WHY IS THERE STILL NO MAJOR FAR-RIGHT PARTY IN IRELAND?

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, Lorka Ó hAnnracháin, candidate for the MA/ degree in Political Science declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

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ABSTRACT

Almost every country in the West now has a significant far-right movement, yet the non-emergence of far-right politics has been comparatively understudied. Ireland is one of the only democracies where there is still no significant far-right party, yet many of the typical conditions for far right emergence, such as high levels of immigration; a globalised, neoliberal economy; and rapid cultural changes are present, and there has been an increase in far-right violence and protests recently. This puzzle, therefore, gives rise to the central research question of this thesis: why is there still no major far-right party in Ireland?

I systematically examine the main theories of far right emergence in the political science literature on both the demand and supply-side, and assess the extent to which they are applicable to the Irish case. This thesis finds that the weakness of the far right in Ireland is best explained by supply-side factors, emphasizing their importance in understanding the emergence of the far right. Specifically, the central argument focuses on the political space available to a far-right party in Ireland, asserting that Sinn Féin, a left-wing nationalist party, limits this space and attracts potential far-right voters. Using 2020 Irish election data, I show that Sinn Féin commands significant support from potential far-right voters and explain how this situation has developed.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

Almost every country in the West now has a significant far right movement, and the far right is increasingly often seen as an inevitable and permanent feature of electoral politics in modern democracies. Cas Mudde's influential "pathological normalcy" thesis, which holds that far-right politics is the normal feature of modern democracies rather than a pathology (Mudde 2010), looks ever more convincing as even countries such as Portugal, Spain and Canada, where there was no significant far right for long periods, have seen the emergence of electorally viable far right parties. While there is a wealth of literature examining the emergence of the far right in numerous countries, the non-emergence of far-right politics has been comparatively understudied. Given the near-ubiquity of the far right today, the absence of a far-right party in any modern democracy is a more puzzling phenomenon than its emergence. Ireland is one of the only democracies where there is still no significant far-right party, yet many of the typical conditions for far right emergence, such as high levels of immigration; a globalised, neoliberal economy; and rapid cultural changes are present, and there has been an increase in far-right violence and protests recently. This puzzle, therefore, gives rise to the central research question of this thesis: *why is there still no major far-right party in Ireland?*

This thesis argues that the continued lack of a major far-right party in Ireland is not due to a lack of popular demand. Rather, the main reason is that Sinn Féin, a left-wing nationalist party, limits the political space of the far-right and commands significant support from potential far-right voters. In modern democracies, the tendency has been a decline in voting along class lines, and the increased importance of cultural issues in politics (Kriesi, Restructuration of Partisan Politics and the Emergence of a New Cleavage Based on Values 2010). Therefore, the

left is losing large swathes of its former working-class vote, and far-right populists are attracting many of these voters by campaigning on cultural issues such as immigration. In Ireland, however, this trend is reversed. While the Irish political system has historically not been characterised by class voting, an increasing alignment along class lines is taking place, with Sinn Féin becoming the main party of the Irish left as well as the Irish working class. Sinn Féin's politics is left-wing and progressive, but also nationalist and populistic. As the main source of nationalist and populist politics in Ireland, Sinn Féin has successfully gained the support of many working-class, anti-establishment, nationalistic voters who may otherwise have supported a far-right party. Using 2020 Irish election data, I show that potential far-right voters in Ireland support Sinn Féin in large numbers, and outline how this situation has arisen.

This thesis is a case study of Ireland. I systematically examine the main theories of far right emergence in the political science literature on both the demand and supply-side, and assess the extent to which they are applicable to the Irish case. Demand-side explanations refer to both the socio-economic conditions that create demand for far-right politics, as well as citizens' actual demand and attitudinal proximity to the far right. Supply-side explanations focus mainly on the political opportunities available to potential far-right actors, but also on the behaviour of far-right actors themselves (i.e. is their strategy and discourse conducive to success). On both the supply and demand-side, I use *general explanations* found in the broader political science literature and assess their viability using evidence from the Irish case, however, in section 3.1 my analysis is largely built on *context-specific explanations,* focusing on Ireland's unique history and idiosyncrasies.

This thesis begins on the demand side, first examining the socio-political conditions most widely associated with increased demand for far-right politics in section 2.1, and next, assessing the prevalence of attitudes conducive to far-right mobilisation among Irish citizens

in section 2.2. The appraisal of demand-side theories shows a distinct lack of convincing explanations for the absence of far-right politics in Ireland. Following the analysis of demand-side explanations, it examines context-specific explanations which cannot be neatly placed on either the demand or supply-side in section 3.1, focusing mainly on the history of Irish nationalism. This section yields mixed results, and highlights avenues for further research to fully understand the relationship between the history of Irish nationalism and the weakness of the contemporary far right. Following this, it examines a number of supply-side explanations (media landscape; the political system; and the existing far right) in sections 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4, which also yield largely mixed results and open up avenues for future research. Section 3.5 turns to the last supply-side factor included in this thesis, examining the political space available to a far-right party in Ireland. My findings indicate that the absence of a far-right party in Ireland is primarily explained by the fact that Sinn Féin occupies the political space of a far-right party, commanding support from many of its potential supporters. I conclude by outlining a research agenda building on this study. Overall, this thesis shows that the weakness of the far right in Ireland is better explained by supply-side explanations, and demonstrates the importance of considering supply-side factors when studying the emergence of the far right.

1.2 Defining "the far right"

Several terms have been used to describe the type of politics I call "far-right" in this thesis, such as "radical-right," "right-wing populism," and "extreme-right." I follow Cas Mudde (2019, 7) in using "far-right" as an umbrella term to describe both the radical and the extreme right. According to Mudde, "radical-right" actors reject *liberal* democracy, but are not entirely anti-democratic, whereas the extreme right is defined by its rejection of the fundamental tenets of democracy. The radical right is more common today, and typical

examples include Le Pen's Front National and Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom, whereas extreme-right parties are typically neo-fascist in nature, such as the Greek Golden Dawn party.

The vast majority of the contemporary far right can be described as "radical-right populism," and therefore Mudde's (2007) conceptualisation of the radical right as consisting of three core elements – nativism, authoritarianism, and populism – is used as an analytical framework throughout this thesis. However, the lines between the radical and extreme right can be difficult to distinguish, and radical-right populism can have extreme-right elements, so to avoid confusion I use the term "far-right" throughout this thesis.

1.3 Literature on the absence of the far right in Ireland

There is no consensus on why there is no major far right in Irish politics. Eoin O'Malley's (2008) argument is widely cited and convincing, and this thesis builds on O'Malley's work. He argues that Sinn Féin, despite being a progressive party, occupies the "electoral space" of a far-right party, attracting a disproportionate amount of voters with far-right attitudes and drawing from the same demographics from which the far right typically draws. He shows that support for Sinn Féin is statistically linked to anti-immigrant views. Furthermore, he shows that the demographic profile of the typical Sinn Féin supporter is remarkably similar to that of the typical far right voter: he finds that Sinn Féin supporters more likely to be young, working class, and feel like they have not benefitted from Ireland's economic growth. O'Malley's article is also more thorough than many other studies in that he carries out a systematic review of the necessary conditions for far-right emergence, in which he includes six conditions:

1. A post industrial society exposed to rapid industrial change […]
2. High levels of immigration and popular intolerance of immigration...

3. Increased importance of the cultural cleavage.
4. Convergence in the political space and dealignment […]
5. Openness of the party system to new entrants […]
6. Partiocracy – where the parties are closely interlinked with the state […] (2008, 964)

He shows that all of these conditions are present in Ireland at the time of writing in order to prove that the absence of a far right in Ireland is due to Sinn Féin. O'Malley considers alternative explanations which argue that the mainstreaming of nativism (Garner 2007) and populism (Fanning and Mutwarasibo 2007) have prevented the rise of far right populism, but does not consider the argument later suggested by Hix (2020) that Ireland's responsive and participatory political system is the reason for the lack of a far right. There are a number of other potential explanations not considered by O'Malley, which this thesis will consider. However, the main reason a re-examination of the Irish case is in order is due to the significant changes to the Irish political landscape since O'Malley's article was written.

Firstly, shortly after the article was written, Ireland's economy was ravaged by the 2008 financial crisis, and support for Fianna Fáil, the party which had dominated Irish politics since the inception of the state, collapsed, opening up the political space for new challengers. This political space was largely exploited by Sinn Féin, rather than a radical-right challenger, which is now the dominant party of the left. In short, the explanation that Sinn Féin has prevented the emergence of the far right still appears plausible, but the dynamics of this phenomenon have changed greatly. Fifteen years ago Sinn Féin was a fringe nationalist party, with a voting base similar to that of a far-right party, yet now it is the most popular party and the face of the Irish left, with a distinctly left-wing base (Muller and Regan 2021). For O'Malley's explanation to still hold, it must be thoroughly revised.

O'Malley and Fitzgibbon (2015) do tackle the puzzle of the non-emergence of far-right populism in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. While a thorough consideration of the

role of Irish political history is somewhat absent in O'Malley's (2008) article, O'Malley and Fitzgibbon (2015) turn their focus towards Ireland's colonial history, and argue that the anti-colonial character of Irish nationalism is not conducive to far-right nationalist mobilisation. This helps explain why Sinn Féin's left-nationalism has enjoyed political success, whereas right-wing nationalism has failed to take hold in Ireland.

The explanations for the lack of an Irish far right proposed by Garner (2007) and Fanning and Mutwarasibo (2007) are centred on the incorporation of populism and nativism into mainstream Irish politics. As O'Malley (2008) argues, the evidence for these claims is questionable at best: given the ubiquity of anti-establishment far right parties, this explanation would be more convincing if it could be shown that mainstream Irish politics is uniquely nativist or populist in an international context – which appears rather implausible. Furthermore, it contradicts other research which suggests that far right parties are less successful if they are widely stigmatised and seen as extreme (Bolin, Dahlberg and Blombäck 2023), and that the mainstreaming of far right views and talking points is in fact conducive to far right success (Kallis 2013, Krzyżanowski 2020, Mendes and Dennison 2021).

Duncan McDonnell (2008) argues that Fianna Fáil's mainstreaming of populism and Sinn Féin limiting the electoral space for a far-right party have prevented the emergence of the far right, but he concludes by stressing that the emergence of far-right populism is both possible and likely. Given the collapse of Fianna Fáil's popularity and the destabilisation of the party system after the financial crash – which happened after this article was written – as well as the near-ubiquity of the far right in the present day, McDonnell's argument cannot explain the continued non-emergence of a far-right party fifteen years on. He also mentions the fact that the large number of independents in Irish politics commanding an anti-establishment vote limit the political space for new anti-establishment parties.

The role of independents in preventing far right emergence is also considered by Hix (2020) and Bowler and Farrell (2017), who offer primarily institutional explanations for the non-emergence of the Irish far right. Bowler and Farrell argue that getting a new party off the ground is difficult in Ireland, despite the ostensibly open nature of Ireland's proportional electoral system. Hix (2020) argues that Ireland's representative electoral system; tradition of local politics, regular referendums; and deliberative citizens' assemblies have made the Irish political system uniquely responsive and therefore unsuitable to the anti-establishment appeal of the far right.

While several scholars have addressed the issue of the lack of a far right in Ireland, none of them have taken the approach of compiling a comprehensive list of theories from the broader political science literature and comparatively assessing their applicability. Thus, a clear assessment of which explanations for the lack of an Irish far right is most useful is missing, and the existence of multiple explanations for this phenomenon means that there is no clear answer. O'Malley (2008) is perhaps the most thorough with regard to considering other factors, but his six conditions for far right emergence do not cover all the available explanations in the political science literature, and his discussion of alternative explanations focuses on Garner (2007) and Fanning and Mutwarasibo's (2007) research on the Irish case, without considering alternative explanations from the wider political science literature. For this reason, I believe the approach taken in this thesis stands to make a significant contribution to the literature.

1.4 Literature on the absence of the far right in a broader context

There are a large number of theories explaining far right emergence – some point to cultural grievances (Norris and Inglehart 2019), some attribute it largely to globalisation and economic factors (Rodrik 2021); some point to political reasons such as declining trust in the

political process (Halikiopoulou and Vasilopoulou 2018); and several scholars have attempted to map out the myriad interconnected causes of far-right emergence (Betz 1994, Golder 2016, Hawkins, Read and Pauwels 2017). Due to the large variety of causal explanations, it is difficult to pinpoint why some (increasingly few) countries do not have a significant far-right force in electoral politics, and in some countries it is a new and minor phenomenon, whereas many other countries have large and well-established far right parties. Scholars have attempted to explain the lack of a far right in various countries and regions such as Spain (Alonso and Kaltwasser 2015) Wallonia (De Jonge 2021) and Canada (Ambrose and Mudde 2015), and while each of these articles give brief overviews of existing explanation before presenting evidence to support their claim, none of them could reasonably claim to have comprehensively considered and refuted the potential alternative explanations, as this thesis aims to do. The validity of the findings of each of these studies is undoubtedly called into question by this fact, as they fail rule out the many other (potentially better) explanations for the phenomenon they are trying to explain. Therefore, I believe this thesis is well positioned to make a meaningful contribution to the literature, not only by providing new insights into the Irish case, but also by exemplifying a more rigorous method of explaining why the far right is absent in a specific country or region.

Compiling a comprehensive list of explanations for far right emergence is made easier by the fact that several scholars have already done so. Rydgren (2007) and Eatwell (2016) have written helpful overviews of the theories explaining the emergence of the far right. I draw primarily on these two influential articles to compile a list of the theories that I examine in this thesis. These theories are shown in Table 1, and will be explained and assessed in the following sections.

Type of explanation	Explanation
Demand side: conditions that create demand	Immigration and ethnic competition (general explanation)
	Economic factors (general explanation)
	Post-materialist values / cultural backlash (general explanation)
	Social breakdown and declining participation (general explanation)
Demand side: demand measured by attitudes	Attitudes: nativism (general explanation)
	Attitudes: authoritarianism (general explanation)
	Attitudes: populism (general explanation)
Between supply and demand	Irish nationalism in the context of the far right (context-specific explanation)
Supply-side explanations	Media landscape (general explanation)
	Political system (general explanation)
	The existing far right (general explanation)
	Political space: Sinn Féin (general and context-specific explanation)

Table 1: List of theories to be examined

Chapter 2: Demand-side explanations

There are two main groups of demand-side factors. The first group, which contains social, economic, or political conditions, leads to demand for far-right politics. The second group consists of, actual popular demand and attitudes among citizens that are adjacent to the politics of far-right parties.

2.1 Demand-side explanations: Conditions that create demand

In this section I will examine four explanations in the first category:

2.1a Immigration and ethnic competition

2.1b Economic factors

2.1c Post-materialist values and cultural backlash

2.1d Social breakdown and declining participation

2.1a: Immigration and ethnic competition

High levels of immigration and asylum seekers – while usually not considered to be a fundamental cause of far-right politics – can nevertheless help the far right mobilise. It is usually difficult to tell the extent to which outrage about immigration and asylum seekers is created by or capitalised on by far-right parties. However, it is clear that the far right does mobilise around the issues of immigration and asylum-seeking, so low levels of immigration and asylum-seeking and/or a lack of popular outrage about these issues could be a significant

reason for the absence of a far-right party. In this section, I argue that this is clearly not the reason for the lack of a far-right party in Ireland.

Immigration into Ireland has increased significantly in the last few decades, especially during the 'Celtic Tiger' years (Ireland's economic boom in the 1990's and 2000's, and as of 2021, Ireland has the fourth highest number of immigrants relative to population in the EU (Eurostat 2021). Furthermore, Ireland has taken a considerable number of refugees recently, with 81,256 in 2022 according to World Bank data – a 748.98% increase from 2021, and by far the highest in the history of the state (Macrotrends n.d.). The "ethnic competition thesis," states that anti-immigration sentiment often goes hand-in-hand with concerns around scarce resources support for the far right, and is driven by a desire to reduce competition with immigrants over resources such as housing, jobs and benefits (Rydgren 2007, 250). Although Ireland's macro-economic indicators are good and unemployment is extremely low (ESRI 2023), housing is extremely expensive and scarce (Waldron 2023).

The levels of immigration and asylum-seeking, as well as the scarcity of housing are the types of conditions that would be expected to drive far-right support according to the "ethnic competition thesis." In fact, the main theme of recent far-right protests and violence in Ireland has been opposition to immigration and asylum-seekers (Gallagher 2023, Euronews 2023, McDermott 2023), and much of the framing of their message corresponds with the expectations of the "ethnic competition thesis." Many of the concerns voiced by far-right groups and protesters are around housing and express anger at the idea of asylum seekers being housed over native Irish people, and the idea that Ireland is "full" and that we should "house our own" first is a common theme of these protests (Ducourtieux 2023, Hearne 2023).

2.1b: Economic factors

Several authors (e.g. Betz 1994, Broz, Frieden and Weymouth 2021, Rodrik 2017, 2021) have sought to explain the rise of the far right through economic factors, and the economic conditions associated with the rise of the far right are very much present in Ireland. Socio-economic changes have certainly had a major impact on the political landscape, likely contributing to the rise of the far right in two main interconnected ways. First, there is a growing divide between the 'winners' and 'losers' of globalisation, which plays out on both economic and cultural dimensions. Globalisation has brought prosperity and opportunity to highly educated people with cosmopolitan lifestyles, but not to lower educated working classes, and therefore regional disparities have also become pronounced, with affluent areas of major cities flourishing and rural areas left behind – especially post-industrial areas. Thus, a new salient political cleavage emerges and the 'losers' can be mobilised by far right populists railing against cosmopolitan liberalism and political and cultural elites – the 'winners.'

Secondly, feelings of economic anxiety – brought about by features of neoliberal economies such as job loss, de-industrialisation, de-unionisation, the gig economy, and financial crises (Rodrik 2021) – have become more common, especially among the 'losers.' The far right can therefore capitalise on these feelings of anxiety and insecurity by scapegoating minority groups and establishment figures. The "economic anxiety" thesis overlaps with the "ethnic competition" thesis, in that it predicts people with high levels of economic insecurity and uncertainty to be susceptible to far-right rhetoric that blames their economic worries on minorities.

Following this line of reasoning, countries where there is a strong divide between the 'winners and losers' of globalisation and the conditions that lead to economic anxiety are present are expected to have a higher far-right vote share – and Ireland fits this description. Ireland has become one of the most globalised economies in the world, employing a growth

model driven by foreign direct investment (Bohle and Regan 2021). Industries such as financial services, IT, and pharmaceuticals have boomed in Ireland (Bohle and Regan 2021), creating many high-paying jobs for highly educated professionals, especially in the Greater Dublin Area. Thus, Ireland has significant regional inequalities and there is a marked core-periphery divide between Dublin and rural Ireland (J. A. Walsh 2023). Moreover, many of the people who feel left behind by the Irish economic model are angry at the status quo and voting increasingly for anti-establishment parties on the left such as Sinn Féin and People Before Profit (Reidy and White 2017). It is clear that there is an extremely pronounced divide between the 'winners and losers' of globalisation in Ireland.

Secondly, the conditions that lead to economic anxiety are also certainly present in Ireland. Levels of unionisation are low; precarious work is common; and workers are not particularly well protected either by legislation or collective bargaining (Pembroke 2019). Furthermore, the housing crisis is one of the worst in Europe, and a major source of economic anxiety (Waldron 2023). The economic conditions typically associated with far right emergence clearly exist in Ireland, and the reason behind the puzzling absence of the far right in Ireland lies elsewhere.

2.1c: Post-materialist values and cultural backlash

Several scholars have attributed the rise of the far right to cultural grievances (Golder 2016, Norris and Inglehart 2019) and the increased importance of cultural issues in politics (Kriesi 2010). Norris and Inglehart's (2019) influential 'cultural backlash' thesis holds that long-term shifts from materialist to post-materialist values have brought about the rise of authoritarian populism. This section shows that the shift from materialist to post-materialist values among citizens has occurred in Ireland as well, but political discourse is comparatively

more focused on economic (materialist) issues. Thus, while examining the applicability of the 'cultural backlash' thesis reveals a highly relevant idiosyncrasy, this is only on the supply side.

Norris and Inglehart (2019) argue that younger generations' values are increasingly post-materialist, meaning that their political identity and voting behaviour is increasingly shaped by issues that are not directly related to their material interests, such as minority rights and environmentalism. This, they propose, has triggered a backlash from primarily older, more conservative people who oppose the increasing salience of progressive post-materialist values – which they perceive as alienating and a threat to their privilege. Furthermore, it means that political debate is dominated by cultural rather than economic issues, making it easier for far-right parties – whose agenda revolves largely around cultural issues – to mobilise voters.

Norris and Inglehart's (2019) comparative study includes the Irish case, which is somewhat unique. Drawing on Eurobarometer survey data, they show that Ireland follows West-European trends in terms of post-materialist values; there was a significant majority of people with materialist values in the 1970's and 1980's, which disappeared around the turn of the millennium (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 94).

Irish society was changing drastically during this period, experiencing drastic secularisation – in part driven by the child abuse scandals surrounding the Catholic Church (Turpin 2022) and a significant amount of progressive social change took place, such as the decriminalisation of homosexuality and the legalisation of divorce. Ireland was deeply conservative and Catholic in the 1970's, but by the late 1990's public opinion had changed a lot – a significant (although not total) separation of church and state had occurred; and many liberal reforms were instituted (Girvin 2008). Thus, the fact that materialist views were no longer in a majority by the 1990's is unsurprising.

Norris and Inglehart also analyse the content of party manifestos to gauge the comparative salience of economic versus non-economic issues. This is designed to approximate the prevalence of materialist versus post-materialist values in the political sphere, as opposed to in individuals' attitudes. Interestingly, Ireland is an outlier in this regard, with a higher proportion of economic than non-economic issues in party manifestos (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 324).

As of 2016, Ireland (underlined) had a higher proportion of economic issues than almost all the other countries with the exception on Iceland and Portugal – two countries that also did not have a major far-right party in 2016. This is the first relevant idiosyncrasy of the Irish context: without an increasing focus on cultural issues in the political sphere, one of the major facilitating factors for the rise of the far right is absent. However, it is clearly not for a lack of the social change and value shifts that typically heighten the salience of cultural issues, as shown by the increasing prevalence of post-materialist values. Therefore, it can be assumed that this idiosyncrasy is a question of supply rather than demand-side factors, and the issue will be addressed in Chapter 3.

2.1d: Social breakdown and declining participation

It has often been argued that high levels of social isolation and declining interpersonal trust cause intolerance (Putnam 2000) and fuel right-wing populism (Rydgren 2009). Furthermore, declining popular participation in politics has also been linked to the rise of the far right, most notably by Mair (2013). Mair argues that a growing gap between the representatives and the represented leads to popular discontent with the status quo, contributing to the rise of anti-establishment populists (typically on the far right) promising to restore power to the people. Drawing on Putnam and Mair and using European Social Survey (ESS) data, I

examine four sets of indicators that could drive demand for far right populism: *political and electoral participation and party ties; civic participation and volunteering; social connections;* and *interpersonal and institutional trust,* and find that while Ireland is no outlier on the majority of these indicators, levels of trust in Ireland are quite high, and could partially explain the absence of a major far-right party in Ireland.

Indicator	IE	ESS (n=22)
Voted in last election	76.01%	72.12%
Contacted politician or government official last 12 months	17.99%	16.86%
Donated to or participated in political party or pressure group last 12 months	5.04%	5.70%
Feel closer to a particular party than all other parties	38.82%	42.62%

Table 2: Political and electoral participation and party ties (Own analysis, data from ESS Round 10. IE = Ireland, ESS = mean of all countries in ESS Round 10)

From Table 2, it is clear that Ireland does not diverge much from the ESS mean. Almost all of the countries in the ESS sample have well-established far-right parties, and Ireland does not exhibit a significantly higher level of participation than these countries. Despite a slightly higher rate of electoral participation and contact with politicians, Irish people were apparently less likely to donate to or participate in a political party or pressure group, and were also less likely to feel closer to a particular party. The gap between the representatives and the represented seems to exist in Ireland just like it does throughout Europe. Although a comparative time-series analysis of Irish trends in this area is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is worth noting that Mair's (2013) comprehensive study of declining political participation across western Europe included Ireland, and did not find it to be an outlier to European trends either.

Indicator	IE	ESS (n=22)
Signed petition last 12 months	17.76%	18.73%
Taken part in public demonstration last 12 months	6.90%	6.44%
Volunteered for not-for-profit or charitable organisation	18.46%	16.41%

Table 3: Civic participation and volunteering (Own analysis, data from ESS Round 10. IE = Ireland, ESS = mean of all countries in ESS Round 10)

As shown in Table 3, with regards to civic participation and volunteering Ireland is once again very close to the ESS mean, with the vast majority of the population not having signed a petition, taken part in a public demonstration, or volunteered for a non-profit or a charity in the last twelve months.

Indicator	IE mean	ESS mean (n=22)
How often meet socially with friends, relatives or colleagues (1 = never, 7 = every day)	4.24	4.66
How many people with whom you can discuss intimate and personal matters (0 = none, 7 = 10 or more)	2.56	2.5
Take part in social activities compared to others of same age (1 = much less, 5 = much more)	2.63	2.69

Table 4: Social connections (Own analysis, data from ESS Round 10. IE = Ireland, ESS = mean of all countries in ESS Round 10)

Indicator	IE mean	ESS mean (n=22)	IE rank (1 = most trusting)
Most people can be trusted (0 = can't be too careful, 10 = most people can be trusted	5.64	4.99	7th
Most people are fair (0 = most people try take advantage of me, 10 = most people are fair	6.29	5.49	6th
Trust in parliament (0 = no trust at all, 10 = complete trust)	4.93	4.49	6th
Trust in legal system (0 = no trust at all, 10 = complete trust)	5.73	5.23	9th
Trust in police (0 = no trust at all, 10 = complete trust)	6.7	6.34	8th
Trust in politicians (0 = no trust at all, 10 = complete trust)	4.21	3.7	6th
Trust in political parties (0 = no trust at all, 10 = complete trust)	4.08	3.64	7th
Trust in European Parliament (0 = no trust at all, 10 = complete trust)	5.38	4.77	5th
Trust in United Nations (0 = no trust at all, 10 = complete trust)	5.68	5.25	6th
Trust in scientists (0 = no trust at all, 10 = complete trust)	7.16	7.06	10th

Table 5: Interpersonal and institutional trust (Own analysis, data from ESS Round 10. IE = Ireland, ESS = mean of all countries in ESS Round 10, IE rank = Ireland's rank in ESS sample)

With regard to social connections, Ireland tracks the ESS mean very closely once again, as shown in Table 4. However, in Table 5 a clear pattern emerges. Irish people score higher for both interpersonal and institutional trust than their European counterparts, with Ireland being higher than the mean in every category. Higher levels of political participation; closer party ties; more civic participation and volunteering; and more social connections can all be expected to raise the levels of trust in a population. However, given the data in Tables 2, 3, and 4, it would seem that in Ireland other factors are responsible for the comparatively high levels of trust shown in Table 5.

One potential reason for this is that high levels of trust may be an effect rather than a cause of the lack of a significant far right. Another is that Ireland is an affluent north-west European country with a well-functioning democracy – attributes that tend to predict higher levels of trust. It is worth noting that on each indicator a number of surveyed countries scored

higher, with four countries scoring higher on every single indicator: Finland, Norway, the Netherlands, and Iceland. All of these countries are affluent, north-west European countries with strong democracies, and all of them except Iceland have well-established far right parties. Furthermore, the far-right riot in Dublin in November 2023 involving large-scale arson and violence casts doubt on the notion that Ireland's lack of a major far-right party is due to exceptional levels of trust and social cohesion. Nevertheless, the high levels of trust in Ireland are significant, and worth investigating further as a potential reason for the lack of a far-right party in Ireland. This also be could be a product of Ireland's political system, which has been characterised as uniquely responsive (Hix 2020), and will be examined in a later section.

2.2 Demand measured by attitudes

Having established that the conditions that typically lead to demand for far-right parties exist in Ireland, I examine actual demand for far-right politics, measured by attitudes. This section shows that Irish people's attitudes reflect a level of demand for far-right politics that would be sufficient for the emergence of a far-right party. O'Malley (2008) finds that there is a small but significant minority in Ireland with intolerant views that match the politics of far right parties, and relying primarily on data from the European Social Survey Round 10, I show that this is no different today.

According to Mudde's (2007) influential work on the populist radical right, its ideological core consists of three elements: nativism, authoritarianism and populism. Mudde (2010) uses this typology to argue that the populist radical right is not a "normal pathology" of western democracy, but rather a "pathological normalcy." He examines the prevalence of these ideological features in the history and politics of western democracies, concluding that they are fundamental ideological features that have always been present. He also presents attitudinal

survey data, showing that nativist, authoritarian and populist attitudes are similarly commonplace in Western democracies. He draws two important conclusions: firstly, researchers should start asking why the far right has *not* emerged in certain countries, rather than trying to explain why it *has* emerged elsewhere. Secondly, he argues that demand for far right politics is so widespread that researchers seeking to explain its non-emergence must study supply-side as well as demand-side variables.

2.2a: Nativism

In this section I examine the prevalence of nativist, authoritarian, and populist attitudes in Ireland. Table 6 compares attitudes towards immigrants in Ireland and in the 22 European countries included in Round 10 of the ESS. The responses to these questions are used as indicators of nativism.

Question	IE	ESS mean (n=22)	IE rank (1st = least nativist)
Country's cultural life undermined or enriched by immigrants (0 = undermined, 10 = enriched)	6.61	5.42	5th
Allow many/few immigrants from poorer countries outside Europe (1 = many, 4 = none)	2.2	2.52	8th
Allow many/few immigrants of different race/ethnic group from majority (1 = many, 4 = none)	2.13	2.46	7th

Table 6: Attitudes towards immigrants (Own analysis, data from ESS Round 10. IE = Ireland, ESS = mean of all countries in ESS Round 10, IE rank = Ireland's rank in ESS sample)

As Table 6 shows, the Irish responses are clearly less nativist than the European average, but attitudes towards immigrants are certainly not overwhelmingly accepting. Moreover, out of the 22 surveyed countries, respondents from Norway, the Netherlands and Iceland were less nativist on all three questions, and respondents from Great Britain, Switzerland, and Belgium were, on average, less nativist on two out of three indicators (own analysis). With the exception of Iceland, none of these countries are without a significant far right. If the levels of nativism are high enough for the far right to do well in the UK, Belgium, Switzerland, Norway and the Netherlands, it is difficult to argue that the same is not true for Ireland. Figures 3, 4, and 5 show the breakdown of the responses to the three questions in Ireland and the aforementioned five countries.

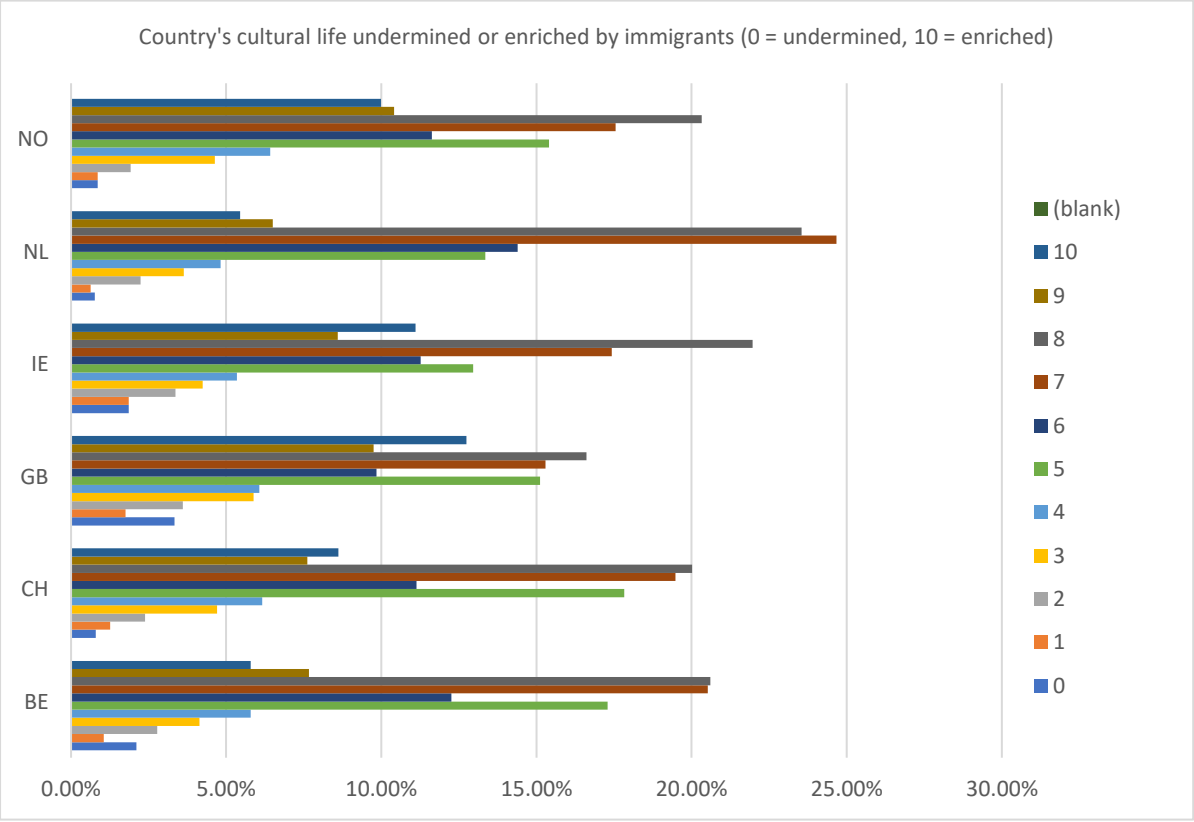

Figure 1: Cultural life undermined or enriched by immigrants (Own analysis, data from ESS Round 10. Breakdown of responses in Norway, Netherlands, Ireland, Great Britain, Switzerland, Belgium)

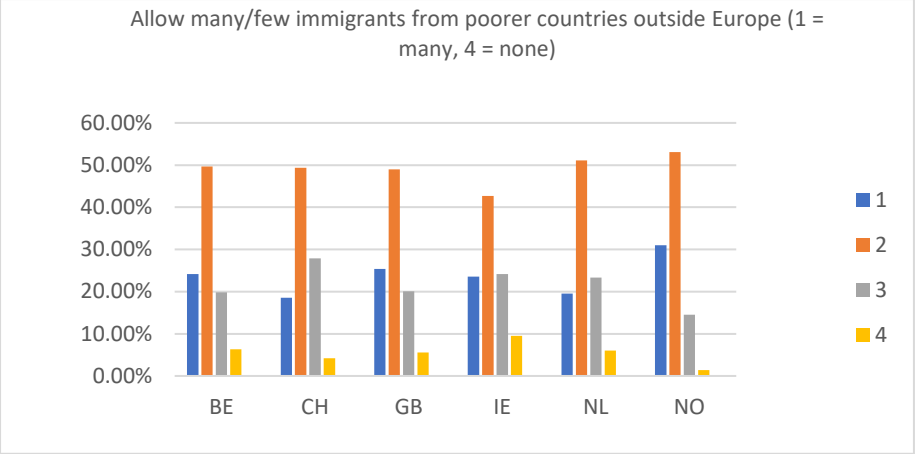

Figure 2: Allow many/few immigrants from poorer countries (Own analysis, data from ESS Round 10. Breakdown of responses in Norway, Netherlands, Ireland, Great Britain, Switzerland, Belgium)

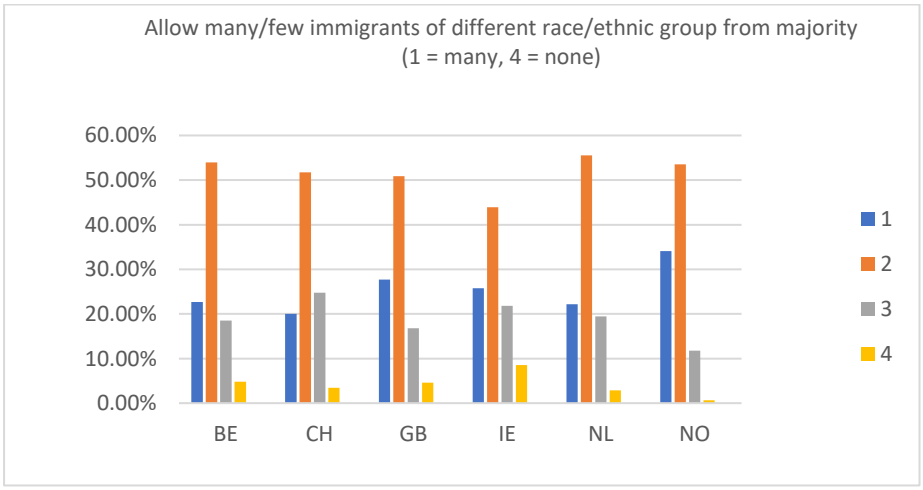

Figure 3: Allow many/few immigrants from different race/ethnic group (Own analysis, data from ESS Round 10. Breakdown of responses in Norway, Netherlands, Ireland, Great Britain, Switzerland, Belgium)

It is crucial to note that Ireland is not only more nativist than these countries on average, but there is a larger proportion of respondents espousing the most strongly-held nativist views. Figure 1 shows that after British respondents, Irish respondents were most likely to answer 0 or 1 on the first question, and Figures 2 and 3 show that Irish respondents were the most likely to answer 4 on the second and third questions, with almost 10% on both questions. Figure 4

supports the notion that there is a small but significant minority of Irish people with strongly-held nativist views as well. It shows the breakdown of answers to the question *"what do you think of attempts to give equal opportunities to [ethnic minorities]?*"

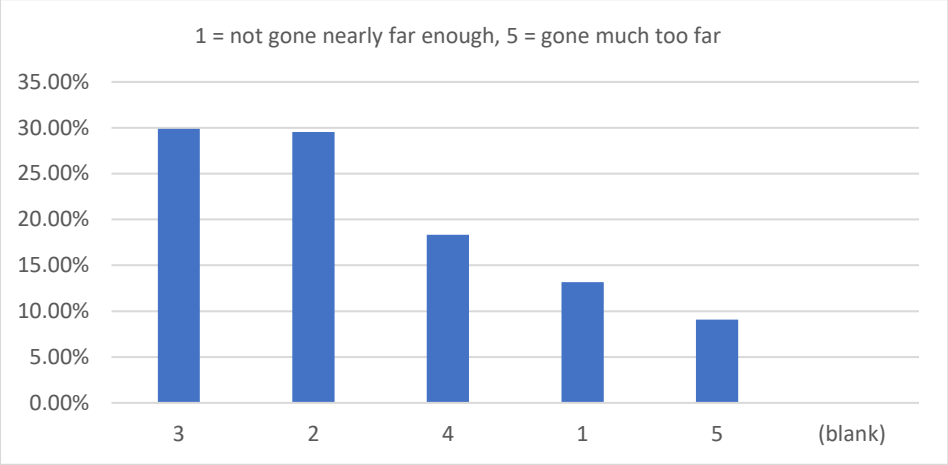

Figure 4: Attitudes towards attempts to give equal rights to ethnic minorities in Ireland (Own analysis, data from 2020 Irish National Election Study 1)

Again, close to 10% have strong reactionary views. It is clear that while Ireland does not have a large constituency of nativist voters, the demand for nativist politics is equal to or greater than in many other western European countries with far more successful far right parties.

2.2b: Authoritarianism

With regard to authoritarian views, the picture is clearer. Again, data is taken from the ESS, and responses to the statement *"Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn"* and the question *"How acceptable for you would it be for [your country] to have a strong leader who is above the law?"* are used to approximate

authoritarian attitudes. As shown in Table 7 Ireland was the median country out of the 22 countries surveyed for both sets of responses.

Question	IE	ESS mean (n=22)	IE rank (1st = least authoritarian)
Obedience and respect for authority most important virtues children should learn (1 = agree strongly, 5 = disagree strongly	2.35	2.42	11th
Acceptable for country to have a strong leader above the law (0 = not at all acceptable, 10 = completely acceptable)	2.75	2.98	11th

Table 7: Authoritarian attitudes (Own analysis, data from ESS Round 10. IE = Ireland, ESS = mean of all countries in ESS Round 10, IE rank = Ireland's rank in ESS sample)

2.2c: Populism

Moving on to the third ideological feature of the populist radical right – populism – Ireland is once again within the normal range for a west-European country with a successful far right party. I follow Mudde in conceptualising populism as "a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups: "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite," and argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde 2017). In the ESS Round 10, two questions were added to gauge populist attitudes, similarly building on Mudde's ideational definition of populism. The first question (in Table 8) measures anti-elitism, and the second question taps into people's attitudes towards unrestricted popular sovereignty. The third question taps into conspiratorial beliefs – a known correlate and reliable predictor of populist attitudes (Castanho Silva, et al. 2020). While Irish respondents are markedly less populist than

average on the first two questions (or perhaps more satisfied with the system), shown in Table 8, these questions can also reflect how democratic or how responsive the political system is. On the third question, which does not refer to the respondent's own country, Irish respondents showed a stronger tendency towards populist attitudes than the ESS average.

Question	IE	ESS mean (n=22)	IE rank (1st = least populist)
In my country the views of ordinary people prevail over the views of the political elite (0 = does not apply at all, 10 = applies completely)	5.18	3.88	4th
In my country the will of the people cannot be stopped (0 = does not apply at all, 10 = applies completely)	6.2	4.59	4th
There is a small secret group of people responsible for making all major decisions in world politics (1 = agree strongly, 5 = disagree strongly)	3.1	3.13	13th

Table 8: Populist attitudes (Own analysis, data from ESS Round 10. IE = Ireland, ESS = mean of all countries in ESS Round 10, IE rank = Ireland's rank in ESS sample)

In terms of attitudes, a clear picture emerges. A small but significant portion of the Irish population consistently exhibit attitudes in line with the far right, similar to other West-European countries where the far right is well established.

In the 2020 Irish National Election Study, respondents were asked to rank the probability that they will ever vote for parties on a 10-point scale. The far right micro-party, the Irish Freedom Party (IFP), was the only far right party included in the study, and Figure 5 shows how respondents rated their chances of ever voting for the IFP.

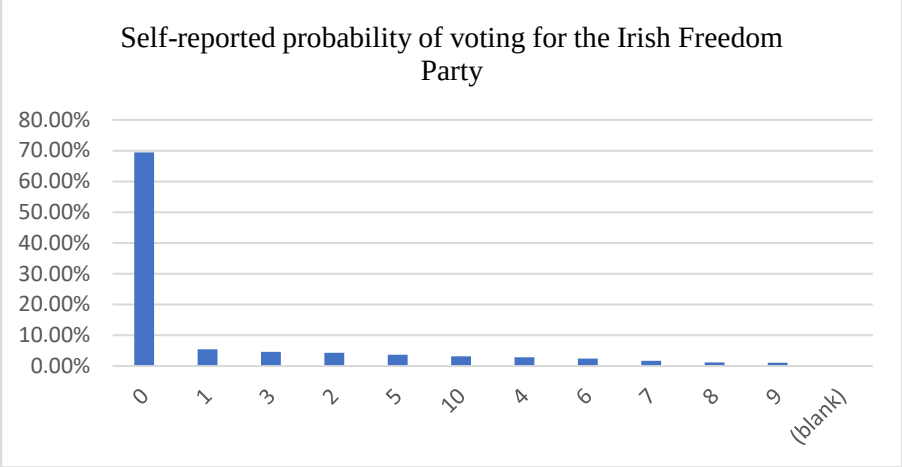

Figure 5: Self-reported probability of voting for the Irish Freedom Party, 0 = not at all probable, 10 = extremely probable (Own analysis, data from 2020 Irish National Election Study 1)

While the vast majority of Irish voters are unsympathetic to the IFP, 7.8% answered 6 or higher. For a widely stigmatised fringe far right party which has never achieved any electoral success, in a country where the far right has been rejected unanimously in every election, this number is not as low as one might expect. Rather, it supports the assumption that there is an untapped base of far right supporters in Ireland, and the reasons for the non-emergence of the far right is a question of supply rather than demand.

Chapter 3: Irish nationalism and supply-side factors

3.1 Irish nationalism in the context of the far right

Ireland's history and idiosyncrasies must also be considered, as there are many potential explanations for the lack of a far right that are unique to the Irish context. Therefore, this section will consider the role of context-specific explanations, covering both demand and supply-side factors. I show that there is evidence to both support and refute the argument that the left-wing history of Irish nationalism precludes the emergence of a major far-right party, and conclude that this is an area where research that goes beyond the scope of this thesis is warranted.

Throughout Ireland's history, Irish nationalism has been in opposition to British imperialism, and far right politics have never had any noteworthy success. As O'Malley and Fitzgibbon argue "Irish nationalism is rhetorically bound up in its oppression as an ethnic minority or a small nation within the United Kingdom" (2015, 289). They argue that many Irish people have taken a "perverse pride" in the oppression of Irish immigrants abroad (2015, 289), and therefore also been proud of the fact that immigrants in Ireland are not subject to the same mistreatment.

Furthermore, Irish nationalists have not only opposed British imperialism, but they have consistently aligned themselves with other subjugated peoples in various other colonial conflicts around the world. For example, Irish nationalists (most notably in Sinn Féin) have compared the Northern Irish conflict to the Israel-Palestine conflict, aligning themselves with the Palestinian cause (J. Doyle 2007). Similarly, as Guelke (2000) outlines, Irish republicans were strong and consistent supporters of the oppressed Black population in South Africa, and the IRA and Sinn Féin cooperated extensively with the African National Congress (ANC). The

historical tendency of Irish nationalism to be left-wing and anti-imperialist gives potential demand and supply-side explanations for the lack of a far-right party in Ireland. Following Eatwell's (2016) account of the "nation traditions" theory, it can be argued from the supply side that far right challengers in Ireland could not portray themselves as a legitimate part of the national tradition, thus making it difficult to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the voters, even if some voters may be close to them ideologically. Moreover, it can also be argued that the lack of a tradition of far right nationalist politics blocks the development of a viable far right from the demand-side, and voters simply do not and never have had an appetite for far right politics. Mudde (2010), for example, treats the historical prevalence of far right ideology in a society as a demand-side factor.

Garner (2007) and Fanning and Mutwarasibo (2007) both give accounts of Ireland as a state where nativism is incorporated into the mainstream, and argue that this may be the reason for the lack of a far right party in Ireland. Both accounts characterise the history of Irish nation-building as an exclusionary (though not explicitly racist) process, where "Irishness" was defined in ethnic terms. They both identify the 2004 referendum where birthright citizenship was revoked by popular vote as a key moment where nativism was mainstreamed. As Ireland began to experience net immigration after decades of net emigration, the nativist response evinced in the 2004 referendum is seen by both Garner (2007) and Fanning and Mutwarasibo (2007) as a natural consequence of a legacy of exclusionary nation-building. When addressing the absence of a far-right populist party in Ireland, both accounts also point to the dominance of Fianna Fáil throughout the entire history of the Irish state (at the time of writing). Throughout the twentieth century Fianna Fáil was widely seen as a nationalist-populist catch-all party (Weeks 2023), which absorbed populist concerns into the political mainstream (Fanning and Mutwarasibo 2007).

While some populist and nativist tendencies may have been absorbed by the mainstream throughout the history of the Irish state, these arguments are not well placed to explain the continued absence of a far right party today for several reasons. Most importantly, there is little convincing evidence to support the theory that absorbing far-right concerns prevents the emergence of a far-right party. In fact, the opposite has been argued: that the mainstreaming of far-right discourse has been one of the factors contributing to the emergence and 'contagion' of the contemporary far right (Kallis 2013). In countries where far-right politics is prevalent in the mainstream but breakthrough far-right parties have not been particularly successful, such as the US and the UK, far-right populists have established themselves successfully within mainstream parties. Elsewhere, far-right parties tend to emerge and achieve electoral significance even if far-right rhetoric and policy is mainstreamed. In fact, Mudde's (2010) influential "pathological normalcy" thesis claims that the mainstreaming of far-right politics helps rather than hinders the far right. Furthermore, while Fianna Fáil was uniquely successful as a catch-all populist party throughout the twentieth century, and the Irish political system was truly characterised by the lack of alternatives to Fianna Fáil, its collapse in popularity after the 2008 crisis significantly changed the dynamic of the Irish party system. No single party commands anything close to the vote share of Fianna Fáil throughout the twentieth century, and the effective number of parties has increased (Coakley 2021). Even if the explanations proposed by Fanning and Mutwarasibo (2007) and Garner (2007) can help explain the lack of a far-right party in Ireland until 2007, they do not explain its continued absence since then.

Ireland has a unique history, and Irish nationalism has a unique character. There are other potential context-specific explanations that could be considered, but are beyond the scope of this thesis. Future research would do well to undertake a more thorough examination of the history of Irish nationalism in an international context to understand the extent to which Irish

nationalism is truly unique, and whether there is a precedent for far-right emergence in a context where the dominant strain of nationalism was typically left-wing.

3.2 Media landscape

Turning to supply-side explanations, this section examines the possibility that the non-emergence of the far right in Ireland is due to an unfavourable media landscape or effective gatekeeping. It has often been noted that the modern media landscape has helped the far right flourish. Firstly, the privatisation and increasingly commercial nature of the media landscape has incentivised sensationalist media coverage, which works to the benefit of anti-establishment populists who spark outrage such as Trump (Gerbaudo 2018; Mazzoleni 2014). Furthermore, a common explanation for the emergence of the populist far right is that new media has allowed anti-establishment challengers to mobilise on social media, diminishing the gatekeeping capacity of traditional media (Eatwell 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Rydgren 2007). For this explanation to have any salience, Ireland would need to be a significant outlier compared to other contemporary democracies, as the commercial nature of the contemporary media landscape and ineffectiveness of formerly viable gatekeeping practices has been the norm around the world, allowing far right politics to flourish.

Flynn and Preston's (2016) analysis shows that Ireland's media landscape is no outlier. Ireland's media has undergone significant privatisation and deregulation, and has been easily accessed by large international players, such as the Murdoch Group. Linguistic factors of course play an influential role in this, furthermore, British media has always made up a large part of Ireland's media market because Ireland is a former British colony, making the Irish media landscape difficult to regulate, and exposing the Irish public to much of the UK's media, including its often reactionary tabloid press.

Building on Pollak's (1999) study of racism in Irish media, O'Malley (2008) also considers and largely dismisses the possibility that the lack of far right emergence in Ireland is due to media factors. He notes that the Irish editions of the UK tabloid press have large readerships, and often run the type of anti-immigrant stories that can drive anti-immigrant sentiment. Overall, it is clear that media-related factors cannot provide a plausible explanation as to the lack of far right emergence in Ireland. Ireland is no outlier with regards to media; the Irish media landscape is relatively unregulated and easily accessed by foreign international media players; social media usage is widespread; and reactionary tabloids command large audiences.

3.3 Political system

Although Ireland has a proportional electoral system, which has been considered more conducive to the emergence of far-right (Andeweg 2001, O'Malley 2008) or populist (Hakhverdian and Koop 2007) parties, there are several potential reasons why Ireland's political system may have a played a role in the prevention of the emergence of a far-right party. First, Ireland has a uniquely high number of independent TD's (members of parliament) (Bowler and Farrell 2017), which may be a hindrance to prospective new parties. Ireland's proportional single-transferable-vote (STV) system allows voters to choose between candidates of the same party, and therefore facilitates a high level of intra-party competition, resulting in highly personalised and candidate-centred elections with an emphasis on local issues (Hix 2020), contributing to the proliferation of independent candidates. Another incentive for candidates to run as independents instead of forming new parties is that independents do not have to pay a deposit to run for election provided they present signatures from thirty constituents, and are entitled to receive a Parliamentary Activities Allowance, only

received by party leaders and independents, if elected (Bowler and Farrell 2017). Moreover, independents in Ireland typically occupy anti-establishment positions, and therefore this has been seen as an explanation for the lack of newcomer anti-establishment populist parties (Bowler and Farrell 2017; Hix 2020).

It has also often been argued that the rise in far-right populism in recent years is due to a crisis in political representation (Halikiopoulou and Vasilopoulou 2018, Mair 2013, Silva and Wratil 2023, White 2020). Hix (2020) argues that Ireland's political system is highly responsive, keeping Irish citizens more satisfied with democracy and more trustful of politicians than elsewhere. According to Hix, the STV system creates stronger ties between constituents and representatives by being more candidate-focused than other systems. Moreover, he makes the case that frequent referendums and deliberative mini-publics create a system of "supplemented democracy" that is uniquely representative and responsive. Indeed, the high levels of institutional and interpersonal trust in Ireland (shown in section 2.2) lends some credence to this hypothesis, and more research could certainly be done on how effective representation may counteract the appeal of the far right in Ireland and elsewhere.

Nevertheless, the evidence to suggest that Ireland's political system is the reason for the lack of a far right party is far from convincing. Although the political system incentivises political entrepreneurs to run as independents instead of with new or minor parties, new parties have achieved moderate success in recent years. The Social Democrats formed in 2015, and People Before Profit – Solidarity came into existence as an electoral alliance in the same year. They now have a combined eleven sitting TD's (members of parliament). Furthermore, while the Irish political system was characterised by its stability for much of the state's history, there has been a high level of instability since the 2008 financial crash (Coakley 2021). As mentioned previously, the main party of the establishment, Fianna Fáil, has seen its support collapse, and anti-establishment alternatives – such as Sinn Féin and People before Profit – Solidarity have

increased their vote share. Clearly, new parties have been able to break through in the Irish political system, and there has been space for anti-establishment challengers to exploit.

Furthermore, as mentioned in section 2.2 p.21, other West-European countries with similar or higher levels of trust than Ireland have successful far-right parties. The fact that people in Ireland are on average more trustful of citizens and politicians does not preclude the existence of a significant minority who are deeply distrustful. Indeed, the recent rise of far-right rhetoric and violence in Ireland suggests that the Irish political system has not stopped the spread of populist and far-right sentiment, and that the non-existence of a major far-right party in Ireland is down to supply-side rather than demand-side factors.

3.4 The existing far right

Ireland has never had a significant far right party, with the possible exception of a fascist group known as the 'Blueshirts,' in the 1930's which merged into Fine Gael shortly after its formation. The current levels of far-right mobilisation are unprecedented in recent Irish history, as far-right violence and protests have become common, including the unprecedented far-right riot in Dublin's city centre in November 2023. This section examines the current state of the Irish far right, as well as previous attempts at far-right mobilisation. Two important questions must be considered regarding the Irish far right: first, is the Irish far right's lack of success due, at least in part, to factors endogenous to the existing unsuccessful far right, and second, does the current far right in Ireland have the potential to emerge as a significant electoral contender? These questions will be discussed in subsections 3.4a and 3.4b respectively .

3.4a Is the far right's lack of success due to endogenous factors?

With regard to the first question, it is clear that the Irish far right's non emergence can be explained in part by looking at the Irish far right itself. Two relevant endogenous factors are the Irish far right's fragmentation and its failure to capitalise on opportunities for mobilisation.

Factor 1: Fragmentation

One of the biggest challenges for the Irish far right is that it is extremely fragmented. The National Party and the Irish Freedom Party are the most typical and prominent far right micro-parties, exhibiting classic far right anti-immigrant and populist rhetoric, neither of which has ever had a representative elected at any level of government. Additionally, another far-right micro-party known as Ireland First was formed in 2023. Some other micro-parties show far-right tendencies but are not unambiguously far-right: the newly launched Liberty Republic's (formerly Direct Democracy Ireland) website has examples of classic anti-immigrant far-right rhetoric and references to "greedy globalist…traitors," but it also mentions "anti-racism" and "anti-homophobia" (Liberty Republic) and Rónán Mullen, leader and only elected member of the Human Dignity Alliance – has espoused staunchly socially conservative views on issues such as conversion therapy and LGBTQ education in schools (Kelleher 2019).

Furthermore, several politicians leaning towards the far right have run as independents. Peter Casey is the most notable example, who faced significant backlash but saw his popularity soar after claiming that Irish Travellers were "people camping in someone else's land," (K. Doyle 2018) and came second in the 2018 presidential election, garnering 23.3% of the vote. In 2019, he ran in the European Parliament election, criticising the EU's migration policies and claiming "of course I'm racist, I'm a very proud Irish man" (Ryan 2019). The fact that his high vote share in the 2018 presidential election was the best electoral result achieved by any far-right or far-right adjacent candidate in modern Irish political history reinforces the argument

that the far right suffers from a lack of political space and fragmentation, as the presidential election is largely entirely candidate-centred and does not follow the usual logic of party competition. As has been mentioned in section 3.3, the Irish political system is favourable to independents, who make up an unusually high number of the country's elected representatives and constitute a disproportionate share of Ireland's most radical anti-system candidates. Nevertheless, should a capable party manage to unite the far-right elements in Irish politics, the far right could certainly increase its influence.

Factor 2: Missed opportunities

According to Mendes and Dennison (2021), emerging far right parties often mobilise around an issue less controversial than immigration to initially gain legitimacy (such as Brexit in the UK, Catalan independence in Spain, and agrarian interests in Switzerland and Finland), and use this "reputational shield" to then pivot to anti-immigrant nativism. Ireland had two culturally salient referendums in 2015 and 2018, legalising same-sex marriage and abortion respectively. Additionally, the financial crisis and subsequent period of austerity may have provided an opportunity for populist mobilisation, and right-wing agrarian interests – on which the far right has capitalised elsewhere – continue to be salient in rural Ireland. I argue that these can be considered missed opportunities for the far right.

The first missed opportunity is *divisive referendums.* Both the 2015 marriage equality and 2018 abortion referendums had high turnout, extensive media coverage, and a well-beaten but sizeable 'no' vote. Rapid secularisation and progressive social change – which have been particularly prominent in Ireland – can fuel a populist backlash (Yilmaz and Morieson 2021), and these referendums provided an opportunity to politicise grievances related to progressivism and secularisation. As Mendes and Dennison (2021) argue, it is often easier for far-right parties

to gain legitimacy if they have split from mainstream parties. TD Peadar Tóibín was suspended by Sinn Féin on the grounds of his anti-abortion views, before resigning and forming his own republican anti-abortion party, Aontú. It is possible to imagine this having been the beginning of a successful far right party; Tóibín had political legitimacy and nationalist credentials from his prior membership of Sinn Féin, and no major party had sided with the 'no' vote in the abortion referendum, despite support from 33.6% of the electorate. Aontú has combined some socially conservative stances with Sinn-Féin style Irish republicanism and a left-wing economic stance centred around "economic justice" (Aontú), but has not pivoted to the far right. With Tóibín as the only member elected to national government, the party has largely failed to establish itself on the national scene, and one may speculate that a pivot towards the far right would have allowed Aontú to move into an unoccupied niche in Irish politics.

Justin Barrett, leader of the National Party until his recent usurping, was also a somewhat high-profile anti-abortion campaigner, both during and before the 2018 referendum. However, he has not succeeded in using the abortion issue as a "reputational shield" to gain legitimacy for his nativist far right politics. Barrett has attended rallies organised by Nazi-sympathiser groups (MacNamee 2016), and the National Party's rhetoric is on the extreme side even for a far-right party. The National Party's often violent rhetoric, such as the frequent use of the slogan "*bua nó bás"* ('victory or death') on election materials is likely too radical for the electorate in a country where the far right has never achieved political legitimacy. For a far-right party to achieve a noteworthy political breakthrough in Ireland, it would likely need to present in a less radical way than the National Party. Ultimately, these referendums – perhaps most notably the abortion referendum – created clear opportunities for a far-right breakthrough, but the opportunity was missed.

The second missed opportunity is *agrarian interests.* Elsewhere, the far right has initially mobilised against environmental policies seen to be against agrarian interests at first, using the issue as a "reputational shield" (Mendes and Dennison 2021) before pivoting to other far right issues. Although the far right is weak in Ireland, there is a significant core-periphery divide between the Dublin area and rural Ireland, and several politicians have been elected on conservative agrarian platforms, many of them as independents (Weeks 2009). Notable examples include the brothers Danny and Michael Healy-Rae, the former having denied that there is a human impact on climate change (BBC 2016). Ireland does not have a conservative agrarian party, despite ostensible demand. Should a far-right party manage to mobilise agrarian anti-environmentalist sentiment, as was the case in Switzerland and Finland, for example (Mendes and Dennison 2021), it is easy to imagine a more successful far right.

The third missed opportunity is *financial crisis and austerity.* The shock of the 2008 financial crisis and the following period of austerity led to an increase in protests and populist mobilisation – although not to the extent of other badly affected countries such as Spain or Greece (O'Malley and Fitzgibbon 2015). During the period of austerity after the crisis, the Irish public became increasingly disaffected and distrustful of the political establishment. Several scholars have proposed financial crises as a contributing factor to the rise of the far right (Funke, Schularick and Trebesch 2016, Gyöngyösi and Verner 2022, Rodrik 2021), however, the populist actors who benefitted politically from this were almost exclusively left-wing populists such as Sinn Féin and People Before Profit (O'Malley and Fitzgibbon 2015).

3.4b Does the current far right in Ireland have the potential to emerge as a significant electoral contender?

Especially given recent developments, it seems increasingly likely that the far right in Ireland can and will achieve a significant breakthrough in the near future. Following Mendes and Dennison's (2021) framework, it can be argued that they are effectively using the issue of housing as a "reputational shield." The issue of unequal access to housing, on which Sinn Féin has campaigned to great effect, provides opportunity for the far right, especially given Ireland's high levels of immigration and sharp increase in asylum seeking in recent years (see section 2.1a). The issue of housing has been one of the most (if not the most) salient issues in Irish politics for several years, and the far right is currently making a concerted effort to capitalise on this opportunity (Kirk 2024). The issue of housing is a central theme in ongoing far right protests – as the shortage of housing is used as a reason to restrict immigration and asylum seeking; one of the National Party's, most commonly used slogans, for example, is "House the Irish! Not the World!" Another slogan that plays on inequality-related grievances, which has been heard at anti-refugee protests is "There are no refugee centres in [rich neighbourhoods such as] Dalkey or Killiney" (Regan 2023).

The scale and frequency of far-right protests in Ireland has grown rapidly, (Askew 2023). Furthermore, the salience of immigration has increased sharply among the Irish public (Laurence, McGinnity and Murphy 2024). It is difficult to determine whether this is a cause or an effect of the growing far right, but nevertheless, it suggests that the popular demand for far-right politics and the salience of far-right issues are growing, and the potential for a significant far-right electoral breakthrough exists.

3.5 Political space

3.5a Analysing Sinn Féin's electorate

The question of whether the far right has political space to emerge is one found in the general political science literature, however, the peculiar role of nationalism in Irish left-wing politics is key to understanding the relationship between Sinn Féin and the far right. Thus, I argue in this thesis that the main explanation for the lack of a far-right party in Ireland is partly general and partly context-specific: its political space is limited by the left-nationalist Sinn Féin. Although O'Malley (2008) makes a similar argument, the dynamics of the Irish political space today have gone through fundamental changes, and are worth reinvestigating. O'Malley argues that Sinn Féin takes up the political space of a far-right party by being similar in many ways: radically nationalistic, extreme in their rhetoric, populist, and very much outside the mainstream. Its level of support was also similar to that of a typical far right party in a Western democracy – not insignificant but not one of the major parties. Sixteen years on, however, it has become the face of the Irish left, moderating its most extreme nationalistic tendencies and delivering a more coherent and comprehensive left-wing message, focusing primarily on issues such as health and housing (Maillot 2023).

Muller and Regan (2021) brilliantly highlight the unique characteristics of the Irish political space, showing that Ireland is a clear outlier to worldwide trends of dealignment and the decreasing importance of the economic cleavage. They argue that "Ireland might increasingly look like Western Europe of old, where social democratic parties mobilised low to middle income households through politicising economic-class based issues" (2021, 550). Furthermore, the issues that voters considered most important while voting were far more likely to be economic issues, such as healthcare and housing (Cunningham and Marsh 2021, Muller and Regan 2021). Building on Muller and Regan's findings, I make the case that this idiosyncrasy in the cleavage structure of Ireland's politics, driven by Sinn Féin's increase in

support, is the primary reason for Ireland's continued lack of a far-right party. Their findings show that the Irish political space is less suitable for far-right mobilisation than most modern democracies, where mainstream convergence and the increasing salience of the cultural cleavage as opposed to the economic cleavage are the norm. It is widely agreed in political science that a significant reason for the mobilisation of the far right is the left's inability to capture the working-class vote (Oesch and Rennwald 2018), and Muller and Regan show that Sinn Féin do this far better than left-wing parties elsewhere.

Following Muller and Regan (2021), who show that vote choice in Ireland has been shown to be driven by class and economic attitudes, I argue that Sinn Féin now resembles a social-democratic party of 20th century Western Europe, where working class potential far right voters and left-wing voters with liberal attitudes exist in the same party, united by their class and economic attitudes rather than cultural views. Although I argue that Sinn Féin still blocks the emergence of a far-right party by commanding support from potential far right voters, I argue that O'Malley's (2008) characterisation of Sinn Féin as "a tolerant party with intolerant supporters," with a base resembling that of a far-right party in terms of both demographics and attitudes, no longer holds. I argue that many voters with intolerant views support Sinn Féin because of their populism and nationalism, but so do many progressives who are attracted to their left-wing economic message. Below, I examine some features of Sinn Féin's electorate using Irish 2020 election study data from the INES 1 dataset and compare them to O'Malley's (2008) analysis.

O'Malley (2008) shows the results of four regression models examining predictors of Sinn Féin support. In O'Malley's analysis, Model 1 examines the socio-demographic profile of Sinn Féin voter, showing that they are significantly more likely to be young and male with low levels of income and education. Model 2, examining social attitudes, shows that they are also significantly more likely to be anti-immigration; Model 3, examining voter type, shows

that they are likely to have low efficacy; and Model 4, which studies political attitudes, shows that Sinn Féin support is strongly associated with support for insisting on a united Ireland.

My analysis in Table 9, where I replicate O'Malley's analysis insofar as possible (unfortunately not all of the same variables are used) with data from the 2020 Irish National Election Study 1 (INES 1), paints a somewhat different picture. In terms of demographic traits, the same trends remain, except regarding gender – there is no longer any statistically significant evidence that Sinn Féin voters are more likely to be male. This is indicative of a widening base that no longer resembles the base of a far-right party like it did in 2008. Sinn Féin voters still tend to be poorer; a trend which was confirmed by Muller and Regan (2021), and less educated; a trend which is unusual in modern left-wing parties but commonplace in the social-democratic parties of 20th century Western Europe. They are also, as expected, likely to be younger – as they were in 2008. This is highly unsurprising from an anti-system left wing party.

However, in terms of social attitudes, supporter for Sinn Féin is no longer associated with reactionary social attitudes, and O'Malley's description of Sinn Féin as a "tolerant party with intolerant supporters" no longer holds. I examine five indicators of social attitudes and find that the only significant relationship is the *positive* relationship between Sinn Féin support and feminist attitudes. Regarding voter type, the same variables were not available in the 2020 dataset. However, a similar picture does emerge: supporters of Sinn Féin are more likely to be disaffected and have cynical views about the political system. Finally, attitudes towards a united Ireland remain an exceptionally strong predictor of support for Sinn Féin, showing the strong nationalistic tendencies of Sinn Féin's base.

Probable/not probable to give Sinn Féin first preference vote (1-10 scale)				
Model	**(1)**	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**
Socio-demographics				
Age in years	-0.387*** (-5.49)	-0.424*** (-5.52)	-0.369*** (-5.27)	-0.248*** (-3.34)
Gender (M = 1, F = 2)	0.068 (0.31)	-0.209 (-0.89)	-0.413 (-1.90)	-0.091 (-0.40)
Highest level of education (7-point scale)	-0.325** (-3.09)	0.332** (-3.00)	-0.341*** (-3.41)	-0.393*** (-3.74)
Income (Annual salary, 6-point scale)	-0.443*** (-4.98)	-0.360*** (-3.91)	-0.074 (-0.88)	-0.047 (-0.52)
Social attitudes				
Ireland's culture is generally harmed by immigrants (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)		0.174 (1.29)	-0.085 (-0.69)	-0.039 (-0.30)
Immigrants are generally good for Ireland's economy (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)		-0.184 (-1.26)	-0.016 (-0.123)	0.086 (0.62)
What do you think about attempts to give equal opportunities to ethnic minorities (1 = Not gone nearly far enough, 5 = Gone much too far)		-0.080 (-0.58)	-0.155 (-1.25)	-0.104 (-0.80)
What do you think about attempts to give equal opportunities to women (1 = Not gone nearly far enough, 5 = Gone much too far)		-0.617*** (-4.10)	-0.315* (-2.32)	-0.352* (-2.47)
What do you think about attempts to give equal opportunities to members of the gay and lesbian community (1 = Not gone nearly far enough, 5 = Gone much too far)		-0.114 (-0.79)	-0.112 (-0.85)	-0.053 (-0.38)
Voter type				
How widespread do you think corruption such as bribe taking is among politicians in Ireland? (1 = Very widespread, 4 = It hardly happens at all)			-0.957*** (-6.44)	-0.762*** (-4.91)
How good or bad a job do you think the government did over the past 4 years? (1 = Very good job, 4 = Very bad job)			1.573*** (11.49)	1.442*** (9.93)
How interested would you say you are in politics? (1 = Very interested, 4 = Not at all interested)			0.014 (0.09)	0.139 (0.84)
Most politicians are trustworthy (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)			-0.286* (-2.45)	-0.255* (-2.09)
Political Attitudes				
Insist on or abandon goal of united Ireland – self placement (11 point scale)				-0.410*** (-10.83)
Constant	9.470*** (12.89)	11.999*** (10.05)	8.621*** (6.43)	8.90*** (6.36)
Observations	2755	2755	2755	2755
R-squared (adjusted)	0.05	0.07	0.29	0.36

Table 9: Results of 4 regression models showing predictors of probability of voting for Sinn Féin (Own analysis, data from INES 1 2020, t-values in parentheses.)

While O'Malley only uses the self-reported probability of giving Sinn Féin a first-preference vote as the dependent variable in order to increase the number of observations in the dataset, Sinn Féin's far larger vote share in 2020 allows for a fruitful examination of the

predictors of actual Sinn Féin voting in 2020 – in Tables 10, 11,12, and 13 . The results of these regressions largely echo the findings of Table 9, except Table 11 shows more statistically significant relationships for social attitudes than Table 9. Although the relationships are not particularly strong, Table 11 shows that Sinn Féin voters have more reactionary views towards immigrants than the population average, but more progressive attitudes towards women and LGBTQ people. These findings support the argument that Sinn Féin's base combines both progressives and potential far-right voters, who are united by anti-system beliefs and support for a united Ireland.

Gave first preference vote to Sinn Féin (1 = Yes, 0 = No)	
Age in years	-0.007 (-0.87)
Gender (M = 1, F = 2)	-0.024 (-0.96)
Highest level of education (7-point scale)	-0.046*** (-3.79)
Income (Annual salary, 6-point scale)	-0.051*** (-5.075)
Constant	0.836*** (9.89)
Observations	2755
R squared (adjusted)	0.04

Table 10: Results of regression model showing predictors of Sinn Féin vote - socio-demographics (Own analysis, data from INES 1 2020, t-values in parentheses)

Gave first preference vote to Sinn Féin (1 = Yes, 0 = No)	
Ireland's culture is generally harmed by immigrants (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)	0.026* (2.00)
Immigrants are generally good for Ireland's economy (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)	-0.065*** (-4.64)
What do you think about attempts to give equal opportunities to ethnic minorities (1 = Not gone nearly far enough, 5 = Gone much too far)	0.008 (0.59
What do you think about attempts to give equal opportunities to women (1 = Not gone nearly far enough, 5 = Gone much too far)	-0.41** (-3.01)
What do you think about attempts to give equal opportunities to members of the gay and lesbian community (1 = Not gone nearly far enough, 5 = Gone much too far)	-0.040** (-2.96)
Constant	0.702*** (8.39)
Observations	2755
R squared (adjusted)	0.04

Table 11: Results of regression model showing predictors of Sinn Féin vote - social attitudes (Own analysis, data from INES 1 2020, t-values in parentheses)

Gave first preference vote to Sinn Féin (1 = Yes, 0 = No)	
How widespread do you think corruption such as bribe taking is among politicians in Ireland? (1 = Very widespread, 4 = It hardly happens at all)	-0.100*** (-7.36)
How good or bad a job do you think the government did over the past 4 years? (1 = Very good job, 4 = Very bad job)	0.159*** (12.55)
How interested would you say you are in politics? (1 = Very interested, 4 = Not at all interested)	0.002 (0.13)
Most politicians are trustworthy (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)	-0.036*** (-3.38)
Constant	0.149* (2.20)
Observations	2755
R squared (adjusted)	0.22

Table 12: Results of regression model showing predictors of Sinn Féin vote - voter type (Own analysis, data from INES 1 2020, t-values in parentheses)

Gave first preference vote to Sinn Féin (1 = Yes, 0 = No)	
Insist on or abandon goal of united Ireland – self placement (11 point scale)	-0.052*** (-14.70)
Constant	0.590*** (32.52)
Observations	2755
R squared (adjusted)	0.10

Table 13: Results of regression model showing predictors of Sinn Féin vote - political attitudes (Own analysis, data from INES 1 2020, t-values in parentheses)

The question remains, however: are potential supporters of the far right currently supporting Sinn Féin? In order to answer this question, I examine the relationship between support for the Irish Freedom Party (IFP) – the only far-right micro-party included in the INES 1 dataset – and support for Sinn Féin. In the 2020 INES 1 dataset, respondents are asked to rank the probability that they will ever vote for parties on a 10-point scale. Despite the IFP's negligible support in the 2020 election, 214 out of the 2753 respondents rated their probability to vote for the Irish Freedom Party 6 or higher – thus providing access to a unique sample of potential far right voters in Ireland.

Table 14 examines the association between the self-reported probability of voting for the Irish Freedom Party with the probability of voting for every other party in the dataset, and shows that probability to vote for Sinn Féin is a significant predictor of probability to vote for the Irish Freedom Party. Strikingly, the probability of voting for any other mainstream party is negatively associated with probability of voting for the IFP (although not always at statistically significant levels).

Probable/not probable to give Irish Freedom Party first preference vote (1-10 scale)	
Probable/not probable to give first preference vote to:	
Sinn Féin	0.061*** (4.33)
Fine Gael	-0.015 (-1.06)
Fianna Fáil	-0.036* (-2.41)
Green Party	-0.085*** (-5.36)
Labour	-0.050** (-2.79)
Solidarity / People Before Profit	-0.028 (1.56)
Social Democrats	-0.014 (-0.77)
Aontú	0.132*** (6.15)
Renua	0.402*** (15.79)
Independents	0.088*** (6.03)
Constant	0.432*** (3.34)
Observations	2755
R squared (adjusted)	0.34

Table 14: Results of regression model showing the relationship between probability of voting for the IFP and probability of voting for other parties (Own analysis, data from INES 1 2020, t-values in parentheses)

Table 15 shows the strong and statistically significant relationship between the probability of voting for the IFP and having actually voted for Sinn Féin, and Figure 6 shows the first-preference votes of the 204 respondents who rated their probability of voting for the Irish Freedom Party as 6 or higher, for whom voting data is available. Only a small minority of these people actually voted for the IFP, and a striking 96 were Sinn Féin voters – constituting by far the largest bloc.

Probable/not probable to give Irish Freedom Party first preference vote (1-10 scale)	
Gave first preference vote to Sinn Féin (1 = Yes, 0 = No)	0.875*** (7.51)
Constant	1.303*** (15.07)
Observations	2755
R squared (adjusted)	0.03

Table 15: Results of regression model showing the relationship between probability of voting for the IFP and having voted for Sinn Féin (Own analysis, data from INES 1 2020, t-values in parentheses)

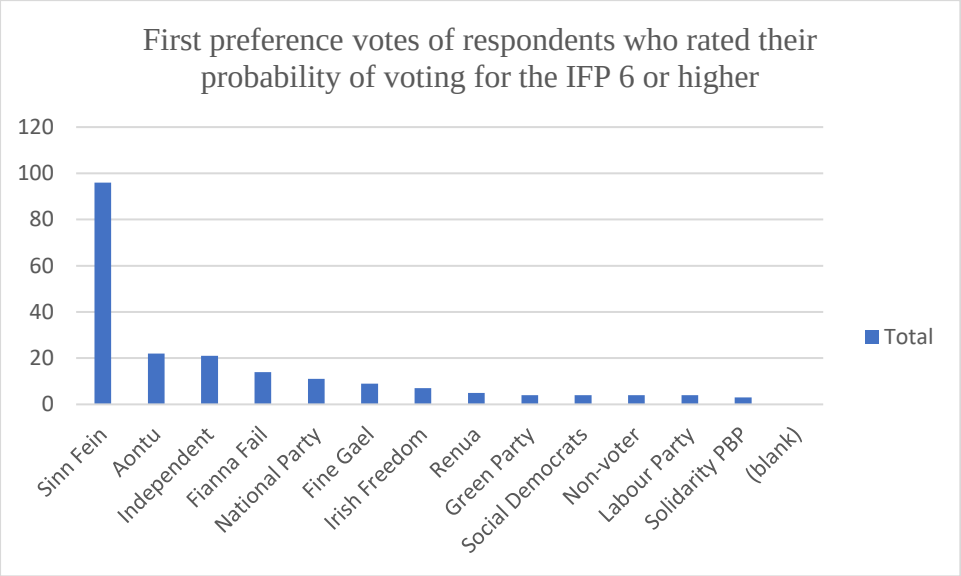

Figure 6: First preference votes of respondents who rated their probability of voting for the IFP 6 or higher (Own analysis, data from INES 1 2020)

This is particularly significant, given the fact that of Ireland's two most notable minor far right parties, the Irish Freedom Party appears to have far less in common with Sinn Féin, having started out as the "Irexit Freedom" (McGreevy 2018), preferring to adopt far-right

frames from abroad than from the tradition of Irish republican nationalism. The National Party, in contrast, mixes typical far right rhetoric with an anti-British, nominally anti-imperialist stance:

> What the men of 1916 saw as the coarse grubby materialism of the British Empire is at large in our own time in the form of international liberalism which infects the whole western world. (The National Party)

As this quote from the National Party website shows, its rhetoric echoes strands of Sinn Féin's anti-British nationalism. Tables 14 and 15, as well as Figure 6, provide strong evidence to support the theory that potential far right voters in Ireland are voting for Sinn Féin.

3.5b Explaining Sinn Féin's rise to prominence

Since the 2008 financial crisis, the Irish political system has been volatile, and there has been political space for new challengers. Sinn Féin has been by far the biggest benefactor, putting together a diverse coalition and seemingly limiting the political space for a potential far-right party while also becoming the face of the Irish left. Clearly, to explain the lack of a far-right party in Ireland, one must understand the factors behind the dramatic growth and diversification of Sinn Féin's electorate.

Cunningham and Marsh's (2021) analysis of the 2020 election reveals several reasons for Sinn Féin's historically high vote share. Firstly, it reflects a general dissatisfaction with the economy. Despite positive macroeconomic indicators, voters were overall dissatisfied with the economy, in large part due to the cost of living and housing crises (Cunningham and Marsh 2021). Even though Fine Gael was in power and Fianna Fáil was not, the confidence-and-supply arrangement between the two parties meant that Fianna Fáil did not represent a credible alternative to the establishment in voters' eyes, and Sinn Féin benefitted from widespread dissatisfaction with the political and economic status quo (Cunningham and Marsh 2021).

Second, housing, along with healthcare, were the two most important issues for voters in the 2020 election (Cunningham and Marsh 2021). Housing was a significant part of Sinn Féin's campaign (Leahy 2021), and it outperformed Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael combined among voters for whom housing was the most important issue (Cunningham and Marsh 2021).

Third, Irish elections have become more volatile in recent years as party loyalty has decreased substantially (Cunningham and Marsh 2021). Only 24% of respondents "felt close" to a particular party; only the largest four parties held on to more than half their votes from the last election; and Sinn Féin was by far the biggest benefactor of vote switching between 2016 and 2020 (Cunningham and Marsh 2021).

Present-day Sinn Féin also has several key similarities with the Fianna Fáil of previous decades, and it has been suggested that it is increasingly occupying political space vacated by Fianna Fáil following its decline in popularity after the 2008 financial crisis (Walsh and O'Malley 2012). Before Fianna Fáil's collapse in popularity post-2008, it was the most popular party across different age and class groups and could not be identified as a right or left-wing party. Rather, it was a catch-all party defined by its nationalism, however, with Sinn Féin now being seen as the main nationalist and the main left-wing party in Ireland, Fianna Fáil is limited to a narrower niche on the centre-right (Weeks 2023). Nationalism in the Irish political sphere, therefore, is currently tied to left-wing politics. As mentioned earlier (p. 27), nationalism in Ireland has traditionally been more left-wing than elsewhere, but this does not necessarily mean that the emergence of a right-wing nationalist party is impossible. As Fianna Fáil declined in popularity and relinquished much of its control over the nationalist space in Irish politics, there would likely have been much more space for a far-right nationalist challenger had Sinn Féin not emerged as the dominant nationalist force. Political nationalism in Ireland continues to be largely (although not exclusively) left-wing in nature because Sinn Féin – a left-wing party – has been the main proponent of nationalist ideology in the political sphere in recent years.

4. Conclusion, research agenda, and prospects

4.1 Conclusion

Type of explanation	Explanation	Does it explain the absence of the far right in Ireland?
Demand side: conditions that create demand	Immigration and ethnic competition	No
	Economic factors	No
	Post-materialist values / cultural backlash	No
	Social breakdown and declining participation	No
Demand side: demand measured by attitudes	Attitudes: nativism	No
	Attitudes: authoritarianism	No
	Attitudes: populism	No
Between supply and demand	Irish nationalism in the context of the far right	To some extent - area for future research.
Supply-side explanations	Media landscape	No
	Political system	To some extent - area for future research.
	Existing far right	To some extent - area for future research.
	Political space: Sinn Féin	Yes

Table 16: Summary of all explanations examined

Table 16 sums up the explanations discussed in this thesis, and whether or not they can explain the absence of a major far-right party in Ireland. After examining a number of demand-side factors, it seems highly unlikely that the lack of a far-right party is down to demand-side factors. The socio-political conditions typically associated with far-right mobilisation are largely present, and an examination of Irish attitudes suggests that the lack of a major far right party is not due to a lack of far-right attitudes among Irish people. Despite the fact that Irish people are more trusting and less nativist than the European average, there are several countries in western Europe with highly successful far-right parties where people tend to be more trusting and less nativist than in Ireland.

As I have argued, the principal reason for the lack of a far-right party in Ireland is because Sinn Féin, despite being a left-wing party, occupies the political space of a far-right party and commands significant support from potential far-right voters. Unlike most other Western democracies, Irish politics revolves more around economic rather than cultural issues, evidenced by the fact that economic issues are relatively more prevalent in party manifestos and public debate. Furthermore, Ireland is experiencing an alignment of voters along class lines – whereas dealignment is the norm in modern democracies. Sinn Féin is supported by a predominantly working-class electorate, unlike most other left-wing parties in contemporary democracies. In addition to that, Sinn Féin has been able to monopolise Irish nationalism in the political sphere in recent years, and its populist, anti-establishment messaging has been extremely popular with voters. While many left-wing parties around the world have been losing working-class supporters to far-right parties with nationalist, nativist, populist, authoritarian ideologies, Sinn Féin has been able to get support from many potential far-right voters by being a nationalistic and populist left-wing party, without the nativism and authoritarianism of a far-right party.

4.2 Research agenda

Sinn Féin's apparent prevention of the emergence of a far-right party with a strategy focused on left-wing economic messaging and nationalist discourse opens up some interesting avenues for future research. An understanding of spatial competition along a single left-right axis (Downs 1957) would suggest that the best way the far right's rise can be curtailed by political manoeuvring is for centre-right parties to adopt far-right elements. However, several scholars, must notably Cas Mudde (2019), have warned of the dangers of mainstreaming the far right, and some have argued that it may in fact help the far right (Kallis 2013, Krzyżanowski 2020, Mendes and Dennison 2021). However, this understanding of spatial competition has largely given way to a more multidimensional conceptualisation, where parties compete along more than one axis (Kriesi, Grande, et al. 2008). Furthermore, as Oesch and Rennwald (2018) illustrate, modern party competition is not bipolar – as understood by Downs (1957) at the time of writing – but tripolar, where the far right competes with the centre right for small business owners, and with the left over its traditional working-class stronghold.

Thus, rather than pivoting to the right, mainstream parties may in fact be able to curtail the political space available for the far right to exploit by appealing to the typical base of the far right with a different type of message. The dominant understanding of the base of the far right is that they tend to be those who feel economically insecure, threatened by globalisation, and dissatisfied with the political system (Kitschelt and McGann 1997, Kriesi, Grande, et al. 2008). Thus, the nationalistic and anti-establishment rhetoric of the far right is appeals to them. However, Sinn Féin's strategy, focused on 'supplying' a left-wing variety of civic nationalism, effectively exercising ownership over the issue of nationalism in the political sphere, and

capturing the disaffected working-class vote (which may otherwise swing towards the far right) with a left-wing anti-establishment seems to have been effective.

The case of Sinn Féin provides a unique example of a setting where the left is increasing its strength among working-class voters, and the far right has made no impact on the dynamics of the political space as of yet. Party competition in Ireland, therefore, is not tripolar, but bipolar, as was the norm before the emergence of the far right. Sinn Féin's unique brand of left-nationalism and anti-establishment left-wing discourse has clearly been successful among voters typically associated with the far right in other contexts. Thus, the case of Sinn Féin and the absence of the Irish far right can inform a new research agenda focused on the potential role of left-wing parties in preventing the rise of the far right. As the far right has become more established, although it continues to grow overall, some far-right parties have sustained losses in various elections. Hence, researchers could begin to examine the profiles of former far-right voters and ascertain their motivations. Future research could investigate if other left-wing parties are successfully competing with the far right in countries where the far right is already established, and if these parties share similarities with Sinn Féin.

Although this thesis thoroughly examines the reasons why Ireland has no major far-right party, the history of Irish nationalism and how it affects the current political landscape is an area where more research could be carried out to deepen our understanding of Ireland's puzzling lack of a major far-right party. While it is true that Irish nationalism has historically been predominantly left-wing, I argue that there is currently insufficient evidence to assert that this is the reason for the lack of a major far-right party. There are many potential historical, context-specific explanations, and future research into the prolonged lack of far-right mobilisation in Ireland that focuses on the history of Irish nationalism and other idiosyncratic explanations could be fruitful. To rigorously answer the question of how the history of Irish

nationalism informs the current political landscape and whether it has prevented the emergence of a far-right party, it may also be necessary to study Ireland in a comparative context.

Another area where more research could help explain the lack of far-right mobilisation in Ireland is the role of effective representation. Irish people are more trusting than the European average, and Ireland's responsive political system has been cited as a reason for the lack of a far-right party (Hix 2020). Irish politics is highly focused on local issues and contact between citizens and representatives, and representative democracy is "supplemented" by deliberative mini-publics and referendums (Hix 2020). However, it is difficult to isolate the causal elements of Hix's claims in order to test the argument that effective representation has prevented the emergence of the far right in Ireland. Such a project would likely need to engage in large-scale data collection examining the link between citizens' attitudes towards representation and far-right voting.

4.3 Prospects

Recent far-right riots and protests in Ireland support the assumption that the demand for a far-right party very much exists, yet remains untapped by an electorally viable party. Furthermore, the most robust reason for the lack of a far-right party – the electoral space being occupied by Sinn Féin – should not be expected to keep Ireland immune from the threat of the far right in the future. Firstly, Sinn Fein has capitalised on high levels of volatility; only 4% of Irish voters "feel close" to Sinn Féin, and its results in the 2020 election were bolstered by strong support among late deciders (Cunningham and Marsh 2021). This suggests that Sinn Féin's broad coalition of voters may be unstable and unlikely to hold in future elections – especially considering the ideological diversity of the electorate. As Regan (2023) has suggested, Sinn Féin winning the next election could significantly increase the chance of a far-

right party forming, as becoming part of the establishment could damage its image among disaffected anti-establishment voters – who may then be open to the appeal of the far right. Moreover, while Irish politics was typically not characterised by a bipolar left-right divide like other democracies throughout the twentieth century, it appears to be now. Most other democracies have seen this bipolar space become a tripolar space as the far right emerges, and it is easily imaginable that this will happen in Ireland too, with Sinn Féin losing part of its voting base to the far right. In conclusion, while Sinn Féin has been uniquely successful at curtailing the growth of the far right in Ireland thus far, it seems likely that Ireland is a latecomer rather than exception to the global far-right wave, and the emergence of an electorally viable far-right party may only be a matter of time.

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