'cap on the influx of asylum seekers' since 'asylum seekers arriving into Ireland every day is exacerbating the housing crisis' (Dáil Éireann debate, 2023). Aontú, meanwhile, highlighted increasing Irish homelessness and promised to 'ensure that non-citizens will no longer be prioritised over Irish citizens for any public service' (Aontú, 2025).

The new link between housing and migration also forced the coalition government to respond by emphasizing housing and immigration issues in tandem in a possible attempt to 'parrot the pariah' (van Spanje & de Graaf, 2018) while also addressing structural issues. In his first convention speech in April 2024, the then newly appointed prime minister, Simon Harris from

Fine Gael, made a pledge to build 250,000 homes in a five-year period while also promising a 'firmer system' of immigration (Leahy, 2024b). The aim would be to make Ireland less attractive for asylum seekers and Ukrainian refugees (*Irish Times*, 2024).

Since March 2024, newly arrived Ukrainians have only been allowed stay in state accommodation for 90 days, and the weekly allowance has been reduced for new arrivals from €220 per week to €38.80 for adults and €29.80 for children – the same amounts as for asylum seekers (Pollak, 2024). The government also decided to toughen conditions for unemployed Ukrainians already in the country, living in hotels and other 'state-provided serviced accommodation' where meals and other services are provided (P. Cunningham, 2024). The new rules apply to around one-third of the Ukrainian refugees in Ireland (Reuters, 2024).

In addition, more states were designated 'safe countries' (Department of Justice, 2024) to speed up the asylum process and the government started to address the problem of tented accommodation. In late April 2024, Harris announced in the Dáil that new 'makeshift shantytowns "wouldn't be allowed'" (The Journal, 2024b), and in May the same year camps in central Dublin were cleared by the authorities.

These initiatives seem to have had an effect. By February 2025, an estimated 29,000 Ukrainians had left Ireland (McGreevy, 2025) and the number of asylum seekers began to fall in the last quarter of 2024 (Pollak, 2024).

Independents and New Party Responses

The merging of housing with immigration in Irish political discourse benefited independent parliamentarians, Aontú and a category of 'other parties' that embraced the new problematization. Independents are freer to adopt populist doctrines than members of political parties (Suiter, 2016: 135). In the 2020 election, 19 independents were elected to the Dáil. Among the most vocal advocates of tougher immigration policies was the Rural Independent Group, which comprised six independent parliamentarians including the former Sinn Féin politician, Carol Nolan. In December 2023, the group presented a motion calling for an end to what it called 'asylum tourism' and asked the government to explain 'why unvetted single males, many from safe countries, are being accommodated in accommodation centres in small rural locations without any consultation whatsoever with local communities, despite the grave potential consequences for residents in those communities' (Dáil Éireann debate, 2023). It continued: 'Record inward migration is taking place in the same context as record-breaking homelessness' (Dáil Éireann debate, 2023). The focus was on asylum seekers but the group also played on anger over Ukrainians getting certain services for free while Irish citizens must pay (Dáil Éireann debate, 2023).

Also merging anti-immigration and housing rhetoric, two members of the Rural Independent Group created a new political party, Independent Ireland, in November 2023. The party presents itself as an alternative to Sinn Féin. It promises to limit

immigration and to provide help to homeless Irish families (*Irish Independent*, 2023). It also pursues farming issues (O'Malley, 2024: 229). Some commentators place it to the right of Fine Gael (Broder, 2024).

Three new far-right parties were also established in 2023: Ireland First, The Irish People and Farmers' Alliance (McDermott, 2024b), in addition to the existing Irish Freedom Party (since 2018) and the National Party (2016). Apart from mobilizing issues around migration and housing, members of the far-right parties often express discontent with Ireland's new abortion law, same-sex marriage, LGBT+ rights, Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs), the World Health Organization, green politics and the EU. They also play an active role in protests against Ukrainian migrants and asylum seekers (McDermott, 2024b).

A Far-Right Irish Future?

The results of the 2024 local and general elections reflect a set of shifting political struggles over the problem of housing and the link between housing and immigration. In the June local elections, immigration was a top priority for many voters (Carroll, 2024), enabling far-right candidates to mobilize support. However, by the November general election, the question had lost some of its appeal. Housing and homelessness remained key priorities for Irish voters, but only 6 percent of citizens listed immigration as their main concern (McDermott, 2024a).

The local elections represented a small break in the Irish trajectory as a state without a far-right representative in parliament: the Irish Freedom Party and the National Party won

one seat each and three independent candidates with far-right views were also elected. Several other independent candidates – some representing Independent Ireland – played on anti-immigration sentiments (Coughlan et al., 2024). In total 52 independents were elected and, of them, Independent Ireland gained 23 seats. The National Party, Irish Freedom Party, The Irish People and Ireland First received 1.7 percent of the vote. This figure was even higher in the elections to the European Parliament held at the same time – almost 5 percent voted for the four far-right parties and more than 6 percent voted for Independent Ireland, which won a seat in the European Parliament (K. Cunningham, 2024a).

Above all, the emergence of far-right issues in the local elections came at a cost to Sinn Féin. The party received less than 12 percent of first preference votes. Many independents and far-right parties used the housing issue in their campaigns and explained the current crisis with reference to asylum seekers and immigrants while Sinn Féin struggled to mobilize the protest vote (McDowell, 2024). As far-right candidates gathered around an 'ethno-nationalist vote' (O'Toole, 2024), the party's embrace of Irish nationalism without nativism came under pressure. Sinn Féin's mobilization of left-wing populist rhetoric also came under fire, as far-right candidates accused it of betraying working class communities, and being part of the political establishment (Leahy, 2024c).

The 2024 Irish local elections demonstrate how explaining the housing crisis as an issue of immigration made it possible for right-wing populists to gain a foothold on the

political stage. In Ireland, this also generated competition for left-wing parties, such as Sinn Féin, which relies on mobilizing votes by combining the questions of housing and homelessness with a non-nativist populist rhetoric.

Despite this trajectory in the local elections, however, the November 2024 general election constituted a shift back to the status quo, especially for the main parties in government. Fianna Fáil won the popular vote (21.86 percent) ahead of Fine Gael (20.8 percent) and Sinn Féin[3] (19.01 percent, 5.5 percentage points lower than in 2020). The Green Party lost all but one of its seats, which benefited the moderate left the Social Democrats and Labour; 16 independent candidates were elected. Independent Ireland won four seats, although three of its candidates were already sitting in the Dáil as independents, and Aontú doubled its seats from one to two. Turnout was low at less than 60 per cent.

In the general election campaign, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael played down issues of immigration (Harrison, 2024) and instead succeeded in shaping the discourse around the economy. Ireland's strong public finances (Murphy, 2025) also paved the way for generous promises from most parties. This primarily affected Sinn Féin. In contrast to the 2020 election, where the party spearheaded the discourse on the housing crisis, the main parties now entered the election with their own comprehensive housing strategies. The overall financial situation also benefited Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, portraying them as competent

managers of the Irish economy (K. Cunningham, 2024b). Finally, increased public spending on matters such as social welfare and rent support by the parties in power worked to take the edge of Sinn Féin's left wing criticism of the government.

Despite the formation of an alliance between the National Party, Ireland First, The Irish People and some independents (Ryan, 2024), none of the 60 to 70 far-right candidates in the general election came close to winning a seat (O'Toole, 2024; McDermott 2024c). The National Alliance together with the Irish Freedom Party gained only 1.5 percent of the vote (K. Cunningham, 2024b). This result demonstrates that it is harder to win a seat in the Dáil than it is to be elected as one of 949 councillors.[4] At the national level, the far-right parties lack of policies on issues other than immigration also played a part in deterring voters (McDermott, 2024c).

Despite the limited electoral gains for the far-right in the 2024 general election, there was a significant shift in the Irish political discourse. Far-right disinformation, violence, threats and harassment were problems in the run-up to both the local and the national elections (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2024a; Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2024b). Several far-right candidates received more votes in the general election than in the local elections, and close to 20 candidates received more than 2 percent of the first preference votes (McDermott 2024c). The announcement of the results was followed by accusations of rigged elections (Raymond, 2024). In addition to the discourse of election fraud among far-right candidates that failed

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[3] Sinn Féin won one more seat (39) than Fine Gael (38).

[4] Elected members of local councils.

to gain popular support, politicians in the group 'independents and others' adopted 'elements of the far-right playbook in their local campaigning' without necessarily being branded as far-right (Kitching, 2024). Research shows how political elites spreading disinformation is a growing problem, particularly among populist parties on the far-right (Törnberg & Chueri, 2025). The emergence of this tendency among Irish political actors echoes developments elsewhere.

The future of far-right populism in Ireland depends on how well actors can respond to the 'politics of place' (Adler & Ansell, 2020: 344) and the extent to which the main parties steer clear of nativist messaging and cooperation with far-right actors. In early 2025, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael formed a new government with the support of seven members of the Regional Independent Group (RIG) and two independents from Kerry (Osborne, 2025; Horgan-Jones & McQuinn, 2025). The largest parties won on promises of a strong economy, and with an ambition to address the housing crisis and other welfare issues while playing down issues of immigration. The strategy has promise but realization of the government's ambitions is not just a question of political will. The new Irish government will have to navigate a potential EU-US trade war. Without a clear political programme for addressing the structural issues around housing, a declining Irish economy in combination with global far-right and national elite-driven disinformation could pave the way for stronger far-right populist representation in the Dáil.

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