The Great Normalisation: Success, Failure and Change in contemporary Ireland

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The puzzle of Ireland

In the three decades from the early 1990s Ireland underwent a remarkable transformation. The economy grew at breakneck speed, with employment almost doubling. What had been a country of emigration, became one of immigration. The physical appearance of Ireland changed radically, as its roads infrastructure was improved, urban retail areas became more internationalised, and parts of Dublin city saw the growth of urban quarters that looked much wealthier, more cosmopolitan, more European. The people on the streets were different too; where it was once unusual to see anyone who was not white Irish, the population became much more diverse. Ireland became less Catholic, as mass attendance which had been at near universal levels, fell markedly from the early 1990s. This was accompanied by equally remarkable changes in social attitudes, where there was a significant liberalisation of views towards issues such as marriage, homosexuality and abortion. Ireland elected Mary Robinson as president in 1990, and she was unusual not just in her sex, but also her more liberal attitudes and engagement with issues that Ireland had tended to ignore. One issue that Irish politics had tended to ignore in practical terms was Northern Ireland. Despite the rhetoric about reunification of the island, little was ever done. This changed in the 1980s, culminating in the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement, signed in 1998. So Ireland also saw a partial resolution of the conflict in Northern Ireland, which had caused the deaths of over 3,000 people, and the formation of a newly devolved assembly in Belfast and the formation of a government that included erstwhile enemies. Mary McAleese, a second woman president, and one from Northern Ireland spoke in 2003 of Ireland: 'If the men and women of Ireland's past could choose a time to live, there would be a long queue for this one. It is far from perfect but it is as good as it has ever been' (7 May 2003). This was not just a politician selling her country; a number of measures, for instance, The Economist 'quality of life' index, put Ireland at or near the top of places to live.

As dramatic as those changes were, the even more spectacular collapse in the economy in 2008 saw Ireland enter a lending programme, which in theory severely circumscribed the ability of government to make decisions. The accompanying social ill-effects, increased unemployment, emigration, and the physical scars on the landscape of unfinished Ghost estates, would have made people wonder if the earlier Tiger period was purely illusory. It was not, but some of the more eye-catching statistics said more about the data gathering that they did about Ireland. Because Ireland is so exposed to capital movements by large multinational corporations (MNCs) instead of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) the Irish Central Statistics Office (CSO) developed and now uses an adjusted measure of national productivity, GNI*, which strips out much of the income that might give an incorrect impression of Irish growth. This was especially evident in the uplift in the Irish economy from about 2013, including in 2015 which saw a growth rate of 23 per cent, simply due to the moving to Ireland of assets in the aircraft leasing industry, of which Ireland is a leader. Ireland's remarkable bounce back made it appear a poster child for austerity (but see Kinsella 2017), but it quickly led to warnings of Ireland entering another boom-and-bust cycle. What the crash did establish, however, was that Ireland found a new equilibrium, and there was no sense of Ireland falling back to where it was before the Celtic Tiger. That was until the Covid-19 crisis, which led to a massive uplift in unemployment on a scale never seen before. Whether

Irish politics changed in that there was the fragmentation of the party system, and increasing evidence of a left/ right divide emerging. The dominance of the two largest parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, was threatened, but until 2020 they remained the two largest parties, if now joined by a plethora of other small parties on the left. Ireland avoided the populism poisoning much of Europe's politics, and there was a more muted reaction to austerity than occurred in other so-called PIIGS (Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece and Spain). The election in February 2020 saw Sinn Féin join the two now medium sized parties in what was surely the complete breakdown of the old established order. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's attempt to form a coalition might cement a more normal class-based politics.

The start of power-sharing administrations in Northern Ireland, including at one stage erstwhile enemies, Rev. Ian Paisley and former IRA leader, Martin McGuinness, (non-ironically) getting the epithet the 'Chuckle Brothers' becoming First and Deputy First Ministers respectively, was never followed by reconciliation between the two communities there. By the late 2010s relations at the elite level had soured, only to be made worse by Brexit. In the Republic, talk of a united Ireland, once the preserve of extremists, entered mainstream debate.

Ireland's rise, crash, and return suggests discrete periods. If we tend to think of history occurring in phases, the Celtic Tiger seems to have had a sharp end in September 2008. The narrative is then Celtic Tiger went from about 1994 to 2008. Then was the Great Recession, until about 2013, followed by the Celtic Phoenix – Ireland's remarkable recovery. But it would be more accurate to think of it all as one period, starting about 1987. The ebb and flow of the economic performance and thus migration patterns, are cycles within a period of Ireland's economic expansion, liberalisation and peace building that we might call the *Great Normalisation*. For as much as Ireland changed, much of the change merely made the country look like a normal western European country – wealthy, secular and peaceful.

The puzzle, then, is how did Ireland get there? It could be that Ireland simply 'caught up'; that it finally converged with the normal performance of a European economy. Of course this begs the question, why did it happen when it happened, and why did Ireland take so long? Why was Ireland subject to such violent swings in fortune? Much of the intellectual commentary on Ireland has tended to answer that with a view that is dismissive of Irish elites and culture; Ireland became successful due to luck (Foster 2007) or despite the efforts of the Irish elite and culture to 'prevent the future' (Garvin, 2004; Lee 1987).

I will argue here that, in fact, the successes, failures, and changes that have taken place in this period of Great Normalisation can be attributed to political decisions made in Ireland, and specifically the political and economic context in which decisions were made (though the importance of random luck should never be discounted). The country's recovery from that collapse, for instance, can be seen as primarily a result of political forces, whereby the political system 'corrected itself' following its earlier excesses. As well as (in part) making them, politics also interacts with other social phenomena, and politics has been impacted by the economic performance, demographic and social changes.

This chapter will trace the arc of the social, economic, and political, performance in Ireland from 1987 to 2020, but concentrate more on the period from 2008 when Ireland, faced with economic collapse reacted in a more moderate -some might say supine- way that other countries. It will review the literature on the nature of the collapse, the political and economic response, and ask (if not fully answer) questions on, for instance, why Ireland chose to take the austerity path with such alacrity, whether it worked, and why some issues, such as water charges, provoked such strong reactions. Furthermore, the chapter will set out the radical changes in Irish society, not least the liberalisation of attitudes, the changing face of Irish people, and the physical space that Ireland, Brexit, and what that means for Ireland. Throughout that, we will look at the impact of and on politics.

Economy and economic performance

In the 1980s the Irish crisis the Irish economic performance was such that while few if any explicitly questioned whether independence was a failure, the inference in many writings was that had the question been posed the answer would have to be 'Yes' (see for example Lee, 1982). Ireland was mired in a debt crisis, with high unemployment, and high wage inflation, which had no obvious politically available solution. It was portrayed in *The Economist* in 1988 as the 'Poorest of the Rich'. Yet within a decade Ireland made a remarkable and seemingly permanent turnaround.

The figures are now as well-known as they are eye-watering. Employment almost doubled, unemployment dropped from over 18 per cent to about four per cent, and annual growth rates averaged at about five percent, about twice the European Union (EU) average. (It had averaged just 0.2 per cent in the five years up to 1988, which given the inflation rate meant that Ireland's economy was contracting.) Gross Domestic Product (GDP) went from about two-thirds the EU15 average to 120 per cent of the average in 2003. Public debt went from 109 per cent of GDP to 25 per cent in 2007. Economists' explanations for the Celtic Tiger tend to be dry and unsatisfactory. They rely on improvements in concepts such as Total Factor Productivity, and ask whether such improvements "are due to workers using more machinery or other factors of production and how much is due to a more efficient use of existing factors of production." (Wycherley 2017, 187-8). These measure progress, but do not explain it. Frequently cited explanations (see Barry, 1999) include the introduction of the European single market, the availability of an educated workforce, wage stability and industrial peace, foreign direct investment, and increased investment in research. With the exception of the opening up of the EU single market these were either already available or might be thought of as correlates of growth, rather than potential causes. For instance, why did so many companies choose to invest in Ireland in this period, but not earlier?

We can probably place the conception of the economic Celtic Tiger at political decisions made in 1987, but other earlier decisions, such as the introduction of free education and the decision to join the EEC were also necessary causal conditions. In 1987 a new Irish government under Charles J. Haughey introduced Social Partnership. This was, on the face of it, a wage bargaining process, but it reached far beyond that into fiscal and industrial policy. Unions were primed to support this plan

– as it brought them into the decision making tent – and offered favourable tax changes in return for wage restraint. This immediately reduced industrial unrest. But with it came fiscal retrenchment, so cutbacks in government spending reduced the need for borrowing. This increased confidence that the Irish state was now serious in dealing with its problems of debt and wage inflation, which encouraged private investment. The government pushed hard to increase employment in existing industries, and to encourage foreign investment (see O'Connor, 2019). For instance, there was a strategy for commercialising agriculture, by increasing the value-added in agriculture, marketing Irish food abroad, and through the privatisation of agricultural co-operatives.

Ireland got lucky too. Ireland's geography had always been a problem. Its relative isolation as an island behind an island at the edge of Europe meant that economically it was essentially a region of the UK, even after independence. Transporting heavy industrial goods was prohibitively expensive. The opening up of the European single market in 1992 and increased globalisation coincided with Ireland now being able to skip that industrialisation phase, and go straight to high-tech growth with lighter industry in pharmaceuticals and the IT sector. Ireland was particularly well positioned to attract investment from US MNCs wanting to establish a European base, especially given Ireland's cultural connections, shared language and legal systems, and the low corporate tax rate (Donovan and Murphy, 2013). There were then agglomeration effects, with companies choosing to locate where others had located. By the 2010s, the relatively new social media companies such as Twitter and Facebook headquartered their European operations in Dublin, and an area of Dublin became known as Googletown.

The positive news about the economic growth and increased employment had some negative side effects that the state failed to deal with. House prices doubled between 1995 and 2000, and doubled again between 2000 and 2006. After 2000 much of the continued economic growth was related to the property industry. Normally an economy that is booming will have high interest rates to act as a brake on growth, but as a result of European Monetary Union in 1999 the cost of borrowing money became very cheap. Irish banks could borrow money at low rates, and in turn it lent freely to property developers, and to those who wanted to buy homes.

Household debt went from €72 billion in 2003 to a peak of €203bn in 2008. There was little to stop this lending as the Irish government was ideologically attached to competition as a solution to most problems. It therefore refused to intervene when banks offered 100 per cent loan-to-value mortgages, which had the effect of increasing house process as consumers were able to borrow more and more (FitzGerald, 2019). In addition the state had in place a huge number of tax breaks designed to encourage property development.

Easy money was not only available to banks and borrowers. The state took in record tax revenues, and the low unemployment, and relatively young demographic profile of the population meant that the pressure on social spending was low. Social Partnership, which had helped kick start economic growth, was now delivering big pay rises for public sector workers. This was done under the pretext that the public sector should keep up with the private sector, but it failed to recognise the security and superior pensions available to public sector workers. Indeed one analysis showed that the public sector 'premium' – the extra reward a public sector worker would receive, controlling for experience, education etc. – doubled between 2003 and 2006 from ten per cent to over 20 per cent (Kelly et al. 2009). Some opposition politicians complained that Social Partnership was usurping the role of the Dáil and cabinet in running the country, and it was unclear that the public was getting any improvement in public services in return for the increased pay to public sector workers. What it did do, however, was help the Fianna Fáil-led government receive a third consecutive election victory.

The 2007 election was more close run that the previous election, with Bertie Ahern appearing lethargic during the campaign. He managed to secure a governing majority, however, with support from the Green Party and the two remaining Progressive Democrat TDs, a party which had long been a cheerleader for tax cuts, but after 2002 had been incapable or unwilling to demand control of public spending. Much of the debate during the election was about Ahern's private finances, which were at best unorthodox, rather than the state's finances, which though healthy on paper were vulnerable to economic shocks. On some measures the property and constructions sectors accounted for almost a quarter of Irish economic activity in 2006 (see Donovan and Murphy, 2013: Chs. 4 and 5). Most of the political class was unable or unwilling to countenance that the boom would not continue as it had for over a decade (Casey 2018). The banking sector too seemed wilfully ignorant of the risks it was taking (see Nyberg, 2011). Before that election a former chief economist of the Central Bank of Ireland set out why a recession was inevitable (Casey, 2007), and an academic economist, Morgen Kelly (2006) warned of the consequences of a rapid fall in property prices.

In 2008 the ‘credit crunch’ – a sudden reduction in the availability of credit – put the Irish banks under severe pressure, as they had borrowed money on short-terms, but lent it out at much longer terms. Its creditors wanted their money, but the banks had no alternative sources. Rising interest rates squeezed household disposable income in Ireland. The property sector went into freefall, and construction workers were laid off. This created in Ireland a ‘five-part crisis’, banking, economic, fiscal, social and reputational (NESC, 2009). As the banking sector suffered, this impacted on the broader economic performance leading to increased unemployment, which in turn had impacts on Ireland’s fiscal position, and had negative societal effects. The sharp nature of the crash also damaged Ireland’s reputation. Bertie Ahern defended Ireland’s management of the economy, suggesting that an open economy like Ireland’s could not withstand “a global recession and the collapse of the global investment banking system” (Ahern, 2015: 20), but more disinterested observers found that while “Ireland’s banking crisis bears the clear imprint of global influences, yet it was in crucial ways ‘home-made’” (Regling and Watson, 2010, p. 5). Indeed there is much more consensus about the causes of the crash: the formation of a property and construction bubble fuelled by reckless lending, allowed by loose financial regulation, and all aided by pro-cyclical government spending (Roche et al., 2017).

The impact on the economy was swift and dramatic. Unemployment doubled in two years, and had trebled within four years. Emigration returned and GDP growth went into reverse. The economic crisis was initially a middle class problem, as those who had been very comfortable suddenly weren’t. The poorest in society were protected by the automatic stabilisers of the welfare state, which unlike in other European countries, such as Greece, continued to be paid, and were reasonably generous. Table 1 shows that initially it was the wealthiest in society who were most dissatisfied with the economic performance. But tellingly four years later, after government’s austerity policies had felt their full force, the wealthy were once again satisfied the economy was picking up, whereas the poorest sections of society failed to feel this in such significant numbers.

But almost all in Irish society were forced to change their habits as a result of the recession. What had become for many middle class norms, such as foreign holidays and weekends away, were now more limited or cut out altogether. A German diplomat had noted, at the end of the Celtic Tiger, that cars on Irish roads were usually less than three years old, compared to an average of eight or nine years in Germany. True or not, new cars sales had risen greatly in the boom, and fell completely in the bust. Claudy et al. (2017) outline data that shows that people tended to go out less, changed shopping habits, and they report that many respondents found that Ireland became more friendly, and that there was a renewed sense of community during austerity. This is consistent with a lot of research that finds times of adversity tend to bring people together.

Decile/ Year	*2010*	*2014*
1st and 2nd (poorest) deciles 'extremely dissatisfied' (0-2 on 0-10 scale)	53.2%	33.1%
9th and 10th (wealthiest) deciles 'extremely dissatisfied' (0-2 on 0-10 scale)	61.6%	7.5%

Source European Social Survey, Rounds 5 and 7

Table 1: Class and Satisfaction with the economy, over time

The reaction to the crisis just as was swift and dramatic. Most Irish banks were basically insolvent, and Ireland decided on a massive bank bailout, whereby the banks' private debts were socialised. This made the state liable for €440 billion in banks debts, twice the Irish annual GDP. Ireland set up a 'bad bank' (NAMA) that assumed many of the non-performing loans from the banks' balance sheets and allowed all but Anglo-Irish Bank to continue trading. Estimates of the final cost of the bailout vary, but a recent official estimate was about €40 billion.

The bank bailout and the necessary increase in state spending was only possible with the help of a lending programme with the European Union, the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – the so-called Troika agreed in December 2010. Ireland was put under pressure to accept the programme, under threat that the ECB would effectively bankrupt the Irish banks, and hence the Irish state. Attempts at sharing the burden with the banks' creditors was rejected by the ECB. It caused some unhappiness at the EU position, though this never really affected the broadly positive sentiment towards EU membership.

The lending programme was portrayed in the media as a ‘day of surrender’, suggesting it represented a complete loss of sovereignty, with the plaintiff question ‘Was it for this?’ asked, invoking independence. The lending programme required Ireland to increase existing and impose new taxes, reduce spending, especially by cutting back on the public sector pay bill, to recapitalise banks, reduce the minimum wage, and reform sheltered professions, such as the law and medicine. The Fianna Fáil-led government collapsed under the pressure of public disaffection, and an election in February 2011 saw Fianna Fáil cease to be the largest party for the first time since the 1920s. The newly elected Irish government was a coalition of Fine Gael and Labour. It had the largest majority in Ireland’s history, but arguably the toughest job any Irish government faced. The Troika was sent in to oversee the adjustments in spending, though there appear to be few instances where the government was forced into specific cuts in spending that it had not suggested.

Fianna Fáil, now decimated and the main opposition party, was not in a position object to the austerity measures being imposed. It was then left to a growing Sinn Féin and a number of smaller left-wing parties to express alternatives to austerity. But it was unclear that any real alternatives actually existed. Ireland had no money, with debt reaching over 100 per cent of GDP. There was no support in northern Europe for fiscal transfers to the countries most affected by the Great Recession. In Germany the sense was that these were countries that borrowed too freely in good times. That a cause of the problem was that German banks had lent so freely at rates that suited the sluggish German economy but not the booming peripheral ones was ignored. Many eminent economists suggested a growth policy, however it was not clear how such a policy could be funded, unless by international institutions, as the market was not willing to let Ireland borrow. So Ireland was stuck with austerity.

Ireland emerged from the lending programme in March 2013. It might have been a great victory for the government, and in particular Taoiseach Enda Kenny. But even though the economy had slowly started to recover, with unemployment trending downward, recessionary budgets continued, with further cutbacks to public services. This may account for the results in Table 1. In delivering austerity with alacrity Ireland was able to recover its reputation relatively quickly, but whether austerity was the reason for the recovery is moot. Ireland to some extent has a dual economy (hence the need for GNI*). There is a domestic economy, which was driven by the construction and property boom, but there is the FDI-based economy, which trades internationally and has low, if any, exposure to the Irish economy. So while the international tech and pharma sectors was affected by the slowdown in the world economy in 2008, they recovered reasonably quickly.

There is some controversy as to whether Ireland is a tax haven for these companies, paying very low rates of corporation tax (much lower than the headline rate of 12.5 per cent) but not really adding much value in the country. The rates reported in the Apple case that was taken by the European Commission were vanishingly small. Given 230,000 people work in FDI related companies, the activities of these companies in Ireland are more than just tax avoidance. But though the Commission found that Apple should repay Ireland €13 billion in tax, and Ireland was opposed to this, the tax status of these companies so far failed to become a political issue. There was a sense that Ireland was benefiting from their being here. Being and open and globalised economy meant that the economy could recover when the world economy had, and it meant that though many of the indicators of economic progress pointed in the right direction, it was possible that the domestic economy picked up at a much slower rate than the figures suggested.

For this reason some of the austerity measures caused controversy, even after the Troika Economic Adjustment Programme had ended. As part of that programme Ireland was required to introduce taxes on carbon and property, and to institute charges for water. The first two were relatively uncontroversial; the first because it was introduced in name only, and the second because it was low, and affected the middle class most. Bringing in water charges, however, became politically incendiary in 2014, not long after Irish Water – a company to manage the water supply – was set up.

The installation of water meters caused the first mass protests in the recession Ireland. Quite why nothing else had is moot, but one explanation for the relative acquiescence with austerity is that unlike in other parts of Europe, the Irish state continued to work effectively. The social welfare system offered an automatic stabiliser, ensuring that the economy did not collapse, and allowing people maintain a relatively good standard of living – Irish unemployment assistance rates are among highest in the EU. The government took measures to ensure that there were almost no evictions from homes because of an inability to pay housing-associated debts. Generally the state did a good job of protecting the worst off. This explanation seems more plausible than cultural explanations, as Ireland had seen mass protests, even spilling over into violence during the Troubles, or demographic ones, as Greece had similar levels of youth emigration (Pappas and O'Malley, 2014). Although social partnership was ended in 2010, Irish unions remained part of the mainstream in Irish society. The protests on water charges were large, and at times threatened to spill over into violence, but they never came close to being "the Irish Occupy, the Irish 'Spring', or the crumbling of the Berlin Wall", as some commentary hoped (Hearne, 2014). Good policing methods, which compare favourably to those in Greece, and an effective state ensured that this did not happen. But the local elections in 2014 emphasised water charges, and pushed more mainstream parties to opposition to the water charges, which were then withdrawn after the general election of 2016.

That election failed to produce a clear winner. Fine Gael ran on the slogan 'Keep the Recovery Going', but it seemed that many people had failed to feel the recovery. It remained the largest party, but lost a lot of support to Fianna Fáil, which recovered to become the second largest party. Labour was punished for its part in the government, possibly because it had overpromised in 2011 at how it might avoid austerity. It took 70 days to agree a Fine Gael-led minority government, supported by Fianna Fáil, which agreed to abstain on key votes. It was a remarkably stable government, especially given the political unrest in other countries at the time.

Migration and Demography

The growing economy created new pressures. Homelessness rose dramatically, as many people were forced out of private rented accommodation. The state spent large amounts on social housing, but usually in the form of subsidising private rents, which arguably made the problem worse by putting upward pressure on rents. Part of the reason for the increased rents was increased immigration.

The Irish economy is built on openness to the outside world, and it is one of the more globalised countries in the world. About 17 per cent of the population is foreign born according to OECD data (OECD Economic Outlook 2019, p. 238), and about 17 per cent of those born in Ireland now live abroad (OECD Ireland Survey, 2015, p. 83). These are larger than any other OECD countries.

It is in part a function of size, as smaller countries tend to have more outward migration, but EU membership and a thriving economy means that Ireland is also more open to labour flows than anywhere else. The Irish population continued to grow, having slowed slightly during the Great Recession. The population of the state was 3.5 million in 1987, reaching 4.1 million in 2005 and 4.9 million in 2019. Ireland's population is still lower than it was before the Great Famine; Ireland is likely to be the only country in the world whose population is lower in the 21st than it was in the mid-19th century.

Immigration did not become the political issue that it was for neighbouring countries such as the UK. It might be because immigrants to Ireland tend to be from other EU countries, tend to be better educated, and are not of religious minorities. For instance, over 20 per cent of non-Irish nationals living in Ireland were from Poland, a country that shared its religious traditions with Ireland. These might, however, have led some of the 'losers from globalisation' resent immigrants. Immigration was a minor issue during the first wave of immigration in the early 2000s. This was politicised at the time, and a referendum was introduced that took away the automatic right to Irish citizenship for those born on the island of Ireland. You now had to have established links with the country. Table 3 below gives a sense of what was important to Irish people over this period, and while housing becomes important, especially during the recovery, there does not seem to be much anti-immigration sentiment in the way it was in the UK pre-Brexit. And any such sentiment failed to translate electorally into support for explicitly anti-immigrant parties or candidates.

	Economic situation			*Crime*			*Housing*			*Immigration*		
Year	**IRL**	Por.	UK	**IRL**	Por.	UK	**IRL**	Por.	UK	**IRL**	Por.	UK
2005	*5*	42	8	*50*	15	31	*11*	1	6	*12*	5	31
2010	*44*	42	38	*27*	10	28	*3*	2	6	*4*	1	28
2015	*16*	28	14	*14*	4	10	*23*	1	15	*7*	3	32
2019*	*11*	22	17	*13*	3	27	*54*	7	14	*7*	4	14

Table 3. What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment? Data for Ireland, Portugal and the UK.
Source: Eurobarometer; *UK data for 11/2018

Having experienced large-scale immigration during the Celtic Tiger years, emigration restarted during the recession. It affected the make-up of the Irish population. Between 2007 and 2013 the proportion of the population that was in the 15-24 age category and the 25-34 category, fell from 22 to 17 per cent, and 25 to 24 per cent respectively. This represented a loss of 230,000 young people, about half of which is accounted for by aging and falling birth rates. Even when the economy was booming in the late 2010s, emigration among the younger cohorts was still relatively high, partly because of tradition, but also because of the cost of housing.

A more liberal country

If Ireland's population make-up has changed in the period of Great Normalisation, the opinions of the people in it were also changed in radical ways. The diminution of the younger population cohort might have had an impact on the political views of the country. If the young are more likely to be liberal, losing them, especially if replaced by people from more conservative places, might make the Irish more conservative on aggregate. Ireland in the mid-1980s appeared in thrall to the Catholic Church, with near universal levels of mass going; a referendum to insert the constitutional ban on abortion was easily carried, and an attempt to legalise divorce failed. By 2015 Ireland became the first country in the world to legalise same-sex marriage by a public vote, and in 2018 Ireland voted clearly to allow abortion, paving the way for a liberal abortion law.

The 2016 census shows that almost 80 per cent of the Irish population identify as Roman Catholic, though this might not translate into behavioural and attitudinal traits we might associate with devout Catholics. Some estimates of mass going saw them fall to 79 per cent by 1991, at about the time scandals in the Church were becoming discussed more publicly. Since then the fall has been greater, especially in urban areas. An archbishop of Dublin claimed that the attendance in some working class areas of Dublin was just five per cent. According to European Social Survey data the percentage attending mass at least weekly was 58 per cent in 2004, dropping to 44 per cent in 2008, 39 per cent in 2012 and 38 per cent in 2016.

Table 3: Attitudes to abortion among Irish people

	2002	**2007**	**2011**	**2016**	**2018**
Total ban (0-2)	33.5	27.0	15	15	18

Ambivalent (3-7)	38.2	40.8	50	44	41
Freely available (8-10)	23.4	26.7	27	35	40
Don’t know	5.1	4.5	9	4	1

Q. People who fully agree that there should be a total ban on abortion in Ireland would give a score of ‘0’. People who fully agree that abortion should be freely available in Ireland to any woman who wants to have one would give a score of ‘10’. Other people would place themselves in between these two views. Where would you place yourself on this scale? 2018 question is to voters in the referendum, and worded slightly differently. Source: Irish National Election Survey, various years, and RTÉ Exit poll, 2018.

Attitudes to abortion have seen similar changes (see Table 3), with the Irish becoming more ambivalent after 2007, and then much more liberal before 2016. The event that caused that was probably the death of an Indian dentist in an Irish hospital. Savita Halepanavaar was suffering complications in her pregnancy, and became severely unwell. She died of sepsis, when some reports show that her treatment was compromised by her pregnancy and the fear of the medical team that a treatment might lead to the termination of her pregnancy. In response to this campaigns to repeal the 8th amendment that had been largely ignored gained public and political support. When change came, it came rapidly. Mainstream parties began to speak of an issue that had been non-grata for decades. Labour and Fine Gael openly supported that the issue would be sent to a citizens’ assembly, which it was after the 2016 election. Following a parliamentary committee inquiry, the Irish government chose to put an amendment largely repealing the 8th amendment to the people in 2018. Most leading politicians, including the Fianna Fáil leader, Micheál Martin supported repeal, to many people’s surprise. After a vigorous campaign the proposal was passed easily. Because of its easy passage it is expected that abortion will not become the divisive political issue that it remains in the US. The mobilisation of people on the abortion issue was not party-based. Party attachment remained low (Costello, 2018), whereas people seemed much more likely to be issue-based voters than party-based ones.

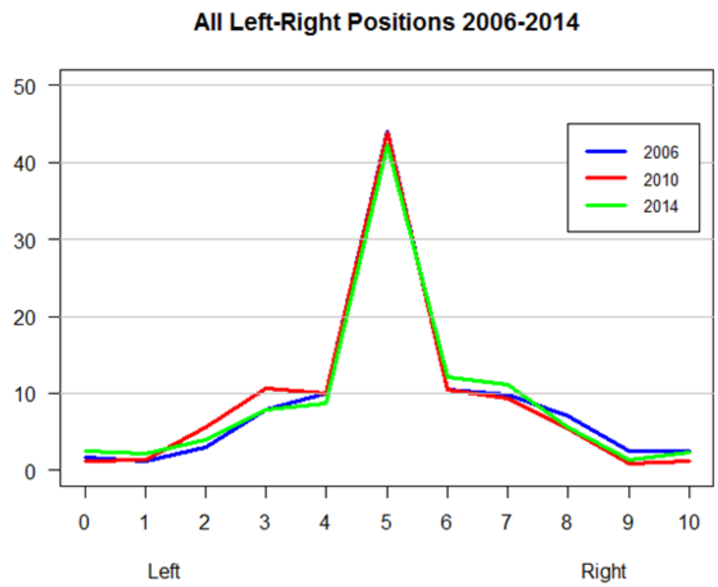

Figure 1: Left Right self-placement from European Social Surveys, 2006-2014

If positions changed in relation to social and moral issues, no such shift took place in relation to economic issues as a result of the financial crisis. Given the largescale failure of the economy, and the blame being set in part at a failure of deregulation of financial institutions one might expect that Irish voters would shift to the left. While voters shifted away from Fianna Fáil, they shifted to other centrist parties. Smaller left-wing parties grew, as did Sinn Féin, but even by 2016 centrist parties still performed best. Figure 1 shows the absence of an ideological shift as a result of the crisis. Almost nothing happened. That said, where politics was non-ideological there is evidence of an emerging left-right divide in Irish politics, and something approaching social bases for Irish politics (Garry, 2018). This emergence might have been accelerated somewhat by the water charges protest, which seems to have politicised at least a group of people.

The shift to a more 'normal' left-right divide emerged more clearly in the February 2020 election, which saw a spectacular rise in support for Sinn Féin. The ensuing Coronavirus crisis, which saw an equally spectacular rise in unemployment and economic crash meant normal politics was suspended, making it hard for Sinn Féin to push their case. But the centre-right Fine Gael caretaker government introduced measures that Sinn Féin had been calling for years, and an agreement between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to form a government together seemed to upend the historic party system. The parties' agreement also signalled a notable leftward shift by those parties. But those parties would have to contend with a new economic crisis, have just emerged from the last one. This time, however, politicians were not blamed. The volatility of the electorate means that we cannot be certain of any permanent shifts among Irish voters.

Northern Ireland and Brexit

Another issue that became politicised in the late 2010s was Northern Ireland. From the 1980s, and especially after 1998 Good Friday or Belfast Agreement, there was a sense that Irish governments would be good friends with the UK, but using the institutions of the Belfast Agreement to promote the interests of nationalists in Northern Ireland. This worked well while Tony Blair remained the UK prime minister. His successors either had other priorities or a complete lack of interest. The fundamental nature of the Belfast Agreement is sectarian, and so few incentives exists for Irish nationalists or British unionists to work together. It provided a temporary peace, but no resolution. Nationalists were seen as trying to extract something more in an inexorable movement towards a united Ireland, and northern Protestants increasingly became 'an unsettled people' (McKay, 2005) unwilling to concede anything. Regular elections increased the rhetorical divisions between these groups. At the societal level the absence of reconciliation and integration was as obvious. Segregation in urban areas continued, and the so-called 'Peace Walls' erected to keep the communities apart were retained, and in some instances increased in height. Those borders within Northern Ireland remained as space was increasingly demarcated by local nationalist and loyalists who tagged their areas with flags, murals and paint. Even if the murals displayed less violent imagery, they still had the impact of excluding others. Flags and protests about flags ended in violence, and the worsening of relations between the communities. Might we then argue that the Belfast Agreement was ultimately a failure?

This would be going too far, but the relationships in the islands have become worse. The Stormont Assembly was in perpetual crisis mode, with collapse following collapse. Efforts to patch a new deal rarely led to improved relations. Electoral competition within the two blocs of nationalism and unionism foster an atmosphere that did not incentivise compromise. Indeed there was a politicisation of issues that had not been central to the cleavage divisions in Northern Ireland. Sinn Féin claimed that the Belfast Agreement could only be fully implemented if issues such as abortion rights and the Irish language were settled. Abortion became an odd division, given that most of Northern Irish society regardless of their faith was conservative on the issue. But the successful change in the law in the Republic made it fashionable to pursue in the north, and it cohered with Sinn Féin's 'rights' frame. While it was always associated with a particular community, the Irish language too became something more readily politicised. Unionist politicians made either deliberately antagonistic or culturally insensitive references to the Irish language. Sinn Féin insisted on an Irish Language Act as a pre-condition for the reopening of the Stormont institutions, which continued in abeyance for many years.

These problems were made worse when the UK voted to leave the European Union. Brexit was supported by only a minority of unionists in Northern Ireland, and so Brexit was an ethnonational issue. The inability of the UK to agree a deal was in part because of the unwillingness to allow a regulatory and customs border in the Irish Sea. What was once a minority sport – talk of a united Ireland – became increasingly mainstream, which hardened unionist attitudes. Ireland also cemented its attachment to the EU, which during the Brexit negotiations remained steadfast in its support of the Irish position. But it was unclear what the impact of Brexit would be on Ireland, north and south. It was likely to lead to economic, social and political changes that might start a new phase in the Irish story, one beginning at the end of the Great Normalisation.

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