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Climate Obstruction in Ireland

The Contested Transformation of an Agricultural Economy

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INTRODUCTION: IRELAND'S NUANCED LANDSCAPE

Contrary to its 'green' international image as the 'Emerald Isle', Ireland has a bleak environmental record. While the country has demonstrated a commitment to environmental goals by adopting several ambitious climate policies, Ireland has one of the highest rates of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions per capita in the European Union, and it is not on track to meet its emissions reductions targets.[1]

Ireland's ambitious climate policies include the Climate Action Act of 2015, which was amended in 2021 to include legally binding, economy-wide carbon budgets and sectoral emissions ceilings. At the international level, Ireland became the first country in the world to commit to divesting from fossil fuels (in 2018), the second to declare a climate and biodiversity emergency (in 2019), and, in 2021, it became a core member of the Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance (BOGA), an international alliance of governments and stakeholders working to facilitate the managed phase-out of oil and gas production.[2]

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Despite these aspirational policy commitments, Ireland consistently ranks among the lowest within the European Union (EU) across a range of environmental indicators.[3] The country is not on track to meet its commitments under the Paris Agreement, and emissions are increasing rather than decreasing in some key areas, including agriculture and transportation.[4] In addition to GHG emissions, Ireland has multiple other troubling environmental indicators. It holds the dubious record of being the country with the worst wetlands depletion of any nation in the world over the past three centuries.[5] Ireland also scores below the EU average on multiple metrics including air quality, the percentage of river water that is unpolluted, and the proportion of land that is protected.[6]

A small European island-nation with a population of just over 5 million, the Republic of Ireland[7] has a comparatively small fossil fuel industry and a strong cultural tradition of agriculture and burning high-carbon-emitting peat for home heating in rural areas. Ireland also has a long history of ecological exploitation and extraction derived from its colonial past as part of the British Empire. This legacy continued post-independence with successive national policies that incentivized draining wetlands to intensify food production and planting non-native monoculture forestry.

Within this context, climate obstruction in Ireland has emerged in a complex and dynamic policy landscape characterized by government efforts to meet the European Union's mandated environmental targets while simultaneously maintaining Ireland's position as a business-friendly, foreign-direct investment hub and subsidizing an ecologically intensive domestic meat and dairy sector.[8] As a result, the Irish landscape is a net source of, rather than a sink for, GHG emissions.

To better understand the disconnect between Ireland's climate policy ambition and its policy implementation failure, this chapter presents an overview of the institutional, sectoral, and individual interests that facilitate climate obstruction in Ireland. 'Climate obstruction' in this chapter is meant to include both outright denial of the climate crisis and intentional efforts to delay climate action. It describes how Ireland's colonial legacy, its unique economic context, its political system, and the country's historically uncritical news media have contributed to a lacklustre approach to environmental policymaking and implementation as well as scepticism in public discourse about the urgency of the climate crisis. The chapter also provides an overview of the sectoral interests that have stymied ambitious policy reform, including a case study of the tactics employed by the Irish agri-food sector. It concludes by highlighting the strong potential for this small, wealthy, and socially cohesive country to overcome climate obstruction and become a global leader in climate action and just climate policy.

BACKGROUND: THE IRISH CLIMATE CONTEXT

An extensive public survey conducted by the Irish Environmental Protection Agency in collaboration with the Yale Program on Climate Communication found that 84% of people living in Ireland are alarmed or concerned about climate change, with only 3% expressing doubt. This analysis demonstrates extremely low levels of climate scepticism in Ireland and widespread public concern and acceptance of climate science.[9]

Despite the high levels of public concern, the misalignment between Ireland's economic and environmental policies have led to GHG emissions increasing by 11.64% between 1990 and 2021 (Figure 4.1). GHG emissions also rose sharply between 1990 and 2008, and increased dramatically after the 2020 pandemic low. The former increases represent a period of economic boom, often referred to as the Celtic Tiger, during which the nation's economy grew rapidly due to EU subsidies and a rapid influx of foreign direct investment (FDI) from US companies. Since then, both the economic downturn caused by the 2008 financial crisis and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic led to temporary emission reductions that rebounded after these crises. Ireland's emissions increases stand in contrast to emissions declines in other parts of the European Union. Notably, Ireland was the European country with the highest GHG emissions per capita and the highest growth rates of GHG emissions in the third quarter of 2022.[10]

The historical economic context

The ecologically unsustainable nature of Ireland's economy is linked to the legacy of British imperialism and the associated dispossession, commodification, mass deforestation, and plantations of colonial exploitation.[11] In the early post-colonial period (1920s–1959), the Irish economy remained largely closed, stagnant, and heavily reliant on subsistence agriculture. Throughout the 1960s, successive governments pursued policies of trade openness, foreign investment, and economic growth, leading to Ireland's admittance to the European Economic Community in 1973. For economic diversification, the country strived to integrate into the global economy throughout the 1970s and 1980s by securing FDI.[12] Leveraging close historical and linguistic ties to the United States, low corporate taxes and a minimal environmental regulatory landscape positioned Ireland to attract FDI from the global chemical industry sector in the 1970s and the pharmaceutical and computer manufacturing sectors in the 1980s.

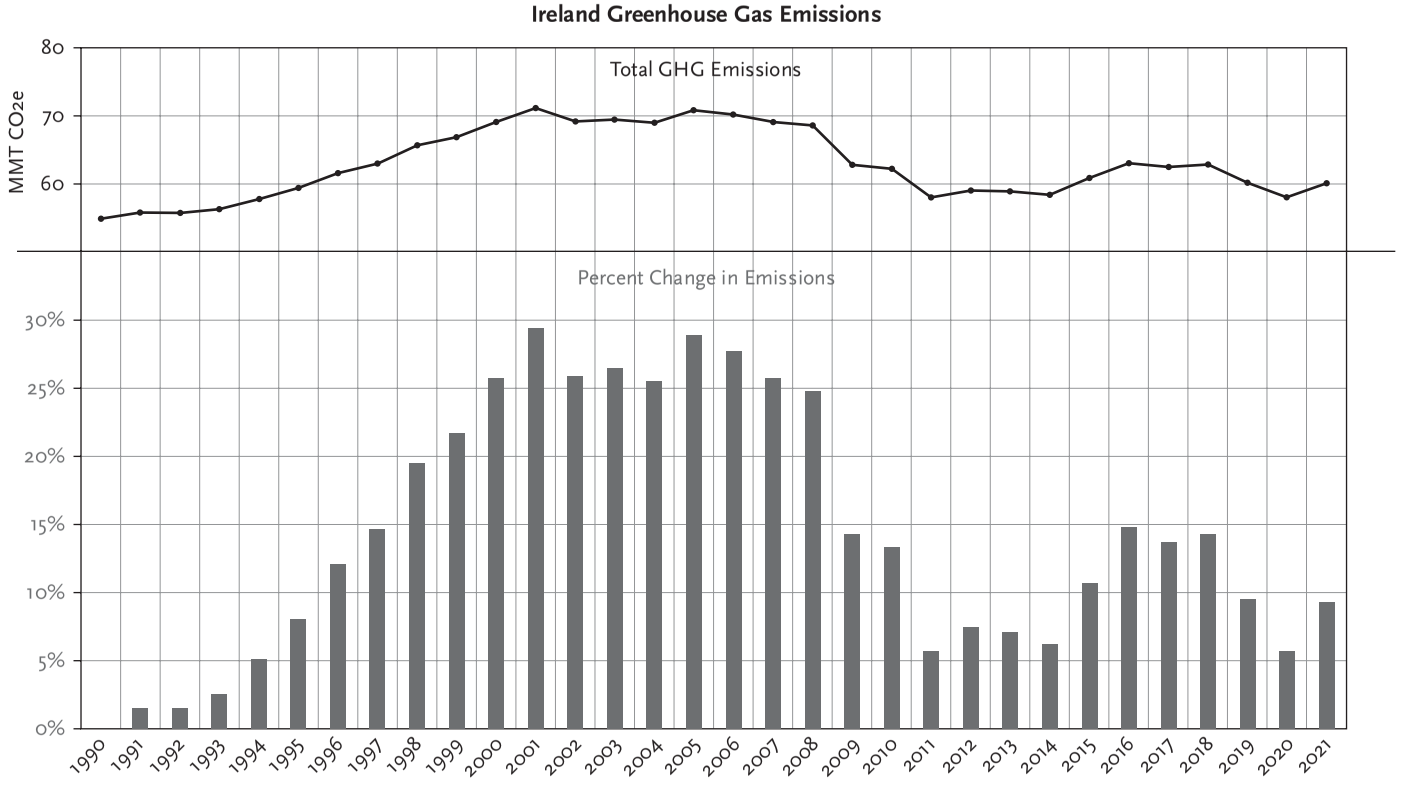

Figure 4.1 Total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (in MMT CO_2e) and percentage change in emissions in the Republic of Ireland between 1990 and 2021, inclusive.

Source: Total GHG emissions based on data provided by Gütschow and Pflüger (2023) for Kyoto Six Greenhouse Gas Totals.

In response to poor economic conditions including budget deficits, expanding public debt, and continued emigration, the Irish government pursued a more aggressive strategy to attract FDI in the 1980s. In keeping with global neoliberal trends of that era, Ireland reduced public spending and taxes, prioritized deregulation, and shifted away from strong support for and heavy reliance on public employment and agriculture to focus on attracting private capital investment.[13] Through policy reform and tax incentives, the government successfully attracted even more investment from large multinationals in the technology and pharmaceutical industries.[14] By the turn of the twenty-first century, urban Ireland had become a hotspot for the information and communications technology and financial services sectors.[15] Simultaneously, the rural economy was transformed into an export-oriented agri-food sector specializing in beef and dairy products. By 2021, 90% of the food produced in Ireland was exported, accounting for 6.6% of gross national income (GNI),[16] and the government incentives to intensify meat and dairy production in Irish agriculture has led to a steady decline in the growing of fruits, vegetables, and grains. Similarly, the amount of forest cover in Ireland is now among the smallest in the European Union.[17] National forestry policies have focused on the expansion of fast-growing non-native Sitka spruce plantations that degrade biodiversity.[18]

Policymaking in Ireland

Governmental structures and processes in Ireland contribute to the delay of climate action and to ineffective implementation of existing climate policies. Policymaking in Ireland is characterized by a fragmented governance landscape that requires elected representatives to focus on providing tangible benefits to the local area they represent and gives independent regulators significant power. The strong national tradition of agriculture and vibrant rural communities is a powerful force in Irish policymaking.[19] Ireland's electoral system, the siloing of governmental departments, and the country's lengthy planning and consultation processes have all played a role in slowing climate action.

Ireland's electoral system is based on the single transferable vote, a form of proportional representation that allows voters to rank their preferred candidates all the way down the ballot; each of the votes contributes to determining who is elected.[20] With the broad and deep slate of candidates in each election, parties then gain seats in the coalition government based on the number of votes cast for individuals in their party. Within this system,

voters tend to focus on individual representatives rather than the party or the party's policy agenda. This arrangement means that politicians tend to focus delivering tangible benefits directly to their constituents, resulting in a parochial approach that has deprioritized national-level issues such as climate change.

Silos, administrative burdens and limited institutional capacity among governmental departments also contribute to climate delay. For example, although the government has committed to ending the sale of fossil-fuel-powered cars by 2030, the infrastructure for electric vehicles is not yet available in many places, both urban and rural. This delay is partly due to a lack of implementation capacity at the local governance level.[21] Further, Ireland's planning processes are participatory and slow, allowing long periods for community and constituent consultation, which frequently leads to contestation, mobilization, and subsequent changes to proposed infrastructure, buildings, and policies.[22] Beyond the multiple benefits of community-engaged planning, these processes have inhibited efficient policymaking and delayed policy implementation.

Evolving climate policy in Ireland

Membership in the European Union has embedded Ireland in an environmental regime that has created legal obligations and normative expectations of environmental protection. Despite the introduction of two major climate change policies in the early to mid-2000s[23] aimed at helping the state to meet its EU commitments, climate policy implementation was limited during this period, with Ireland's carbon emissions increasing by 5%. This rise was attributed, in part, to the large increase in private vehicle ownership.[24] Ireland did meet its targets set out in the Kyoto Protocol due to the sharp decline in economic activity following the banking and financial crisis in 2008. During the 2010s, emissions increased sharply again, driven by development-oriented national policy signals including the national agricultural strategies: Food Harvest 2020 and Food Wise 2025. Published in 2010 and 2015, respectively, these programmes prioritized substantial expansion of the methane intensive beef and dairy sectors.

Ireland's 2021 Climate Action Plan provides a roadmap for decisive action to halve emissions by 2050. Under this legally binding plan, the state must reduce GHG emissions by 51% compared with 2018 levels by 2030 and reach climate neutrality by no later than the end of 2050. In 2022, the government also adopted an economy-wide carbon budget that included specific emissions ceilings for seven distinct sectors: electricity,

transport, commercial and public buildings, residential buildings, industry, agriculture, and other miscellaneous areas including petroleum refining, waste, and fluorinated gases used in refrigeration. Reductions in the overall carbon budget are allocated among these different sectors, so there is competition among them. For example, the July 2022 announcement included a 75% reduction target from 2018 emissions levels for electricity but only a 25% reduction target for agriculture—a controversial distribution.

The policy measures proposed to meet these targets also vary for each sector and include ensuring at least 70% of electricity demand is met from renewable sources, retrofitting 500,000 homes for energy efficiency, and increasing the number of electric vehicles on the roads to 556,000 by 2030.[25] Such a shift will be a considerable challenge given that Ireland still relies on oil and gas for about 80% of its energy needs, including transport, heat, and electricity, with renewables comprising about 13% of supply.[26] Renewables accounted for 34.8% of electricity generated in Ireland in 2021, but natural gas still accounted for 46.0%.[27]

These national targets align with Ireland's statutory obligations as a member of the European Union and a signatory to the Paris Climate Accord. According to civil society groups, this agreement 'hardwired' accountability and transparency into the public and administrative system. The accord gives Ireland's Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications more power to ensure the enforcement of emissions targets and, most significantly, the sectoral ceilings, marking a distinct shift in accountability. Despite these positive developments, Ireland is still considered a 'climate laggard', as policy implementation has not yet resulted in significant emissions reductions.[28] A report released in July 2023 by the Climate Change Advisory Council, an independent watchdog organization, warned that the government's implementation of climate policies is unacceptably slow and ineffective so far; the report pointed out that Ireland will not meet its legally binding targets unless more urgent action is taken.[29]

The Irish government has openly acknowledged the delay in implementing the country's ambitious climate goals. In the November 2022 Climate Action Plan progress report, the government explicitly addressed climate delays, identifying three primary causes: (1) lack of capacity and capability constraints across the public sector, (2) lengthy stakeholder consultation processes, and (3) the complexity of climate action delivery.[30] This report highlights mechanistic capacity challenges to explain the delay rather than identifying individuals or organizations who are intentionally slowing things down. Several of those we interviewed also

informally confirmed that the structure and processes within the government are major contributors to implementation delay.

IRISH MAINSTREAM MEDIA AND CLIMATE OBSTRUCTION

Ireland is a small media territory dominated by the national television and radio broadcaster Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTE), in addition to commercial broadcast stations (Virgin Media and Sky News) as well as local radio. Press coverage includes national dailies (*The Irish Times*, *The Irish Independent*, and *The Irish Examiner*) as well as the Sunday and Irish editions of popular UK tabloids (such as the *Irish Sun* and the *Irish Daily Mail*). Overall, Irish media coverage of climate change has been largely event-driven, focusing on the publication of reports by the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and extreme weather events, rather than exploring the broader social, environmental, and economic contexts.[31] Research shows that episodic framing of climate change is associated with reduced citizen perceptions of the need for government accountability, whereas thematic and contextual coverage increases the potential for citizens to hold governments accountable for enabling climate action.[32] Over the past decade, Irish media established a legacy of accepting the science of climate change while also promoting reasons not to act, thereby contributing to the delay of climate policymaking and effective implementation. Research shows how media discourses reproduced political and elite framings that serve to maintain the status quo and, in so doing, marginalize alternative framings of transformative climate action.[33]

In the post-financial crash years (2008 onward), media narratives about national competitiveness also contributed to normalizing public discourse aimed at obstructing and delaying effective climate policy. This period saw significant political interest in leveraging 'green' solutions to aid Ireland's economic recovery.[34] In parallel, research shows that the green growth agenda and an overriding concern with protecting the economy over meeting environmental challenges became the predominant media trope in climate policy coverage and reveals that media privileged a top-down, supply-side, technological framing of climate change mitigation.[35]

Climate delay tactics

Research highlights three notable delay tactics associated with Irish media coverage of climate change: (1) failing to report critically on the topic,

(2) presenting a polarized debate, and (3) creating a political 'hot potato'. One of the first reviews of climate change communication in Ireland found a lack of critical engagement with the nature of the problem, its causes, and the need for systemic change.[36] This review also highlighted the media's tendency to focus on 'conflict frames' in climate coverage, such as rural resistance to wind farms, and to pitch agriculture against environmental protection, both of which emphasize a polarized debate.

Interestingly, Irish media also act as a platform for the creation of political 'hot potatoes'. This tactic provides a way of exerting pressure on the government in a political culture that tends to avoid contentious issues. Most recently, a government memo to develop a strategy on how to reduce private car emissions as part of the agreed-upon climate targets offers a good example of this media-driven delay tactic.[37] Discussion of the government's transport strategy to reduce car use by half through congestion charges, among other measures, was pulled from a cabinet meeting as it was deemed 'too controversial' by government ministers. This followed intense media coverage the day before that focussed on the controversial nature of congestion charges and division within government coalition parties about the strategy.

Platforming climate contrarians and sceptics

While climate denial is often considered marginal in Irish public discourse, a small number of high-profile actors have historically held sway in challenging climate science. Crucially, their positions of power and close links to media ensured their contrarian claims garnered wide public attention. An analysis of climate change coverage in Irish print media from 2007 to 2016 observed the presence of a 'contested science' frame among columnists and in the *Irish Daily Mail* (a sister publication of the UK tabloid). Key actors included well-known pundits Kevin Myers and Maurice Nelligan, who denounced concern about climate change as alarmist and 'kitchen-sinkology', as well as John Fingleton, meteorologist for the state weather service Met Éireann, who promoted natural climate variation arguments.[38] Another study analysing decarbonization discourses in print media from 2000 to 2013 also identified a 'climate denial' theme (most prominently via Irish editions of the UK tabloid press).[39] In this case, the contrarian arguments pointed to deep divisions among scientists about the causes of global warming and were employed largely by business actors to resist climate policy during debates about a carbon tax in the early 2000s.

Coverage of climate sceptic views is far more evident in Irish media than of outright denial. Sceptical beliefs can be divided into three categories: trend, attribution, and impact, which capture doubts about climate science, belief in human-made causes, and whether there will be negative impacts.[40] In the early phase of climate policymaking, sceptics' arguments focussed primarily on trend and attribution scepticism.[41] Most notably, Pat Kenny, one of RTE's high-profile current-affairs broadcasters (and an engineer by training), regularly included climate sceptics such as David Bellamy on programmes about global warming and infamously argued that rising GHGs were not a problem.[42] Sceptic voices also focussed on response scepticism, questioning the desired level of government regulation of industry as well as the efficacy of climate taxes and policies.[43] Notably, Michael O'Leary, the head of Ryanair, a major Irish airline, did not publicly accept that climate change was real until as recently as 2017.[44] He continues to be given a platform to question the government's ability to deal with the crisis and to engage in public media campaigns against mandatory emissions reductions for the aviation industry.[45]

While climate sceptic views have evolved with the changing policy context, research indicates a media focus on 'dismissive' voices, anti-environmentalists who deride those advocating climate action or attack environmentalist stances for being overly earnest or sanctimonious. Examples include references (often in headlines) to 'environmental nutters', 'lunatic environmentalists', 'headbangers', and 'Luddites marching us back to the 18th century'. Rather than denying the science, these actors dismiss environmental protection based on the view that the economic project is more urgent than tackling climate change.

Another prominent discursive strategy involves the use of religious metaphors. A study of media discourses about the low-carbon transition identified the presence of a 'Church of Green' discourse used by sceptics to challenge perceived 'green authoritarianism'.[46] The analysis found that this discourse was antagonistic toward the perceived 'moralizing' of those advocating carbon-reduction activities. It mobilized an Irish sense of humour to ridicule the imposition of a green orthodoxy with references to a 'tax on fun', 'green sins', a 'carbon confession box', and 'guilt and finger-waving from the environmentalists' response.[47]

KEY ACTORS DRIVING CLIMATE OBSTRUCTION IN IRELAND

Climate obstruction has been advanced through individual and organizational efforts as well as through governmental processes and coordinated

lobbying by sectoral interests. While some key Irish actors are actively delaying climate policy in support of their personal or professional interests, others are inadvertently causing delay because they are focused on non–climate-related priorities. Although this distinction may seem clear in theory, in practice it is often challenging to discern why different people and institutions advocate against climate action.

Fringe academics and think tanks

Within the scientific and academic communities in Ireland, a few individuals have been outspoken, claiming that the science of climate change is not settled. These outliers tend to be networked with international climate denial groups.

Ray Bates, a meteorologist, member of the Royal Irish Academy, and retired Adjunct Professor at University College Dublin, is among the most controversial and internationally recognized of such figures. Bates has leveraged his scientific credentials to advocate against climate action by claiming that the science is not settled and has become politicized. The impact of a sole climate denier was highlighted when, in December 2015, RTE invited Bates to participate in a prime-time discussion with climate policy experts and the minister for the environment on the costs of climate action. In response to the programme, An Taisce (the National Trust for Ireland, focused on environmental conservation) filed a complaint against RTE for failing to provide fair, objective, and impartial current affairs content, which was a violation of Broadcasting Authority of Ireland rules.[48] Bates also wrote a report 'Deficiencies in the IPCC's Special Report on 1.5 Degrees', published in 2018 by the UK-based climate obstruction organization Global Warming Policy Foundation (GWPF),[49] which was heavily excoriated by climate scientists around the world.[50] The report's foreword was written by Edward Walsh, the President of the University of Limerick, who had served as chair of Ireland's National Council for Science, Technology and Innovation, providing additional legitimacy to this effort. Most recently, in 2021, Bates was appointed to the GWPF's academic advisory board.[51]

The Irish Climate Science Forum (ICSF), co-founded by Bates and led by Jim O'Brien, an energy consultant and retired engineer, is one of the most well-known climate-denying organizations in Ireland. According to their website, the ICSF is a voluntary organization composed of scientists, engineers, and other professionals dedicated to disseminating 'objective science' and to providing 'the good news on climate'.[52] The organization's

stated aim is to promote 'realism' in climate science and 'prudence in climate and energy policy'. Their main activity involves holding public lectures on national climate and energy policy, often by high-profile climate deniers, as well as submissions to relevant public consultations. In 2023, the lecture series included presentations by several well-known climate deniers including David Horgan, head of Petrel Resources, one of Ireland's most prominent oil and gas exploration companies, who argued that Ireland's current energy policy was 'tantamount to economic suicide'. Other recent speakers included Marcel Crok, co-founder of Climate Intelligence (CLINTEL), a Dutch foundation aimed at obstructing climate policy, who spoke about why the IPCC needs to be reformed; Christopher Monckton, one of the most cited and widely published climate sceptics; and Professor William van Wijgaarden, a member of the CO_2 Coalition (a US think-tank) who argued that GHG emissions are insignificant.

The ICSF also published a critique of the IPCC AR6 Synthesis Report, arguing that the report was 'seriously flawed' based on the view that 'real world observations point to only a modest 1 degree warming up to 2100' and that 'the IPCC should be disbanded'.[53] While the organization's influence on climate obstruction is difficult to assess, the ICSF provides an important platform for international climate-denying voices that seek to challenge the prevailing scientific consensus on climate change and the need for ambitious climate policies. The organization has links, through its members and lecture series, to the GWPF[54] and to CLINTEL[55] as well as the denialist groups EIKE in Germany and the Stockholm Initiative in Sweden.

Sectoral lobbyists

Although outright denial of climate change is increasingly rare in Ireland, many industry actors are actively engaged in climate policy discussions, trying to slow change. Lobbying groups representing various constituents within multiple large sectors including agriculture, energy and transportation, delay action by highlighting a broad array of social, economic, and cultural costs of implementing changes.

Evidence of environmental lobbying and counter-lobbying activities can be uncovered through a review of public records held on the public database Lobbying.ie, a web-based register of lobbying of designated public officials on policies, legislative matters, or prospective decisions, which is mandated under the Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015.[56] A preliminary keyword search of records using the subject 'climate' found more than 4,000 records filed on this subject during the period September 2015–December 2022. These

public records show that the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) and the Irish Farmers Association (IFA) have engaged in the highest volume of lobbying of public officials on this issue during this period. The third most frequent lobbying group was Wind Energy Ireland (WEI), a renewable energy lobbying group.

An initial review of this database shows a range of 'intended results' from the lobbying efforts. Table 4.1 includes samples of actors' stated intended results sampled from January 2016. Notably, IBEC often lobbied to governments to consider national competitiveness alongside climate action targets. Similarly, the IFA sought to protect the economic interests of the farming sector in the context of discussion on environmental policies. In contrast, WEI sought to highlight the importance of indigenous renewable energy sources. It is important to note that these records

Table 4.1 TOP THREE LOBBYING ACTIVITIES ON 'CLIMATE' BY ORGANIZATIONS, SEPTEMBER 2015–DECEMBER 2022

Rank	Organization	Total returns filed on the subject 'climate'	Sample of organization's stated 'intended results'
1	Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC)	262	Effective mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions in a manner that enhances rather than damages Ireland's prosperity *Date published: 20 January 2016*
2	The Irish Farmers' Association (IFA)	212	Agreement on a common position on Climate Change Fair deal for Ireland in International Agriculture Trade Negotiations Support for IFA request for increased competition in EU on Inputs *Date published: 21 January 2016*
3	Wind Energy Ireland	113	Awareness and possible support for 'The Power to Power Ourselves' communications campaign, highlighting Ireland's 85% dependency on imported energy, and promoting increased attention on the use of indigenous renewable energy sources. *Date published: 21 January 2016*

do not capture, or reflect, the extent or effectiveness of lobbying activity conducted for each subject. However, the number of records provide an indication of the frequency of actors' engagement with public officials on climate action. Further research could be helpful to better capture the effectiveness of these lobbying efforts.

The energy sector

With a low share of energy-intensive industry, Ireland's carbon intensity relative to its gross domestic product (GDP) is among the lowest in the European Union.[57] Furthermore, the Irish energy sector publicly conveys strong support for and a deep commitment to climate action and the energy transition away from fossil fuels. Although the government has outlined a path to an eventual elimination of fossil fuels from the country's energy systems,[58] the country remains heavily reliant on fossil fuels and is ranked lowest in Europe for renewable energy readiness.[59] The national 2030 target of a 34% renewable energy share is focused mainly on harnessing wind, with some solar and biomass, with a renewable energy in electricity target of 70% by 2030.[60]

The Electricity Supply Board (ESB) is the nationally owned company charged with delivering the country's electricity and maintaining its grid. The ESB has committed to achieving net zero emissions by 2040 by increasing renewable generation, investing in electric grid infrastructure, and empowering consumers to electrify. Its website claims an 'unwavering commitment to tackling some of the biggest challenges we face as a society, including climate change'.[61] Despite these vague public messages, the ESB has been accused of slowing the transition to renewable energy by not making the infrastructure investments needed and using its dominance to push new actors[62] out of the energy generation market.

Despite the European Union's encouragement and specific recommendations from Ireland's Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change[63] for cooperative or community-owned, distributed renewable energy in Ireland, this resource has been slow to deploy. One notable exception is led by Community Power, the country's first community-owned renewable electricity utility company.[64] Despite its success in selling and distributing local renewable electricity, the organization has faced difficulties in accessing the grid, and their model has not yet been widely replicated. Complex factors have contributed to the delay in expanding community-owned renewable energy, including a lack of capacity for innovation in the public sector. Community-driven energy initiatives also face significant

competition from international investments funds, which have identified Ireland as a key market. The government, too, has been criticized for creating administrative bottlenecks.[65]

Meanwhile, the ongoing proliferation of data centres in Ireland represents a significant challenge to Ireland's efforts to reduce emissions from electricity generation.[66] A recent investigation revealed that onsite carbon emissions from data centres are more than 35 times higher than during the previous decade.[67] By 2021, data centres consumed 14% of Ireland's total electricity, more than rural dwellings combined. Although the electricity for data centres could be renewably generated, Ireland's renewable energy capacity is not yet sufficient to cover the amount of energy required for the growing demand. Activists have highlighted that such trends are misaligned with climate goals, but addressing these concerns represents a significant challenge to government because of the economic benefits these centres offer. While the centres themselves do not provide much employment, their parent companies are large sources of urban employment for highly skilled information technology workers.[68]

The transport sector: Reinforcing car culture

Decarbonizing the transport system is a major focus of the current government. For example, €35 billion has been earmarked for active travel under the latest climate action plan.[69] Progress in decarbonizing this sector has been slow to date. Ireland's transport sector has reduced its GHG emissions by just 7.5% since 2005. Emissions reductions have stagnated in recent years[70] due in part due to continual reinforcement of the nation's car-dependent transport system. Car-dependent transport systems are a critical component of 'carbon lock-in' in national energy systems,[71] and the Irish government has to date been largely ineffective in reducing reliance on automobiles. Car dependency can become entrenched through several factors including (1) advocacy from the automotive industry; (2) the proliferation of car infrastructure; (3) the political economy of urban sprawl; (4) the lack of alternative modes of transport, including public transport and bicycle infrastructure; and (5) strong cultural norms that promote car use.[72] All of these factors are present in Ireland and undermine efforts to transform Ireland's transport system. Transportation is particularly challenging in rural Ireland, where car dependency is among the highest in Europe due largely to minimal public transport particularly outside of major cities.[73] Evidence of the entrenchment of car dependency can be seen in the recent resistance to the government's efforts to redesign

roadways to provide more space for walking and biking as well as public transport.[74]

While Ireland does not have its own domestic auto manufacturing company (since Ireland joined the European Union, all cars are imported), it does have a strong automotive industry that sells and maintains the nation's more than 2.5 million cars.[75] The network of automobile suppliers selling European, Japanese, and American cars is extensive, and the motor industry promotes electric vehicles but resists efforts to reduce car dependency.[76] Car sales and electric car infrastructure are accelerating quickly in Ireland, per the goals of the national Climate Action Plan, although local authorities have struggled to build a network of charging stations,[77] reflecting the government's ongoing capacity challenges in implementing decarbonization strategies. Ongoing efforts to overcome car dependency contentious, as demonstrated by widespread political controversy in response to the July 2023 release of the first All-Island Strategic Rail Review, which included recommendations for developing an electrified regional rail network.[78]

The agri-food sector: A case study in obstruction in the Irish context

The agriculture sector's historical importance and its ongoing role as a key rural employer give it strong influence in Irish policymaking circles. The broader agri-food sector includes those involved in primary production in farming, fishing, and forestry and those engaged in the production and processing of food, beverages, and wood. There are both indigenous and export-oriented dimensions to the sector. Dairy is the largest component of Irish food and drink exports, followed by meat and livestock. The sector accounts for 7% of the total Irish workforce and is critically important for many rural areas. A key source of the sector's sway on these matters is that it represents the interests of a politically active rural minority on which the two main centrist parties rely for votes.

The agri-food sector represents a major and entrenched stumbling block in Ireland's efforts to reach its emission targets because agriculture is the single largest contributor to Irish GHG emissions, accounting for 37.5% of the national total in 2021. The source of these emissions is mainly methane from livestock and nitrous oxide from the use of nitrogen fertilizer and manure.[79] In addition to its climate impacts, agriculture is also the predominant cause of Ireland's water pollution, ammonia air pollution, and biodiversity loss.[80] The sector is particularly environmentally destructive

compared with other European nations, emitting three times more pollution than the sectoral EU average.[81] Notably, only 1.3% of Irish agricultural land is farmed organically, the second lowest area in the European Union.[82] Moreover, while other traditionally agricultural nations within the European Union, including France, have reduced pollution associated with agriculture in recent years,[83] Ireland is among those that have seen a significant increase, with emissions rising 9.3% between 2011 and 2021.[84] This increase is linked to a 50% rise in agri-food exports during this same period, a strategy explicitly supported by the Irish government over the past two decades.

The political influence of the agri-food sector

Many have argued that Ireland's beef and dairy farmers and their corporate partners have had disproportionate influence on the nation's agricultural policymaking.[85] As shown earlier in Table 4.1, the IFA has engaged in extensive political lobbying and public engagement activities around climate-related matters. Much of this activity has been aimed at limiting the impact of environmental legislation on the existing business model.[86]

A source of the sector's influence is their close ties with the Department of Agriculture. For example, observers note that Teagasc—the state agency providing research, advice, and education in agriculture, horticulture, food, and rural development in Ireland—is heavily influenced by representatives from the dairy industry, with five of the eleven members of this advisory council identifying as dairy farmers.

Evidence of this strong industry influence can be found in Ireland's national agricultural strategies communicated in reports published in 2010 and 2015 (Food Harvest 2020 and Food Wise 2025, respectively), which explicitly called for the expansion of methane-intensive meat and dairy production. The agricultural strategy report published in 2020, which was titled Ag Climatise, proposed climate neutrality by 2050, but still assumed intensive meat and dairy production; this report was deemed 'not fit for purpose' by expert analysts and environmental groups because of the level of emissions it allowed.[87]

As of 2023, the Irish government, which had a Green Party minority, has also been accused of pandering to the interests of the agri-food sector.[88] For example, livestock farming, particularly the raising of cattle and sheep, continues to be heavily subsidized by the state, with only 27% of all cattle farms classified as economically viable.[89] The dairy industry, while more economically lucrative, is environmentally problematic, with GHG emissions

per hectare on dairy farms two to four times higher than on other farm systems. The environmental intensity of the dairy sector has grown steadily since the 2010s in response to government policies that pressured and incentivized dairy farmers to increase the size of their farms.[90]

The misalignment of the country's agricultural strategy with its climate commitments is becoming increasingly divisive. Notably, the Environmental Pillar, a non-profit organization that represents Irish environmental civil-society groups, withdrew from the drafting process of the latest agri-food strategy (Food Vision 2030), claiming that the process was too industry-dominated; did not seriously integrate consideration of climate, biodiversity, and water and air quality; and relied too heavily on future action, yet-to-materialize innovations, and potential abatement technologies.[91] The Irish dairy industry, on the other hand, welcomed the final recommendations, noting that 'it allows Irish dairy further to enhance its competitive advantage'. Seven of the thirty-three members of the Food Vision 2030 stakeholder committee were leaders directly engaged in the global food industry.[92] The current 'roadmap' for the dairy sector allows for continued expansion in dairy output until at least 2027.[93]

Extensive lobbying has also had significant influence in reducing the agricultural sector's legally binding emissions targets under the Climate Action Amendment Bill (2022). A sectoral target originally proposing a 30% emissions reduction by 2030 was successfully resisted and reduced to 25%. The agricultural sector is among the most active in lobbying in Ireland (Table 4.1), and our analysis of the lobbying register revealed that members of the agri-food sector, including the IFA, lobbied government representatives at the EU and national levels to negotiate lower emission targets on the basis that meeting the proposed reductions would (1) devastate the sector, (2) compromise global food systems, (3) result in 'carbon leakage', and (4) allow insufficient time for technologies to be implemented.[94]

There is also doubt about whether these lower targets will even be achieved. An assessment of three scenarios for emission reductions in agriculture found that even in the scenario with the most state support (in which a mandatory 4% emissions reduction would be enforced and subsidies provided to farmers), emissions would decrease by only 6.78% relative to 2005 levels.[95] Furthermore, some of the mitigation approaches these strategies propose remain contested within the scientific literature.[96] An additional concern is whether the government will apply the necessary oversight to ensure that emissions reductions and pollution strategies are enforced. To date, the government has been reprimanded at the EU level for failing to enforce such regulations.[97]

The misalignment of Ireland's climate commitments and the country's agricultural policies (including incentives for farmers) is creating increasing frustration throughout the country among both urban and rural communities concerned about climate, food production, and the Irish economy. While the Irish media often portray a rural–urban divide in Ireland regarding support for climate policy, 2022 research shows that concern about climate change is just as strong in rural communities as in is in urban ones,[98] providing the government with a growing mandate for change.

The agricultural sector and discursive tactics of delay

In their efforts to minimize the financial and regulatory impacts of climate action on their members, the agricultural sector has frequently employed a range of denial and delay discourses engaged in a range of discursive tactics of delay (Table 4.2). The association's flagship publication, *Irish Farmers Journal* (IFJ), has been criticized for giving a platform to debunked climate science. Such discourses have also infiltrated sections of the education system. For example, Agri Aware, a charitable trust controlled and funded by a consortium of agricultural industry players, distributed a series of four workbooks under the title 'Dig In' to more than 3,200 primary schools, misrepresenting Ireland's carbon footprint by underplaying the biodiversity loss and methane emissions attributable to agriculture.[99]

In the context of policy obstruction, sectoral representatives often deploy three clearly identified discourses of delay[100] to resist climate policies: (1) redirecting responsibility, (2) pushing non-transformative solutions, and (3) emphasizing the downsides of climate policy. Notably, the Irish agri-food sector employed the services of a well-known communications consulting agency, Red Flag,[101] which used similar tactics when representing the interests of British American Tobacco, Monsanto, and other agri-chemical companies in the European Union.

Lobby groups regularly use the term 'carbon leakage' to describe the unfairness of the 'free rider' problem; that is, unless all individuals, industries, or countries undertake emissions reductions, some will benefit from the actions of the others. In the Irish context, carbon leakage is frequently used to describe a scenario whereby emissions savings from livestock cuts would be reversed by increased production elsewhere.[102]

Interestingly, many of the discursive frames used by lobbying groups such as the IFA are echoed in policy documents and repeated by politicians representing rural constituents. In this way, the non-transformative

Table 4.2 DISCOURSES OF DELAY FROM AGRICULTURAL SECTOR AND RURAL POLITICIANS IN RESPONSE TO PROPOSED EMISSIONS-REDUCTIONS TARGETS

Discourse of delay		Example
Redirect responsibility	The 'free rider' excuse	'While agriculture has a responsibility to protect the environment, the imposition of a target without accounting for global carbon leakage arising from food production is ill-informed and more likely to lead to a rise in global GHG emissions. Food production must be encouraged in areas where it is the most carbon efficient to do so'. —Irish Farmers Association Annual Report 2022, p. 13[a]
Push non-transformative solutions	Technological optimism; holding that technological progress will rapidly bring about emissions reductions in the future	'Solutions are in development, we are seeing great progress in relation to feed additives, particularly the 3NOP additive which is under research at Teagasc. This additive was designed for continual feeding in indoor systems, the challenge now is to develop options for our pasture-based animals'. —Minister Martin Heydon Statement on Emissions Reductions 28 July 2022[b] 'Irish farmers are embracing measures to reduce emissions and there are significant scientific developments on feed additives and other technologies, but it will take time'. —Irish Farmers Association return recoded to lobbying (i.e. September 2022)[c]
Emphasize downsides	Appeal to social justice: claims that the cost of climate action will reduce social justice	'Reducing the national herd to meet emissions targets would be paramount to "ethnic cleansing" of the agricultural community'. —Michael Fitzmaurice, Independent member of Dáil Eireann (Irish Parliament) for Roscommon-Galway, 12 February 2023, in response to the release of a commissioned EPA research report which recommended reducing the national herd to meet emissions reductions targets[d] 'Who will supply this food? There is a real risk that we will create a global food emergency trying to solve the climate emergency'. —Speech by IFA President Tim Cullinan, 27 January 2022[e]

[a] Irish Farmers Association (2023, January), 'Irish Farmers' Association Annual Report 2022', https://www.ifa.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/IFA-Annual-Report-2022-Published-Jan-23.pdf.
[b] Department of Agriculture Food and Marine, 'Pathway to 51% Reduction.'
[c] Lobbying.ie, 'The Irish Farmers' Association'; Lobbying.ie, 'Regulation of Lobbying Act'.
[d] M. Maguire (2023, February), 'Government Using Farmers as "Scapegoats" for Increase in Emissions – McNamara'. *NewsTalk*, https://www.newstalk.com/news/government-using-farmers-as-scapegoats-for-increase-in-emissions-mcnamara-1436598
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discourse of delay supporting a 'green economy' is purveyed not only by lobby groups but also by its government representatives. For example, the national agricultural strategy published in 2010 declared : 'The modern use of "green" to identify concern for the natural environment has, for some time, been recognized as representing a natural marketing opportunity for Irish agri-food to build on'.[103] Similar narratives continue to be perpetuated by semi-state bodies such as the International Development Authority (IDA) and An Bord Bia (The Food Board) as well as ministerial trade missions.[104]

CONCLUSION

Climate obstruction in Ireland is complicated and nuanced, primarily taking the form of delay and inertia rather than promoting climate denial. Ireland has ambitious climate goals and policies, and most Irish people are alarmed or concerned about the climate crisis.[105] Yet policy implementation has been largely ineffective so far. This review of climate obstruction in Ireland suggests that transformative change is stymied by the country's long colonial history of economic and ecological exploitation, its reliance on foreign direct investment, the political and cultural power of the agri-food sector, inertia resulting from limited institutional capacity for change, and a slow planning process within the public sector.

Research on Irish news media coverage of climate change shows how mainstream media have normalized climate denial and delay in public discourse and provided a platform for climate contrarians and sceptic viewpoints. However, recent developments by media organizations, such as more frequent coverage of climate and biodiversity issues, an increase in environmental correspondents, and dedicated climate sections in the press as well as the promotion of climate literacy training by Coimisiún na Meán (the new Irish media regulator) suggest that opportunities for media-driven climate misinformation could decline. Nonetheless, given the entrenched resistance to change among high-carbon sectors, the sophistication of climate obstruction tactics, and the significance of media coverage for democratic debate about the radical social transformations required to address the climate crisis, ongoing research to identify and counter climate denial and delay narratives in public discourse is essential.

Understanding climate obstruction in Ireland requires consideration of the unique Irish context. As a small, English-speaking, post-colonial islanded country, Ireland has an often contradictory economic and environmental agenda. Although the energy sector has ambitious decarbonization

targets, the pace of change is slow and the scale of investments required to phase out fossil fuel reliance in heating, transport, and electricity have not yet been prioritized. Planning regulations, the dominance of the public sector provider, and the conflicting demands of the economically important technology sector for energy-intensive data centres have also stymied efforts to reduce emissions.

Similarly, the government continues to subsidize environmentally intensive agricultural production due to the political influence of the sector. After two decades of supporting beef and dairy expansion, there is now pressure on the agriculture sector to reduce its emissions under the Climate Action Plan. The agri-food lobby is resisting such efforts to protect its economic interests. Many rural communities are also feeling increasingly threatened by or mistrustful of the government's climate policies due to inconsistent and misaligned approaches. For example, the government's climate policies to incentivize the forestry industry to increase carbon sinks throughout the Irish landscape has resulted in the proliferation of industrial, non-native monoculture forests that are often owned and managed by foreign companies, offering no economic benefit to rural communities and harming local biodiversity.[106] To tackle this issue, the government is now investigating how to incentivize radical shifts in land use and forestry through research and stakeholder engagement.[107] Transforming toward a low-emission economy will also require strong political leadership and new coalitions to collectively tackle powerful actors within the sector whose economic interests lie in maintaining the status quo.

More research is needed to better understand how climate obstruction in Ireland is changing over time and how the media, government, civil society, and interest groups are adapting their strategies, especially as pressure mounts to make more drastic changes. Universities in Ireland are increasingly engaged with creating and expanding multiple innovative climate-related programs and research centres that have had broad social impact around the country.[108] But as university administrations are increasingly driven to seek alternative forms of funding such as industry partnerships, caution is warranted to ensure that they are not influenced by corporate interests to strategically resist climate policy as universities in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom have been.[109]

The CEO of Friends of the Earth Ireland characterized the mainstream Irish response to taking transformative climate action with the phrase 'Not us, Not yet, Not this. . . '. Despite the slow pace of change, anti-fossil fuel norms are expanding,[110] and Irish elected officials have supported the 2023 European Union Nature Restoration Law that commits member nations to restoring ecological health by 2050. Furthermore, as the climate

crisis escalates, advocacy and appetite for larger transformative change is growing.[111] So, too, is government investment in community engagement on climate issues.[112]

As a small, wealthy country the potential for Ireland to become a global climate leader is high. Ireland has a recent history of making major social changes such as the overwhelming support for same-sex marriage, the its Gender Recognition Act, allowing trans people to apply to have their preferred gender legally recognised by the state, and the legalization of abortion. During the COVID pandemic, Ireland was among the countries with the highest vaccine uptake, additional evidence of the Irish people's collective sense of social responsibility, justice, and accountability. This strong sense of fairness and social justice can be harnessed to further resist climate obstruction in Ireland and leverage the country's potential for climate justice leadership.

On the other hand, the resounding rejection of two proposed amendments to Ireland's constitution in 2024 regarding women's role, caregiving, and family structure highlights the need for strong public engagement on social change initiatives. This outcome serves as a reminder that government-led change cannot be successful without public understanding and support. This lesson must be heeded by the government if it hopes to overcome obstrucutionism and secure public backing for crucial climate policies.

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