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'Ireland for the Irish': Far-Right Populism and Geopolitical Imaginaries of Ireland on Social Media during the 2020 Irish General Election

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Abstract: This article argues that the political campaigning on Twitter of two far-right parties during the 2020 Irish General Election worked to disseminate far-right populist tendencies through their discursive use of conservative geopolitical imaginaries of Ireland. The material harvested for this study consists of 631 original tweets posted by the official Twitter accounts of The National Party and the Irish Freedom Party during the period of January 14 – February 8 2020. Using thematic analysis, this article argues that much of the Twitter content of these two parties centred around three central themes: anti-establishment, anti-immigration, and evoking Irish history. Uniquely, permeating all three themes of the political parties' accounts are discourses of "patriotism" which configure much of their social media rhetoric as part of an "Ireland for the Irish" geopolitical imaginary. From this analysis, we argue that the National Party and Irish Freedom Party not only disseminated their nationally-specific far-right agendas in their tweets during the 2020 General Election, but that they did so through using geopolitical imaginaries and rhetoric that are reminiscent of far-right populist movements more broadly across Europe and the US in order to rationalise their movement and legitimise their conservative geopolitical imaginaries of Ireland.

Keywords: *Geopolitical Imaginaries; Social Media; Irish General Election 2020 ; Populist Communication; Far-Right Movements.*

Introduction

The 2020 Irish General Election was notable, given that it had a larger proportion of far-right populist candidates than had previously been seen in an Irish Election. What became more notable is that most of these far-right populist parties failed to return a single candidate to the 33rd Dáil [Irish Parliament], polling less than 1% in most constituencies

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across the Republic of Ireland on polling day (McDermott, 2020; Gallagher, 2020). Despite the minimal impact made by the parties in this Election, the potential rise and mainstreaming of far-right populism remains a concern within the broader Irish public sphere and social media has been a primary site through which much of these political actors and parties have attempted to appeal to the Irish electorate (Kirk, 2020). In particular, many of these parties and candidates look to the successes of the European far-right populist movement, and parties like Vox in Spain and the Sweden Democrats, aspiring "to go from obscurity to relevance in one miraculous election" (Downes, 2020).

Social media has become an arena for extreme, populist movements to organize, strategize their message, and reach potential audiences (Huntington, 2016). As right-wing populism has become more mainstream across varying political jurisdictions, a number of studies have begun to examine the online rhetoric of these extreme groups, from monitoring the Facebook pages of far-right political parties in Spain (Ben-David and Fernándes, 2016), populist social media communication by far-right parties in Germany (Stier et al., 2017), to developing a theoretical classification of functions of different internet applications and platforms in right-wing populism (Krämer, 2016). As scholars have increasingly made evident, in disseminating their political ideologies on social media, far-right groups rely on geopolitical imaginaries in order to both justify their agendas and to gain public support (van Elsas and van der Brug, 2015).

The focus of this article is on far-right political parties in Ireland, specifically in relation to the Irish Freedom Party and The National Party, both of which have been classified as "Irish Far-right Hate and Extremist Groups" by the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism (GPAHE) in its 2022 report (GPAHE, 2022); in fact, they are the only extremist groups from GPAHE's report to be registered as political parties in Ireland. Further, these parties can be categorized according to Mudde's (2007) populist radical right framework, which is a party that combines three components: nativism (a combination of nationalism and xenophobia), authoritarianism and populism. This study aims to examine the ways in which these parties have promulgated and exemplified far-right populist tendencies through their political campaigning on social media, specifically their Twitter accounts. We argue that much of the content on the Twitter accounts of the two parties are centred around three central themes: anti-establishment, anti-immigration and evoking Irish history. Permeating all three themes of the political parties' accounts are discourses of patriotism and what they refer to as the "patriots", discursive practices that are centred on the promotion and justification of an "Ireland for the Irish" geopolitical imaginary. As of yet, there has been limited academic engagement with far-right movements in Ireland, and even less research pertaining to populist movements and social media use within the Irish context. This article seeks to address this gap and expand the contexts in which research on populist movements and their social media use takes place.

Far-Right Political Parties, Geopolitical Imaginaries, and Populist Communication

Far-right political parties have been garnering mainstream political success over the past decade. In 2014, far-right political parties across Europe won a record number of seats in the European Parliament, with huge gains for parties such as the French Front National, the Danish People's Party, the UK Independence Party [UKIP], the Austrian FPÖ, the Greek Golden Dawn[1], the Hungarian Jobbik and the True Finns (Elgot, 2014; Halikiopoulou and Vasilopoulou, 2014). In March 2016, in the midst of Europe's migrant crisis, the European Union and Turkey struck a deal to return migrants arriving to Greek islands to Turkey in exchange for EU funding and other concessions, with specific policies put in place for Syrian refugees (Corrao, 2018). On June 23rd, 2016, 51.9% of British voters chose to support the "leave" side in the Brexit referendum, voting to remove the United Kingdom from the European Union following notably anti-immigration campaigns from parties such as UKIP (Durrheim et al, 2018; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017).

These events along with numerous other similarly disconcerting acts and discourses were brought about by, and contributed to, the "new right-wing populism" in Europe, whereby once taboo views and narratives have increasingly found a place within the mainstream Western political sphere (Wodak and KhosraviNik, 2013). Although right-wing populism can be traced back to the Second World War, what is new, however, is the recent surge in support for such movements and the means by which many of the disparate (and often conflicting) right-wing populist thoughts and ideologies have established themselves as mainstream political narratives within many of Europe's liberal democratic societies.

Central to the successful establishment of right-wing populist ideologies within European mainstream political arenas has been the prevalent use of geopolitical imaginaries, and their distribution via social media. Such geopolitical imaginaries are created through the act of identifying, labelling and representing places and the people who inhabit them according to perceived levels of importance by political elites and other politically-motivated actors (Dodds, 2007). These geopolitical imaginaries must be understood as political acts by select individuals and institutions. Here, the authors employ a critical geopolitical approach, or more specifically a popular geopolitics approach, by viewing geopolitical imaginaries as discourses that are politically and culturally varied in how they represent geographical, social and political phenomena. (Ó Tuathail, 1998; Dittmer and Dodds, 2008).

Drawing from Foucault's (1980) work on "Power/Knowledge", our approach is grounded in critical and popular geopolitics, which acknowledges that geopolitical imaginaries are never innocent, as they are continually made and disseminated by powerful individuals, institutions and states, and that these imaginaries perpetually induce the effects of power in order to serve contemporary imperialism by reinforcing

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[1]   The Golden Dawn are now outlawed as a criminal organisation after a high-profile trial in 2020 that found them involved in criminal activities, including protection rackets and crimes against migrants and left wing activists. Their leadership is jailed.

existing inequalities (Ó Tuathail, 1998; Kearns, 2009). Further, popular geopolitics recognises that the political is interlinked with the mass media, that the media both creates and distributes geopolitical imaginaries via the representations of global politics, and that such imaginaries and representations circulate both within and beyond national boundaries (Dodds, 2007). This fusion of mass media with political life has been used by a growing number of academics to explore a range of political phenomena, from post-WW2 nationalism in the USA (Dittmer and Bos, 2019) to the perceived threat of Europe's "migrant crisis" (Yatsyk, 2018; Edenborg, 2018) and the politics of belonging that this "migrant crisis" evokes (Makarychev and Sazonov, 2019).

Rather than conveying a single, coherent geopolitical imaginary, contemporary right-wing populism encompasses a diffuse range of stereotypes, ideologies and attitudes that mobilise disparate portions of the electorate. The geopolitical imaginaries espoused by right-wing populism works to divide society through utilising "us" versus "them" narratives, based on religious, ethnic, gender, sexuality, and national lines (Wodak and KhosraviNik, 2013; Köttig et al, 2017; Rheindorf and Wodak, 2019). Despite the emergence of a range of far-right movements such as the so called "alt-right", the ethno-nationalist identitarian movement, and country-specific manifestations of right-wing populism across Europe, all generally coalesce on geopolitical imaginaries supported by anti-immigration narratives, white European supremacy, regressive gender politics, nativist interpretations of the economy, and superficial anti-elitism. In doing so, they reinforce what Kearns (2009) has termed "conservative" geopolitical imaginaries which rely on a worldview of incompatible civilisations, intense spatial integration and relentless conflict.

Social media has been considered a key site and actor in the rise of this "new right-wing populism" and case-study research has been conducted on its role in various jurisdictions, such as the Czech Republic and Slovakia (Mihálik and Walter, 2018), the Netherlands (Jacobs and Spierings, 2018), and Eastern and Central Europe (Caiani, 2019). Social media platforms such as Twitter (now known as X) enable political communication to circumvent traditional news cycles and journalists, providing a well-designed medium for populist communication, especially for right-wing political parties (Ernst et al., 2017). Despite scholarly advances in relation to the ways in which populist political parties use Twitter in European countries such as the Netherlands (Van Kessel and Castelein, 2016), there remains a significant gap in our understanding of its use in the Irish digital sphere. This article seeks to address this gap.

Twitter was selected as the sole social medium for analysis in this study as, according to Van Kessel and Castelein (2016), tweets can be used to deduct the ways in which political actors self-promote, while also enabling a rich analysis of ideology and political positions. This was particularly evident during the 2020 Irish General Election where Twitter acted as a more mainstream tool than other platforms, such as Telegram, in an attempt to reach a wider population of the electorate. Further, a critical examination of Twitter is particularly warranted given its reluctance to remove ("deplatform") political parties in the same way that many other social media platforms purged thousands of

far-right accounts following the Charlottesville Riots in 2017, in a process referred to as deplatforming (Rogers, 2020). These riots erupted following the white supremacist "Unite the Right" rally with violent clashes taking place between protesters and counter-protesters, followed by a self-identified white supremacist driving his car into a crowd of counter-protesters, killing one person and injuring thirty-five more.

The Irish context has seen some recent engagement with right-wing populism, politics and its social media use. Eugenia Siapera (2019) has explored digital racism on Twitter and Facebook, in light of a stabbing incident in a small Irish town that organised Twitter accounts sought to connect to terrorism. In their study of the 2016 Irish General Election, Suiter et al. (2018) examined populist currents in the Irish mainstream press, including three television broadcasters, three newspapers and a digital only news platform. While arguing that right-wing populism and "anti-out-group sentiment" targeting groups deemed to be different (such as migrants) was largely absent from Irish mainstream media, the authors acknowledged that it was more pronounced on social media. As Lucek and Phelan (forthcoming) show, the Covid-19 pandemic has embolden far-right sentiments and attitudes to migrants in the Irish context, demonstrating a rise in the framing of migrants as a contagion/disease, criminals, and as the favoured elites of the Irish government. To this end, we aim to examine the 2020 Irish General Election as a distinct geopolitical epoch in the development of the Irish far-right, whereby far-right actors engaged more actively than before in mainstream Irish politics while actively weaponising narratives and geopolitical imaginaries that would later be used to garner further support throughout (and following) the Covid-19 pandemic.

Far-Right Politics, Racism and Anti-Immigrant Sentiment in Ireland

The relative lack of success of far-right political parties and mobilization in Ireland has been noted by several scholars (Garner, 2007; O'Malley, 2008). O'Malley (2008) in particular has argued that despite the fact that Ireland has some favourable conditions for the growth of a radical right party, this populist space is taken up by Republican party Sinn Féin, who lean more so towards the populist left. Natasha Dromey (2019) has argued that Ireland has come to think of itself as "almost immune" to the far-right, positing that although such a political party had not mainstreamed itself as of 2019, Ireland could still experience a surge if such a group is able to "sell" its story to the people.

Despite these observations, there have been several examples of Irish far-right parties and groups before the formation of the National Party and Irish Freedom Party. The only far-right party to ever have had electoral success was Ailtirí na hAiséirghe, a fascist political party founded in 1942 by Gearóid Ó Cuinneagáin that sought to form a totalitarian Irish Christian corporatist state (O'Drisceoill, 1996; Douglas, 2009). In the 1945 local government elections, the party went on to win nine seats. Other similar parties have attempted to achieve electoral success, among which include the Immigrant Control Platform, who ran candidates unsuccessfully from 1998 to 2011 and Identity

Ireland founded in 2015, who stood for controlled borders, anti-immigration and a withdrawal from the European Union. The party's national spokesperson Peter O'Loughlin unsuccessfully contested the 2016 Irish General Election and the 2019 European Parliament election. One of the most prominent and notable far-right Irish groups was Youth Defence, an Irish organization that opposed the legalization of abortion. James Reynolds, who would later become the deputy president of the National Party, became leader of Youth Defence and was noted for having ties to neo-Nazi groups in Germany and Italy (O'Sullivan, 1998).

Although the 2020 General Election was one of the first to see two prominent far-right parties contesting for votes, there were several figures during the election campaign who echoed some of the rhetoric of both of these parties in the months leading up to the 2020 General Election, and who ended up becoming comfortably elected. These included Verona Murphy, a Wexford TD who commented in November 2019 that "ISIS was a big part of the migrant population" (O'Connell, 2019); Noel Grealish, a Galway West TD who in September 2019 described migrants from Africa to Ireland as "spongers" (Burns, 2020); and Michael Collins, a Cork South West TD, who defended Noel Grealish in September 2019 by stating that "our own people" should come first before we help immigrants (McQuinn, 2019). Former journalist Gemma O'Doherty also rose to prominence in the run up to and during this General Election. As a member of the unregistered political party, Anti-Corruption Ireland, O'Doherty unsuccessfully ran in the Fingal constituency. O'Doherty made headlines in the run up to the election for targeting a mixed-race couple on social media after they featured in a supermarket advertisement. She has also been criticised for publicly sharing photos of dark-skinned schoolchildren that she claimed showed Irish people were becoming an "ethnic minority in many towns" (Gallagher, 2020).

As geographers have long evidenced, imaginaries of Ireland and the Irish people are interlinked with nationalistic debates of place and identity (Nash, 1993; Martin, 1997; Dempsey, 2023), and these have been used to justify the exclusion of migrants (Gilmartin, 2008). These identity-based discourses of belonging are particularly pertinent to our examination of far-right geopolitical imaginaries and narratives, as evidenced through racism and anti-immigrant discourses. Lentin has explored racism and anti-immigrant discourses in the context of the 2004 citizenship referendum (Lentin, 2007) and anti-immigration sentiment in the political state of the Republic of Ireland (Lentin, 2012); for example, the removal in 2004 of constitutional rights to citizenship to the Irish-born children of migrants has received considerable attention (Garner, 2007). Ebun Joseph (2020) has argued that the labour market in Ireland has seen the policing of racial order through the group favouritism continuum, that maintains homogeneity in a heterogeneous labour market, which consequently reproduces inequality. The Immigrant Council of Ireland and Fanning (2011) have demonstrated that racism is a serious problem in Ireland, in particular for migrants who experience verbal and physical abuse. Fanning (2021) has also explored the ways in which far-right groups in Ireland have also begun to support anti-immigrant sentiment at the core of their policies. Michael (2015)

in particular explored the pervasive anti-black racism in Ireland while Carr (2016) has explored hate crime and Islamophobia in Ireland. Moreover, in a number of high profile cases of fatal assault in the Republic of Ireland, racism is acknowledged as a motivating factor (Michael, 2015).

While the far-right has yet to emerge as a political force in the Irish political system, its discourses and racist narratives have been mobilised through social media (Siapera et al., 2018; Siapera, 2019), where two of Ireland's primary far-right political parties have forged a strong presence, particularly on Twitter. Crucially, what makes both the National Party and the Irish Freedom Party worthy of analysis in the context of the 2020 General Election is the fact that both parties had an electoral pact, which encompassed support for each other's candidates in their canvassing. Similarly, the two parties have regularly collaborated on public demonstrations together, such as the 2019 organization of a protest in Oughterard, Galway against the founding of a Direct Provision centre. To that end, while being different parties, both serve similar political interests and have been known to collaborate on policy issues.

The National Party

Founded in 2016 by Justin Barrett and James Reynolds, the National Party is one of the main far-right political parties in Ireland and following the 2020 General Election, does not have representation at local, national or European level. The party held its first conference in Donald Trump's Doonbeg Hotel in County Clare, where founder Barrett declared the party as anti-immigration, anti-abortion and pro-death penalty (McCarthy, 2017). The party was officially added, in April 2019, to the Register of Political Parties for Dáil, local and European elections, but only fielded candidates for the first time at the 2020 General Election. A total of ten candidates were put forward, garnering a share of first preference votes totalling between 0.49% and 1.74% (The Journal.ie, 2020). At the core of the vision of the National Party, as set out in their political vision and manifesto, is to "stand against corrupt and amoral establishment, who push replacement level immigration which will in time completely destroy Irish nationality" along with standing against the "project of a federated European Superstate, which is explicitly anti-national and therefore anti-Irish" (National Party, 2020). These nationalistic sentiments are expressed through their party slogan, "Ireland belongs to the Irish" (National Party, 2020). The party, which joined Twitter in 2016, currently has a following of over 10,700 people as of November 2023, an increase from 6,491 in February 2020 (observed at time of data collection).

The Irish Freedom Party

Influenced by the UK's withdrawal from the European Union (Brexit), the Irish Freedom Party was founded in September 2018 at a conference under the original name of Irexit Freedom to Prosper Party. The party emerged in a broader context of connection with

far-right politics elsewhere. The party's founder and chairman, Hermann Kelly, worked in the European Parliament for Nigel Farage of UKIP and the far-right Romanian politician Cristian Terhes (Peñas, 2023). Ben Gilroy, who became a prominent member of the party, became very active in trying to establish an Irish yellow vests movement, based on the Yellow Vests Protests in France, which were a series of populist, grassroots weekly protests. In this sense, the members of the Irish Freedom Party were significantly influenced by far-right politics occurring elsewhere in Europe.

While initially forging a political identity as a Eurosceptic party, the Irish Freedom Party has since adopted constitution with core principles on "strengthening Irishness" (Irish Freedom Party, 2020) and promoting what they refer to as a "2nd Gaelic Revival", that will rejuvenate interest in Irish cultural traditions. Much of the Irish Freedom Party's ideology is centred around the notion of "taking back control", particularly in terms of immigration and borders. This directly speaks to, and references, the populist rhetoric seen with the "leave" campaign during the 2016 Brexit referendum (Lilleker and Bonacci, 2017). The party became officially registered in June 2019 and contested its first election in the 2019 Wexford-by-election. In the 2020 General Election, the party fielded 11 candidates, achieving between 0.19% and 2.06% of the votes in their respective constituencies. The party, which joined Twitter in 2018, currently has more than 31,000 followers as of November 2023, an increase from 14,100 in February 2020 (observed at time of data collection).

Methodology

Our dataset harvested and analysed tweets from these two Irish nationalist identifying parties which were identified by GPAHE (2022) as far-right hate and extremist groups. Further, of the 12 Irish groups identified in GPAHE's (2022) report, only the National Party and Irish Freedom Party are registered as political parties in Ireland. Further, the parties were selected due to their association with the pan-European, ethno-nationalist, right-wing extremist identitarian movement, and the similarities between their visions of Irishness and nationalist politics. GPAHE's report identifies the ideologies of both parties as centring on anti-immigration and anti-LGBTQ+, with the Irish Freedom Party also being classified as having strong conspiracy ideologies, and the National Party as promoting white nationalism.

This research examined the ways in which these two parties campaigned and canvassed the Irish electorate during the 2020 General Election on social media, paying particular attention to how the rhetoric of their social media posts reflect geopolitical imaginaries. To that end, this study harvested tweets from each of the official parties' Twitter feeds, for the duration of the Irish General Election campaign, from the dissolution of the Oireachtas (the two houses of the Irish Parliament) to the closing of the polls (January 14–February 8). From this period, 631 original tweets were gathered and aggregated from the parties' official Twitter pages. Retweets and repeated contents were not considered. Of these tweets during the Irish General Election, 405 were from the Irish Freedom Party and 226

from The National Party. Twitter was chosen as the sole social media platform for analysis as it was used by both parties to disseminate their campaigns to broader sectors of the electorate than less mainstream social media platforms such as Telegram.

We employed a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to look for patterns and regularities in texts and then interpret these in terms of the relationships they engender and the sociocultural practices they are associated with. The tweets from both accounts were tagged with one or more description, then repeatedly clustered and re-classified to generate a set of consistently applied tags reflecting the main purposes of each tweet. This process was conducted independently by each author, before then combining each of the authors' themes and subthemes to produce a shared final set of descriptive tags. Both the written texts and audio-visual material of tweets were analysed and coded thematically. Although the data size of this study is relatively small, given the time period under consideration and the thematic variation of tweets between the two accounts, the sample size nonetheless facilitated the research goals of uncovering social media strategies and political rhetoric conveyed by these parties. The findings are presented in terms of the themes emerging from our systematic reading of the contents and the political messages and rhetoric they convey as they aim to engage the electorate for votes.

Results: Discursive Constructions of Far-Right Geopolitical Imaginaries on Twitter

Following the first step of analyses, the study identified three key themes describing the main contents of the tweets: (i) anti-establishment, (ii) anti-immigration and (iii) evoking Irish history. While variations exist between the ways in which the two parties utilise Twitter, both accounts during the campaigning period of the Irish general election displayed an "us versus them" dynamic, oriented around nativist sensibilities and configurations of Irish patriotism. These nativist sensibilities, along with the populist motivations of a puritan, compromised Irish identity, functions as a basis for the ways in which both parties use Twitter to convey their political messages during this canvassing period.

Anti-Establishment

In both Twitter feeds, critiques of the mainstream political parties and mainstream media formed much of the content. The form of these tweets tended to refer to mainstream parties Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and the Green Party as "traitors". This rhetoric of an Ireland betrayed by the "establishment" is expressed in a number of tweets. The National Party described the established political parties as having "wrecked the Irish economy and sent 250,000 young Irish people into foreign exile". Similarly, the Irish Freedom Party tweeted: "A vote for the Irish freedom party is a vote for Ireland. Reject the political establishment on Saturday. Embrace a patriotic alternative".

In particular, the Irish Freedom Party contends through varying tweets that Ireland is a "failed" state and as a result "the political establishment and the media are working together to ensure we do not have a proper debates", noting that establishment parties, as they refer to them, will destroy Ireland "through mass immigration and moral relativism". The National Party echoes these concerns, arguing that the establishment supports "a transient Ireland where everything is for sale. And where you can walk down an Irish street and never meet an Irish person".

Both appealed directly to their users and a potential broader electorate by encouraging voters to "send a message to the rotten political establishment" and vote them out (see Figure 1). The Irish Freedom party directly appeals to voters by directly tweeting: "vote for real nationalists on Saturday. Not globalists or internationalists. They have betrayed you and our nation". Their idea of "taking down the establishment" is furthered in a campaign video featuring one of their candidates Ben Gilroy, where he uses a hurl, from the traditional Irish GAA sport hurling, to take "a swing at the establishment" (see Figure 2).

This notion of a failed establishment is expressed in nationalist terms, with many of the tweets focussed on Ireland's main opposition party, Sinn Féin. Although Sinn Féin defines itself as a republican, left-wing nationalist party, both parties set out to discredit its claims of being nationalist while accusing them of being complicit in the "climate hysteria" of established parties. Among the tweets include:

- @sinnfeinireland are complicit in #climatehysteria all designed to rob ordinary people of their money (Irish Freedom Part).
- Unlike @sinnfeinireland we have a nationalist outlook and offer Irish people a real patriotic alternative (The National Party).
- Irish voters should not mistake @sinnfeinireland for a nationalist party. Far from it, they are a self described 'Internationalist' party. A vote for SF is a vote for higher taxes and mass immigration #irishfreedom (Irish Freedom Party).

Figure 1 National Party Tweet featuring leaders of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Sinn Féin.

Figure 2 Irish Freedom Party social media video.

These tweets from both parties are particularly interesting, given that they establish the binary of good versus bad nationalism, as they claim Sinn Féin to be emblematic of the latter and as a result, both parties frame themselves as a "real" nationalist alternative. While Sinn Féin are criticised on both social media accounts on these nationalistic imperatives, the Green Party are framed on both Twitter accounts in terms of contributing towards a focus on climate issues, or as they refer to it, #climatehysteria which they claim is a betrayal and hypocritical to Irish society:

- The Green Party. The biggest lecturing hypocrites who ever walked the earth. #Irishfreedom (Irish Freedom Party)
- Greens should be eaten and not heard. The biggest hypocrites of all. #GE2020 (The National Party)

While invoking narratives of "us versus them" in terms of Ireland's mainstream political parties, both the National Party and Irish Freedom Party argue that the mainstream media is complicit in supporting the mainstream parties. In particular, many of the news sources are labelled by the Irish Freedom Party as more "politically correct than factually correct" and sources of misinformation. Both parties accuse the media establishment of curtailing freedom of speech:

- Another fake debate tonight in the media between the establishment parties (The National Party)
- The media and political establishment have colluded together to prevent the Irish people from having a proper open debate on immigration and the direction of our country. Go out today and deliver a message to them. #IrishFreedomParty Number 1 #GE2020 (Irish Freedom Party)

The Irish National Party furthers this anti-media establishment narrative by accusing the Irish public service broadcaster RTÉ of censorship.

- Hi @rtenews you seem to have made another mistake. You have listed our National Party candidate Stephen Redmond as 'non party'. It's looking increasingly like Section 31 for the National Party rather than a series of 'mistakes' @BAItweets
- Hi @rtenews your Six One feature on the Limerick City constituency appears to have mentioned all of the candidates except Rebecca Barrett. A genuine error or Section 31 for the National Party? #GE2020

The term "Section 31" references part of the Broadcasting Authority Act (1960), where the Minister of Parliament with responsibility for Communications could issue a Ministerial Order to RTÉ to not broadcast specified material. No such ministerial order was given during the 2020 General Election, despite the National Party's claims of censorship.

To summarize, the content of much of the tweets invited and canvassed Twitter users to disrupt the political establishment and media status quo, through harnessing particular narratives in their tweets pertaining to misinformation, censorship, the curtailing of free speech in the media, along with accusing the mainstream political parties of betraying the Irish people.

Anti-Immigration

The source of much content on both parties' Twitter feeds during the general election period was immigration. Both the National Party and Irish Freedom Party go as far as to frame immigration as one of the central issues of the 2020 election and contemporary Irish culture more broadly but particular discourses and trends emerge for each.

Nativist Irish identity is central to the National Party's tweets, given that their slogan, "Ireland for the Irish" is a core message in many of their tweets. In referencing this nativist sensibility, tweets contain frequent references to a #nationalidea and the notion of "Ireland belonging to the Irish". Moreover, the party uses the rhetorical framing in these tweets that the Irish "are a minority in their own country", a narrative that challenges mainstream geopolitical imaginaries of Ireland as belonging to the Irish people by positing migrants as a threat to Irish sovereignty. As examples:

- James Reynolds – the Irish people are coming second in their own country #GE2020.
- We're just trying to preserve our own place, our own home, where we live. We don't have anywhere else.
- Of course @fiannafailparty + @FineGael support mass-emigration. In both cases out of economic expediency. Instead of building a country for our young, they sent them pacing [sic] or imported cheaper replacements. #Election2020 #NationalParty

The National Party's framing of the Irish as a minority in their own country is shared by the Irish Freedom Party, which is much more overt on the issues of immigration. In particular, the tweets by the Irish Freedom party argue that Irish citizens are not being given preferential treatment in state services over immigrants:

- Under the Irish Freedom party, Irish people must go to the top of the list in their own nation.
- To offset population decline the Irish Freedom Party believe in pro natalist and pro family policies to increase the birth rate.

Figure 3 Anti-immigrant sentiment on The National Party's Twitter feed.

The establishment parties all believe in mass immigration or as the UN describes, 'Replacement Migration'. #GE2020 #Irishfreedom
- Another fake debate tonight. They all support mass immigration. All in favour of using our country as a beautiful economic hostel.

While the Irish Freedom Party foster an outright anti-immigration approach, centred around ideas of Irish people being second class citizens and becoming replaced by

migrants, the party configures their own version of "Ireland for the Irish" throughout their series of tweets by referring to their party, and supporters of their nationalist agenda as "patriots". This is used to encourage voters to "become true patriots and vote for Irish freedom".

Both parties' Twitter feeds claim that there is immigration denial in Ireland and that the political parties refuse to engage with the topic. The National Party accuse Taoiseach Leo Varadkar of "denying the existence of immigration", while the Irish Freedom Party makes broader claims:

● The political establishment don't want to discuss immigration. They refuse to engage with the issue. They refuse to acknowledge its negative effects on the people of Ireland.

A significant point of the contention in the broader mainstream media was the issue of the Irish housing crisis. This issue became a significant structuring dynamic for much of the anti-immigrant sentiment on both parties' Twitter feeds, becoming weaponized in varying ways to encourage users to vote on the basis of anti-immigrant sentiment. The Irish housing crisis has been fuelled by soaring rents across the country, with an Irish property market that has been placed in the hands of companies seeking to maximise profit on real estate, propelling house prices and making them unaffordable (Hearne, 2020). This crisis has become marked by a substantial increase in homelessness across the country:

● The housing crisis won't be solved until we end the policy of uncontrolled immigration. This is basic supply and demand. It is plain common sense too. The establishment parties are afraid to discuss immigration. The Irish Freedom Party will tackle it head on. #GE2020 (Irish Freedom Party)

● Irish people out demanding a fairer housing policy today in Dublin 15. The Irish Freedom Part will put an end to the discrimination of Irish people on the housing list. #GE2020 #IrishFreedom (Irish Freedom Party)

● For the first time in any General Election the Irish people will have a party willing to tackles [sic] the issue of uncontrolled immigration and highlights its effects on housing demand, wage suppression and services #GE2020 (The National party)

In addition to linking immigration to the housing crisis (see Figure 4), both parties also connect immigration with crime, referencing "Pakistani gangs" and uncontrolled borders. In several tweets, the Irish Freedom Party was overt in its anti-EU stance,

Figure 4 The housing crisis and anti-immigrant sentiment.

arguing that Ireland needs to "take back its borders", mirroring the popular slogan from the Brexit campaign in the UK.

To summarise, anti-immigrant sentiment is used by both parties to appeal to the electorate, primarily through "weaponizing" the housing crisis, claiming that the political and media establishment are in denial about the issues of immigration and refuse to debate it and claiming, through nativist sentiments and framings of patriots, that Irish people are becoming a minority in Ireland.

Evoking Irish History

In addition to focussing on the geopolitical imaginaries of the present, the content of many of the tweets from both parties orientated around imaginaries of Ireland's past. Given that this election took place during the Decade of Centenaries – an initiative launched by the Irish government to commemorate the events surrounding the establishment of the Irish state – it is no surprise that Irish history was evoked. The National Party and Irish Freedom Party are not outliers in this regard, but rather, they use Irish history for the more extreme means of supporting their far-right viewpoints. This included inferences to historical figures, particularly those at the centre of Ireland's 1916 Rising and the subsequent War of Independence. Quotes and pictures from these figures were used and this history serves a rhetorical function whereby these parties attempt to legitimise their positions and actions, drawing from widely shared cultural knowledge and imaginations of the nation. The content of the tweets served to present both of these parties as the continuation of a long tradition striving to preserve the Irish nation. The National Party in particular evoked 1916 rebel Pádraig Pearse's quote:

- Great day canvassing in Dublin South-West for our candidate Philip Dwyer. "Ireland Belongs To The Irish" – Pádraig Pearse #VoteNationalParty #GE2020
- "Nothing that has happened or that can ever happen can alter the truth of it. Ireland belongs to the Irish". Pádraig Pearse #Election2020 #GE2020

Pearse's quote had a very specific meaning in relation to the British Empire's colonial rule in Ireland. Here, it is co-opted by The National Party to convey that they are continuing the work of Pearse, by critiquing immigration and what the party sees as a degradation of Irish cultural values. These efforts are also evoked through tweets showing party canvassers in front of national 1916 memorials in varying cities across Ireland (see Figure 5).

The National Party @NationalPartyIE · Feb 1
National Party Leader Justin Barrett joined the canvass in Limerick City today along with our two Limerick candidates Rebecca Barrett (City) and Cristín Ní Mhaoldhomhnaigh (County). #VoteNationalParty #GE2020

Rebecca Barrett

○ 5   ⟲ 44   ♡ 165

Figure 5 Canvass at Limerick's 1916 memorial.

The Irish Freedom Party overtly refers to its candidates and supporters as patriots, regularly referencing that they are continuing the cause of Irish sovereignty:

● Our party is a real nationalist party in the traditions of those who fought for Irish independence and self government

The party uses this historical configuration (see Figure 6) to highlight how their policies make "patriotic sense", but also to highlight the ways in which establishment parties are an "insult" to the "patriots":

Figure 5 Patriotic rhetoric on social media.

● The establishment parties see Ireland as an economic hostel, part of a wider union. The Irish Freedom Party see Ireland as a unique country with a special heritage and culture. A place for Irish people to call home. Vote #Irishfreedom #GE2020.

● Micheál Martin leader of FF, insults all of our Patriot dead who have fought for Irish freedom.

Much of this rhetoric aspires to the maintenance of a nativist Irish identity and indicates the ways in which this is a structuring dynamic in the identities of both parties. However, it also serves as way of highlighting the ways in which they perceive the nation to be under attack from external forces, such as immigration or the European Union.

To summarize, both parties use Twitter to generate content and tweets based on an idealised geopolitical imaginary of the Irish past. This historical configuration not only represents their understanding of nationalism and patriotism, but it also serves the rhetorical function of indicating the ways in which these parties perceive themselves to be the continuation of Irish historical figures that fought for independence. These sentiments are expressed through their social media accounts to appeal to the electorate, as they claim that they will "save the country".

Discussion: Ireland for the Irish

Throughout the course of the 2020 Irish General Election, Twitter was a key platform used by the National Party and Irish Freedom Party to convey their geopolitical imaginaries. These imaginaries reflect currents of far-right populism more broadly, particularly those seen in the US and the UK. Both parties' accusations of mainstream media spreading fake news and excluding them from televised debates with established parties, coupled with their accusations of the political establishment of spreading misinformation and refusing

debate on topics such as immigration, echo the discourse of fake news evident during the 2016 US presidential campaign (Nelson and Taneja, 2018). Similarly, the geopolitical imaginaries presented by the Irish Freedom Party show parallels with those of the leave side's campaign during the Brexit referendum period, with continued calls being made for "taking back control" and accusing the political establishment of making Ireland a "province of Europe" (Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017).

As we argued in the previous section, these tweets could be broadly understood through three thematic lenses: anti-establishment, anti-immigration and evoking Irish history. Importantly, however, we believe that these three themes produce a significant geopolitical imaginary of Ireland: that Ireland is "for the Irish". This is conveyed through the ways in which these parties use Irish history, symbols and nationality to rhetorically frame their movements. This overarching ideology is one centred around an exclusionary and conservative geographical imaginary and sense of belonging. Through disseminating an "Ireland for the Irish" narrative, questions of belonging are brought to the forefront. As Gilmartin et al. (2018:58) have argued,

> "Belonging is a reciprocally material and imaginative phenomenon, which is also geographical in all its forms. We feel a sense of belonging to places and to other people, often in terms of a defined collective. These connections to people and place are often themselves joined, as they are in the case of belonging to a nation-state, where we feel a connection to the place and to our fellow nationals".

This sense of belonging to a nation-state, and thus of connection to our fellow nationals, is an example of what Anderson (1991) has defined as an "imagined community". Both the National Party and Irish Freedom Party rely heavily on such imaginaries in their discourses, as is most evident in their repeated reference to "the Irish" collective. This imaginary, as with similar far-right geopolitical imaginaries across Europe, is underpinned by white supremacy (Kiper, 2022); with "the Irish" assumed to be white, Irish-born people.

Through their reiteration of "the Irish", and indeed Irish sovereignty and "patriots", both the National Party and Irish Freedom Party are presenting their Twitter followers with discourses on belonging to, and ownership of, Ireland. This sense of belonging is underpinned by the belief that Ireland is a "place for Irish people to call home" (Irish Freedom Party). Such assertions of belonging are inherently political as they involve differentiating processes and "us versus them" discourses, which not only establish an Irish collective identity based on a narrow list of differentiating markers, but which also act to exclude others who are not deemed worthy of belonging. This politics of belonging involves the reproduction of various communities of belongings' boundaries by seemingly homogenous majoritarian groups, while simultaneously also involving their contestation by minority groups (Yuval-Davis, 2006). This is arguably the case with the anti-immigration and identity-politics discourses of both the Irish parties, who view these minority groups as threats to the cultural heritage and national identity of Ireland and the Irish people.

In this way, the Twitter accounts indicate the ways in which far-right populist parties in Ireland attempt to activate rooted, nationalistic ideologies, while also framing Ireland within a racist, xenophobic and ultraconservative geopolitical imaginary. In doing so, a problematic and exclusionary geopolitical imaginary of Ireland as a place is shared, one whose cultural values and traditions are threatened by progressive new social movements, immigration, and the established political elite. Much like Hakoköngäs et al.'s (2020: 9) study of far-right groups in Finland, The National Party and Irish Freedom Party attempt to activate strong emotions "such as moral anger by presenting evidence of present social disadvantage". In the Irish context, this social disadvantage is framed around contemporary political issues within the Irish political system, such as that of the housing crisis, which is used by both parties to stoke anti-immigrant sentiments amongst their Twitter following and reflects the way they attempted to use this housing crisis as a form of political capital during the election period.

Conclusion

The 2020 General Election saw rhetoric emerge on Twitter from both The National Party and Irish Freedom Party around a nativist Irish identity of true Irish "patriots" and the production of a geopolitical imaginary of belonging centred on the narrative of "Ireland for the Irish". While the canvassing period of the general election indicates the ways in which social media was co-opted by both parties to appeal to the electorate, much of the rhetoric was reflective of broader far-right parties internationally and their use of social media to disseminate conservative geopolitical imaginaries. The focus here on the Irish context has revealed the ways in which particular Irish political issues (such as the housing crisis) were utilised and connected to broader sentiments of anti-immigration and anti-minority peoples to reinforce imaginaries of "in" and "out" groups, drawing parallels with far-right movements in the UK, US and Europe. In doing so, both the National Party and Irish Freedom Party not only promulgated their nationally-specific far-right agendas in their tweets, but they worked to produce conservative imaginaries of Ireland which attempt to rationalise their far-right ideologies through situating their movement within the West's broader right wing geopolitical sphere.

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