



DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

SHIFTING LANDSCAPES & LANGUAGE

Democratic volatility and the evolving
political discourse in Ireland

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Ireland has not yet had an electorally successful far right movement, but elements within the mainstream have begun to utilise far right rhetoric.



There are cohorts among the population who are increasingly alienated and frustrated with Ireland's political and economic system. They are vulnerable to radicalisation.



Political practitioners are concerned about these challenges but continue to make strategic errors in addressing them.

1. INTRODUCTION

In November 2024, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and TASC ran a seminar as part of broader efforts to better understand Ireland's recent increase in far-right activism. The presentations examined whether increased nativist street agitation is seeping into the conduct of representative democracy, as well as the dynamics of persuasion and political alignment among right-leaning young men. These enquiries were predicated on the thesis that electoral contests only provide part of the picture of the political landscape, and there is also the potential for far-right rhetoric and positioning to influence established parties.

Comparative examples from elsewhere in Europe show the opportunities available to fringe organisations to influence mainstream politics in the absence of direct electoral success. This report charts this process through tools of discourse analysis, ethnographic research and senior stakeholder interviews. What emerges is a picture of a shifting political landscape, in which mainstream actors have shown diverse responses to far-right rhetoric. While some have resolutely opposed reactionary language, others have appeased and even appropriated its messages.

2. POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AS A BATTLE FIELD

In asserting that there are means by which far-right actors can be successful, other than being directly elected to local councils and parliamentary chambers, we must first establish a framework for testing this. Our thesis is that it is possible to test shifts in positioning among mainstream political actors to determine whether they have appropriated, endorsed, appeased or opposed far-right talking points and rhetoric.

We have done this using tools and evidence from cognitive linguistics and behavioural science to demonstrate the way in which political actors use narrative framing to address sensitive issues such as immigration, gender, climate action and broader culture wars. Using the writings of Daniel Kahneman, Dan Ariely, Zoltán Kövecses, Frank Luntz, Paul Thibodeau and Anat Shenker-Osorio, we observed rhetorical habits across the spectrum. This process encompasses an in-depth analysis a sample of almost 500 language tokens from political communication from 2017–2024. In each instance, we examined rhetorical structures and devices to provide a discourse analysis that covered overt and covert communications techniques.

Our second avenue of enquiry focused on a specific audience segment for an in-depth ethnographic study that examined six young Irish men (ages 18–29) with varied socio-economic and educational backgrounds, exploring their values, frustrations, and susceptibility to far-right narratives. They were selected and screened based on demographic criteria from a sample provided by the Ireland Thinks polling company. The participants were interviewed using the FrameShift

MindCamSM methodology, in which storytelling and the generation of imagery reveal deep-seated emotions and perceptions beyond verbal responses. The third portion of the project comprised online and in-person interviews with six key stakeholders in politics, civil society and the media regarding the dynamics we have observed in our earlier research. Conversations were off the record and, therefore, no quotes will be directly attributed to any individual.

3. THE DYNAMICS OF PERSUASION

Human decision-making often relies on cognitive shortcuts like stereotypes, biases, and associative networks, which link concepts in the mind. For instance, familiar phrases like »weapons of mass destruction« evoke specific mental connections due to pre-existing biases. This process, described as »cognitive ease« by Kahneman, occurs when information aligns with our expectations, making it feel true. Conversely, conflicting information induces cognitive strain. Political discourse taps into these cognitive mechanisms. Words such as »fairness« or »freedom« can mean different things to individuals based on their biases, while terms like »taxation« or »state intervention« carry ideological weight. Politicians leverage these associations to enhance their persuasiveness to target audiences. They have at their disposal a toolkit of linguistic habits to assist them:

Framing directs attention to specific aspects of an issue while excluding others, much like a picture frame. Effective framing aligns with audience predispositions, minimising cognitive strain. Politicians may adopt existing frames or reframe issues to align with their values, often through metaphorical language that appeals to intuition.

- **Priming** further shapes perception by influencing the ease with which related concepts come to mind. In politics, priming can subtly alter opinions on topics like immigration or public safety by associating them with fear, scarcity, or other emotional triggers. Case studies demonstrate how metaphors like »influx« or »balance« frame immigration debates, emphasising either societal pressure or fairness.
- **Sequencing:** The order in which information is presented affects audience judgment. Positive traits listed first (e.g., »intelligent« before »stubborn«) can create a favourable impression. For instance, sequencing statements about »illegal migrants« and government actions can frame deportations as necessary and publicly supported.
- **Hedging and passive voice** soften potentially contentious messages by diluting agency or certainty. For example, phrases like »measures that will have the effect of...« or »evictions have increased« avoid assigning direct responsibility, reducing backlash. Negation (e.g., »Ireland is not full«) inadvertently reinforces opposition frames by repeating their language, making refutations less effective.

- **Collocation:** The habitual pairing of certain words creates emotional resonance through collocation. For instance, the term »fair« is variably paired with »firm,« »equitable,« or »efficient,« reflecting ideological stances.
- **Metaphors** are important tools to simplify abstract issues, but they bring their own value judgements. For example, presenting inequality as a »gap« implies inevitability, while describing it as a »barrier« or »imbalance« suggests a need for action. Metaphors also shape moral and policy preferences. Left-leaning voters respond to metaphors emphasising care and reciprocity, while right-leaning voters favour metaphors tied to strength and self-reliance. In debates on immigration, metaphors like »container« (scarcity) or »body and sickness« (societal health) reveal underlying biases.

Effective communication leverages familiar frames, emotional triggers, and intuitive metaphors to align messages with audience biases, ensuring cognitive ease. While our discourse analysis was of political representatives speaking to multiple audiences, the ethnographic study of right-leaning young men demonstrated the context within which they would receive this messaging. An initial profile of the group was instructive as to the type of biases that would guide one towards a right-leaning political position.

The young men we interviewed have a broadly nationalist orientation. They strongly identify with Irish heritage, valuing symbols like GAA, traditional music, and local pubs, which foster a sense of community and pride. They view Irish traditions and communal ties as central to national identity and unity. This is coupled with economic frustration and the participants expressed discontent with Ireland's economic challenges, such as high housing costs, inflation, and stagnant career opportunities which, they feel, have eroded traditional community values. They feel trapped in their circumstances, describing limited upward mobility and societal inequality as demoralising.

The group had a shared sentiment of distrust and disconnection from the Irish politics, which they perceived as an elitist »echo chamber« resistant to change. Some advocate for a complete overhaul, seeing the current system as corrupt and ineffective in addressing issues like housing and immigration. It was notable that mental health struggles are a significant part of the men's stories, with some participants openly sharing experiences of depression and suicidal ideation, compounded a negative impact of social media on their self-esteem. Isolation and a sense of inadequacy are common themes, as they wrestle with societal expectations and personal aspirations.

They voice frustration with neoliberal capitalism, globalisation and broader societal shifts which reinforce feelings of powerlessness. Their opposition to this does not lead them towards a left-wing analysis but towards a desire for belonging, which is grounded in more conservative and reactionary values, and sometimes far-right leanings. Their disillusionment with mainstream politics and perceived loss of communi-

ty values positions them as an audience that is susceptible to far-right persuasion.

Supporting this, the senior stakeholders we interviewed noted the strategy employed by far-right agitators in weaponising socioeconomic challenges and discontent for political ends. They feel that economic frustrations are making some groups more receptive to radical messages. This has been especially pronounced in the growing appeal of far-right ideologies among disillusioned young men.

Far-right actors have been effective in the tactics they have used, amplifying divisive rhetoric on immigration and cultural grievances through social media, and adopting a right-wing playbook seen in the US and elsewhere. They assess the response of mainstream politics to have been mostly defensive. While some parties resist far-right ideologies, others subtly adjust stances on contentious issues for short-term gain.

4. FRAMING IN AN IRISH CONTEXT

The discourse analysis observed some common framing techniques employed by Irish politicians with respect to »hot button« issues such as immigration. The techniques transcend ideological divides but are used differently depending on the speaker's perspective.

- **The »decency« frame:** Politicians from across the spectrum appeal to shared notions of decency, linking it to their point of view. Terms like »ordinary decent« or »who we are« are used to resonate with community values, but can support both open and closed perspectives on immigration.
- **Nationalism and identity:** Both far-right agitators and mainstream politicians invoke nationalist motifs. While opponents of far-right rhetoric often criticise its divisive nature, there is a notable habit in some quarters to invoke benign notions of nationalism which reject division. While well intentioned, it is counterproductive, risking »othering« and excluding groups that do not fit the essentialist notions of Irish identity.
- **Inoculation and depoliticised language:** Politicians often preface controversial views with statements condemning racism or extremism to shield themselves from criticism. Depoliticised terms like »what's called the right« and rejection of traditional political labels also serve to neutralise opposition, or to provide cover for views that align with the right.
- **Invoking illegitimate financial gain:** Some political representatives and candidates have drawn deliberate links between the profit motive and the immigration system in order to discredit the immigration system as currently constituted. Some have even described accommodation providers as exploitative and linked their criticism to broader societal concerns, such as housing and the tourism sector.

- **Criminality:** Opponents of immigration frequently draw connections between migration and crime, even when evidence is lacking.
- **Anti-elitist populism:** Populist rhetoric targets elites perceived to have a left-wing bias (NGOs, media, or environmental advocates), depicting them as out of touch with ordinary people. This technique appeals to grievances based on a range of cleavages, including urban-rural, class and cultural.

The analysis demonstrates that political actors do not need to be explicit in their ideology, but can signal a particular viewpoint on contentious social and political issues through their choice of language (dog whistle). It can have the effect of reinforcing exclusionary narratives under the guise of protecting community values or addressing systemic concerns.

Looking to the ethnographic analysis of the group of young men, one can see how some of the patterns evident in the language of political candidates can resonate with this alienated cohort. These men hold a highly romanticised notion of a serene, traditional Ireland, free from industrialisation and modern pressures, where community and nature are paramount. They valorise small town living as a refuge from the fast-paced modern world. They imagine a harmonious Ireland where wages are fair, services meet needs, and community thrives.

Their ideal leader embodies characteristics including forthrightness, courage, and integrity, but also empathy. Figures like Michael Collins, Elon Musk and Napoleon Bonaparte emerged from the MindCamSM analysis, along with strongman figures like Donald Trump. They respected the strength and perceived anti-establishment traits embodied in these characters.

5. PATTERNS EMERGING

The discourse analysis investigated positioning and rhetorical presentation of Irish political parties and independent politicians on contentious social issues such as immigration, climate action, hate speech legislation, and LGBTQ+ rights. It also covered political events such as the family and care referendums.

- **Fianna Fáil** initially adopted relatively open rhetoric, and representatives have been prone to using economically focused justifications for immigration. More recently, the party has seen some internal divisions and a shift towards more conservative and restrictive positions by representatives such as Lisa Chambers and Barry Cowen. Some representatives have adopted strident tones on social issues, while others such as Willie O’Dea critique perceived »woke« influences. There has been some highly fraught localised criticism of refugee reception centres, leading to candidates departing from the party either through expulsion or resignation.
- **Fine Gael** had taken a broadly progressive position on immigration and hate crime legislation. However, during the latter part of Varadkar’s premiership and since Simon Harris took over, there has been a notable shift to the right. The party has taken to linking housing shortages to immigration and rowed back on commitments regarding social issues. Internally, there has been something of a generational divide with older members advocating a conservative reorientation. Strategically, Fine Gael also uses contentious issues to critique Sinn Féin’s alleged political inconsistency.
- **Sinn Féin** also initially took a broadly progressive line but has shown increasing ambivalence on immigration and climate action. Mary Lou McDonald’s criticisms of government migration policy have linked it to profit-seeking private interests, while Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire has invoked »sovereignty« narratives around migration policy along with the use of localised »container« metaphors, ruling out opening asylum centres in specific areas.
- **Independent politicians** have tended to be the most strident of those with parliamentary representation in invoking harsh anti-immigration and reactionary rhetoric. Common habits include the frequent use of terms like »woke« and criticising climate and hate speech legislation. They frame opposition to asylum centres as community advocacy, and cite immigration as a key cause of strained resources rather than preexisting policy failures.
- **The Labour Party** has maintained a consistently progressive stance on immigration and social issues, emphasising fairness, decency, and equity. Leader Ivana Bacik and Aodhán Ó Riordáin MEP have actively countered narratives that scapegoat immigrants and people seeking asylum. They have heavily criticised reactionary populism, including from mainstream parties, and in particular Sinn Féin’s perceived pivot to the right. They have directly criticised the linguistic framing used by their competitors.
- **The Social Democrats** also adopt an open, compassionate position on immigration, reframing debates to focus on systemic issues and governmental responsibility. Leader Holly Cairns highlight the need for humane asylum policies and makes direct reference to divisive government rhetoric in her critiques.
- **The Green Party** has managed to uphold a progressive stance despite the constraints of coalition government with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. They have countered efforts to link between housing shortages and immigration and emphasised factual narratives.
- **People Before Profit-Solidarity** strongly opposes scapegoating of migrants, directly challenging right-wing narratives adopted by competitors like Sinn Féin. Representatives emphasise solidarity and systemic re-

form but occasionally have been prone to diluting their own messaging through the overuse of negation.

Within the ethnographic study, the young men we interviewed show a strong disillusionment with politics and media. They see mainstream parties (in particular Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and Labour) as corrupt and disconnected, and view Sinn Féin as having compromised its working-class roots. Distrust in media, especially RTÉ, stems from perceived bias and fear-mongering during events like the COVID-19 crisis. Alternative outlets like Gript Media offer some appeal despite being viewed as polarising.

Ultimately, their world view reflects a conflict between their individual struggles and their aspirations. They feel disillusioned by their personal situations, taking some personal responsibility but also angry with the world and desirous of societal reform. They want to see practical change, such as addressing high living costs, improving infrastructure, and supporting young people's potential are seen as critical steps to building a better Ireland, but they have sought recourse in populist and traditionalist solutions.

The senior stakeholder interviewees addressed some of these challenges. As political and media practitioners, they have faith in Ireland's institutional and democratic resilience, but they do worry about complacency and rising far-right electoral prospects. Their analysis has an interesting parallel with those of the young men, citing an emerging radicalisation around COVID-19, climate action, anti-trans sentiment, and economic precarity contributing to political extremism and disenfranchisement. With trust in traditional media declining among those prone to far-right narratives, and with social media amplifying polarisation, it has become increasingly difficult for journalists to carry out their work. Increased hostility in online spaces leads journalists to disengage, allowing »citizen journalists« with fringe views to dominate.

6. CONCLUSION

The analysis provided here is predicated on the notion that words matter, and that they can have an impact on the policy preferences of our communities and societies. How political leaders choose to speak about sensitive topics can influence behaviour at street level, and a shift in tone can bring the Overton Window in one direction or another. However, mainstream political figures will not always be as explicit in how they articulate controversial opinions. The selective use of metaphors and other framing techniques has the effect of priming an audience to be more receptive to particular arguments.

This analysis showed a demonstrable shift in rhetorical positioning among some parties with representation in Dáil Éireann, while others stayed consistent. Ultimately, the appropriation of far-right rhetoric is risky, and has the effect of normalising positions that were previously outside the pale. The political stakeholders we interviewed were keenly

aware of this, and urged that clear, consistent communication at community level would be necessary to counter misinformation and far-right narratives effectively.

Offering easy solutions and scapegoats with limited power, far-right narratives are well equipped to embed themselves in many of our cities, towns and villages. Where there are significant economic disparities and marginalised communities with low levels of democratic trust, it will take leadership and effective communication from political representatives to rebuild confidence in public institutions.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Kitching holds an MSc in Comparative Politics from the London School of Economics and a BA in History and Politics from University College Dublin. He began his career in Brussels at the European Parliament and as a Policy Advisor at the Foundation for European Progressive Studies, where he ran the foundation's democracy programme. He moved to London, where he became Director of Social and Political Research at AudienceNet, a public opinion research agency, running research projects in more than 30 countries. Returning to Ireland, he took on roles in the community sector, as well as in public affairs and corporate communications. He founded Bassline Strategy in 2020, to draw these various strands together in a unified research and strategic advisory service. He is a member of the Political Studies Association of Ireland, the Public Relations Institute of Ireland and the National Union of Journalists.

Cathal Lathrop is originally from Dublin and studied Engineering at TCD followed by some post-grad work at DCU (also in Engineering). Moved to the US in 2004 and continued in the engineering space until approximately 2018/2019. He decided to switch careers at that point upon seeing the continuing rise of Trumpism in the US (and similar far-right successes), and joined a small group of behavioural scientists & marketers who also switched over from the corporate world. We wanted to see if any of our skills could be used for good. Co-founded FrameShift in 2019 with three other individuals to develop & test persuasive digital messaging and conduct deep-dive qualitative interviews to understand what's really going on with a particular target audience. What could break through to a right-wing audience, since it was clear that facts didn't matter anymore. In the expanding digital space, progressive messaging was failing to break through. Since then, FrameShift has worked with a variety of progressive audiences to expand the work. Topics include public education, voting rights, trans rights, election gerrymandering, voter mobilisation, as well as direct election work in the US. He moved back to Ireland in late 2022, continuing the work in the US, and looking to continue the use of FrameShift's deep-dive interview methodology.

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While there has, hitherto, been a degree of complacency among political actors and media about the prospect of an insurgent far right in Ireland, the increased intensity and violence of far-right protest has brought the phenomenon into sharper focus. Electoral contests only provide part of the picture, and there is also the potential for far-right rhetoric and positioning to influence established parties. Comparative examples from elsewhere in Europe, and indeed from Ireland's past, speak to the greater success enjoyed by fringe organisations in influencing mainstream politics than in securing electoral success for themselves.



This report charts a research project which examines the impact of the far right on mainstream politics, as an initial proof of concept for wider research. This paper presents a detailed discourse analysis of hundreds of samples of public communications from political representatives, along with ethnographic research among young men who are susceptible to far right positions. Interviews with senior political staff, media and civil society representatives provide a headline overview from those making decisions every day about how to meet these challenges.



What emerges is a compelling picture of a shifting political landscape, which raises further avenues for enquiry. This report documents the contested nature of political communication in Ireland at present and identifies emerging patterns.

Further information on the topic can be found here:
ireland.fes.de