

## The Anti-Mask Movement and the Rise of the Right in Ireland: What does it Mean for our Democracy?

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There have been extraordinary scenes in Dublin over the past few months, as anti-mask protests, apparently coordinated among various far right groups, have resulted in violence and arrests. At one such protest in October, Gardaí (national police) struggled to contain violent clashes between hundreds of anti-mask demonstrators and counter protesters.<sup>1</sup> Less than two weeks later, 11 arrests took place at a further protest, with media reporting the use of batons by the Gardaí against the protesters in the city centre.<sup>2</sup>

These were the latest in a series of organised protests in recent months against the government-imposed restrictions designed to combat the spread of Covid-19,<sup>3</sup> and evidence an apparently growing coordination among Ireland's various fragmented right wing groups. The Garda (Police) Commissioner, Drew Harris, confirmed in the wake of the clashes that Garda intelligence indicates that these groups have a propensity to violence, some adhere to far right conspiracy theories such as the 'Great Replacement' theory (a white nationalist conspiracy theory based on the idea that white societies are being replaced by non-white immigrants)<sup>4</sup> and that the intention of these groups is to disrupt government business.

The roll out of vaccinations at the beginning of the new year has also coincided with a surge of protests and spread of misinformation, including the erection of large, flashing LED signs around the country bearing messages such as "vaccines cause autism",<sup>5</sup> and the

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<sup>1</sup> Colin Gleeson, '[Hundreds clash in violent exchanges at Dublin protest](#)' *The Irish Times* (Dublin, 10 October 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Conor Lally and Mark Hilliard, '[Gardaí use batons and handcuffs to quell anti-lockdown protest in Dublin](#)' *The Irish Times* (Dublin, 22 October 2020).

<sup>3</sup> As a further example, see Gareth MacNamee, '[Gardaí launch investigation after anti-mask protesters filmed berating Luas passengers](#)' *The Journal* (Dublin, 2 November 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Laretta Charlton, '[What is the Great Replacement?](#)' *The New York Times* (New York, 6 August 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Twitter 15 December 2020:

[https://twitter.com/CMacCoille/status/1338908097167888385?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1338908097167888385%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1\\_%ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.thejournal.ie%2Fvaccine-misinformation-ireland-anti-vaxxers-5301468-Dec2020%2F](https://twitter.com/CMacCoille/status/1338908097167888385?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1338908097167888385%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_%ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.thejournal.ie%2Fvaccine-misinformation-ireland-anti-vaxxers-5301468-Dec2020%2F)

distribution of leaflets designed to imitate official advice sheets from the health service, advising that the virus does not exist.<sup>6</sup>

This begs the question: has the pandemic provided the ideal conditions for a credible new strand of radical right populism in Ireland? If so, what does this mean for our democracy?

Ireland is one of the few countries in Europe without an established right-wing populist party (though perhaps this gap has been filled to a certain extent by some individual independent candidates). The two main political parties historically, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, have little to differentiate themselves from each other ideologically speaking, and both tend towards the centre. Indeed, the two parties this year, for the first time in history, entered into coalition together along with the Green Party. While the 2016 and 2020 general elections demonstrated a growing fragmentation in Ireland's party system, the focus has mainly been on the rise of the anti-establishment, left-wing Sinn Féin. Constitutional referendums over the past decade have demonstrated a progressive, liberal social trend in areas including same-sex marriage, abortion and divorce, amendments generally supported across all the main parties. Where does this leave those with conservative and far right ideologies?

Ireland has become accustomed to international plaudits for its progressive social changes and rejection of the Catholic orthodoxy that had such a strong influence over the original drafters of the Constitution, adopted in 1937. The disturbing scenes in Dublin over the past few months, however, involving outbreaks of violence and a heavy Garda presence, serve as a reminder that Ireland is not immune from a rise in far right activity.

Those left behind by Ireland's liberal sweep over the past few years will have difficulty locating a party that represents their viewpoint in the Dáil (national parliament). Even the leader of the traditionally socially conservative Fianna Fáil supported the abortion referendum. Meanwhile, the easy availability of anonymous online platforms such as Telegram facilitates the mobilisation of disparate right-wing movements and individuals. The pandemic itself – creating conditions of increased isolation and anxiety for most people – provides fertile ground for the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories.

The anti-mask movement is bound up with radical right ideas, characterised by nativism, xenophobia, an antipathy towards religious and ethnic minorities and a rejection of scientific expertise. Archie Henderson of the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right distinguishes between radical right parties, which seek to come to power within the existing constitutional framework, and the extreme right, which is opposed to the basic tenets of constitutional democracy in the first place and endorses violence to further its agenda.<sup>7</sup> There is no neat dividing line between the two, and the spectrum of participants involved in anti-mask and anti-vaccination demonstrations around the world today likely fall into both camps. The danger to

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<sup>6</sup> Marie O'Halloran, '[Anti-vaccination leaflets "exactly like" HSE advice sheets being distributed in Dublin](#)' *The Irish Times* (Dublin, 18 December 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Archie Henderson, 'The Many Faces of the Radical Right and How to Counter their Threat' (*OpenDemocracy*, 27 August 2020) <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/many-faces-radical-right-and-how-counter-their-threat/> accessed 14 November 2020.

democracy this poses lies in the rejection of a pluralist society governed by the rule of law, in which the fundamental freedoms of all are protected under the Constitution.

This threat to democracy is demonstrated in stark terms in the US. There, the rise of the right-wing conspiracy network QAnon, which is based broadly on the premise that the world is run by a cabal of powerful, paedophile elites led by the Clintons, shows how a seemingly bizarre and vexatious conspiracy theory can spread rapidly through social media and gain a cult following.<sup>8</sup> The scenes in Michigan prior to the presidential election (including the storming of government buildings by armed anti-lockdown protesters and the plot to kidnap the governor, Gretchen Whitmer, for the purposes of trying her for treason) are a sobering illustration of the power of social media to connect and facilitate extremist forces.<sup>9</sup> The violent breaching of the US Capitol this month by supporters of President Trump in an effort to disrupt the confirmation of President-elect Biden's election victory, apparently on the basis of widespread false claims of voter fraud, is a further stark example of the consequences of a rejection of the democratic process.<sup>10</sup>

The threat of the far right movement in Ireland may seem relatively insignificant at present. After all, the country is much less polarised than the US. Factors such as our electoral system of proportional representation with a single transferable vote arguably incentivises candidates to take a more centrist approach to attract transfers from supporters of other parties. None of the candidates that contested the 2020 general election on a far right platform gained enough votes to even qualify for reimbursement of their election expenses.

Yet, the pandemic has offered a rich opportunity to galvanise the right in Ireland. The composition of the anti-mask protesters is not clear, but the movement appears to speak to other agendas, such as a strong anti-immigrant sentiment. The anti-mask and anti-vaccination protests and counter-protests look set to continue, and if the experience to date is anything to go by, we stand to see further protests and even outbreaks of violence in our capital.

Of course, the right to protest plays an important role in any functioning democracy. Freedom of assembly and expression are protected under Article 40.6.1° of Ireland's Constitution. Grassroots movements in Ireland have contributed immensely to progressive social changes over the years, often by drawing attention to injustices through protest. The late American political philosopher Iris Marion Young, who wrote extensively about structural inequality and exclusion, noted the important role of activists in circumstances where established democratic processes are likely to be biased in favour of the more powerful sections of society.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Adrienne LaFrance, 'How QAnon is Warping Reality and Discrediting Science' *The Atlantic* (June 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, Shaila Dewan and Kathleen Grey, '[FBI says Michigan Anti-Government Group Plotted to Kidnap Gov. Gretchen Whitmer](#)' *The New York Times* (New York, 8 October 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Azi Paybarah and Brent Lewis, '[Stunning Images as a Mob Storms the US Capitol](#)' *The New York Times* (New York, 6 January 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Iris Marion Young, 'Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy' in James Fishkin and Peter Laslett (eds), *Debating Deliberative Democracy* (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003).

The problem arises where a group's agenda involves a rejection of the democratic constitutional order and the use of violence to further its aims. We have seen the damage to democracy done in other countries by a rise in extremist right and left wing politics and a collapse of the centre. Ireland should not assume it is above the fray in this regard. With the far right movement gathering momentum, all it may take to make it a credible presence in Irish society is the emergence of a leader with the competence and charisma to consolidate the disparate groups and individuals.

If this happens, those who have fought hard for the recently won rights and freedoms of women and minorities in Ireland will have to hope that our Constitution and democratic institutions are robust enough to withstand the storm.

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