

Political developments, 2025

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Introduction

In terms of political developments, 2025 represented a year where uncertainty was arguably the dominant theme. International developments and relationships had a major impact on Ireland, emphasised in Ireland–United States (US) relations and the presidential election. While certain typical policy areas continued to be a focus of political attention (e.g. housing), there was an increased salience of issues such as immigration and defence as areas that the newly elected government had to face.

New government

In January of 2025, following on from the November 2024 general election and a relatively short period of negotiation, a new cabinet was announced led by Taoiseach Micháel Martin of Fianna Fáil, with Simon Harris, the leader of Fine Gael, becoming Tánaiste (Ó Cionnaith, 2025). Notable in the appointees was the return of Dara Calleary to cabinet following his resignation in 2020 following the ‘Golfgate’ scandal and the demotion of former Fianna Fáil TD, Charlie McConalogue, who previously served as Minister for Agriculture (there were no demotions in Fine Gael). The gender balance of the new cabinet has been criticised (twelve men and three women) with it being noted that there is the same number of ministers named James or Jim as there are women (ibid.).

The coalition is supported by a number of independent TDs, resulting in two regional independent TDs (Seán Canney and Noel Grealish) becoming super junior ministers (ibid.). Following the election results of 2024, there was some discussion of a possible coalition involving left-wing parties, however, the end result was Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in government, supported by a number of independent TDs (Coyne, 2025a). Partially controversial in government formation was the involvement of Michael Lowry, TD, as ‘defacto leader’ of the independent group given that the Moriarty Tribunal had criticised him as ‘profoundly corrupt’ (ibid.). Martin, in 2011, had called for Lowry to resign from Dáil Eireann following the tribunal’s findings; asked in 2025 about these comments he stood by them but defended negotiating with him to form a government (Finn, C., 2025a). A second controversy emerged when independent TDs who supported the government were granted opposition speaking time resulting in protests and shouting by opposition TDs leading to the Dáil being adjourned on its first day; the speaking rights row was not resolved until March (Coyne, 2025a).

Seanad elections

Following the general election of 2024, the twenty-seventh Seanad was elected/appointed in early 2025. The National University of Ireland Panel saw the return of three senators, Michael McDowell, Alice Mary Higgins and Rónán Mullen (National University of Ireland (NUI), 2025). For the Trinity College Panel, Senators Lynn Ruane and Tom Clonan were re-elected with Aubrey McCarthy being elected for the first time, after a tight recount against Green Party candidate Hazel Chu (Gash, 2025; Trinity College Dublin (TCD), 2025). Owing to a 1979 constitutional amendment to extend the Seanad franchise to other universities and a subsequent Supreme Court ruling in 2023 (owing to the lack of change in regard to extending the franchise), 2025 will be the last Seanad election to have separate NUI and TCD panels (Law Society Gazette Ireland, 2023). The twenty-seventh Seanad was also the first time that Aontú and the Social Democrats had senators elected (O’Halloran, 2025).

Presidential election

In October 2025, Catherine Connolly was elected as President of Ireland with 63.4 per cent of first preferences defeating Fine Gael

candidate, Heather Humphreys (RTÉ News, 2025). The election was regarded as remarkable firstly for the fact that Fianna Fáil candidate Jim Gavin remained on the ballot (receiving 7.2 per cent of first preferences) despite having dropped out of the race and, secondly, owing to the ‘historic’ number of spoiled votes (12.9 per cent). Connolly’s first preferences were the highest on record, eclipsing the percentage of first preferences cast for Éamon de Valera in 1959 and Michael D. Higgins in 2018 alongside a higher than expected turnout of 45.8 per cent (Deloy, 2025; RTÉ News, 2025).

On election day there were two eligible candidates. Fine Gael initially nominated former MEP Mairéad McGuinness, although she subsequently dropped out of the race owing to health reasons with Heather Humphreys replacing her as the Fine Gael candidate (Coyne, 2025b). Fianna Fáil appeared to consider former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern as its candidate with Ahern hoping to secure the nomination but he withdrew (O’Connor, 2025). Fianna Fáil subsequently nominated Jim Gavin who then also dropped out of the race when it emerged that Gavin owed €3,300 to a former tenant of a property he owned arising out of an overpayment of rent (Coyne, 2025a).

In the run up to election day, there were a number of other potential candidates with former meteorologist Joanna Donnelly, *Riverdance* star Michael Flatley and former Chief Medical Officer Dr Tony Holohan all announcing, following varying levels of campaigning, that they would no longer seek a nomination (Coyne, 2025b; O’Connor, 2025). Conor McGregor the former mixed martial arts star turned ‘far right influencer’ also sought nomination, receiving praise from US President Donald Trump and businessman Elon Musk (Finn, D., 2025). TDs, senators and councillors, however, were unwilling to nominate McGregor in particular following a civil judgement finding that he had raped a woman named Nikita Hand in 2018; commentators noted the fact that the far right claims to defend Irish women from the supposed threat from immigrants, yet McGregor was seeking its nomination as a far-right candidate (Finn, D., 2025). While he did not receive a nomination, the support for a potential candidate from a sitting US president was unprecedented.

Two candidates did come close to securing the nomination but did not achieve sufficient support. Entrepreneur Gareth Sheridan received the backing of two local councils (Pepper, 2025) and Maria Steen, a conservative campaigner, also sought the nomination, however, by the final day of nominations, 24 September 2025, she had

only received the backing of eighteen elected members prompting Aontú leader Peadar Tóibín to claim government parties ‘pulled up the ladder’ to prevent a conservative challenge (Leahy, Coyne & McQuinn, 2025). Commentary such as this or Steen’s own comment that she was ‘shut out’ of the race may explain the high level of spoilt votes detailed below.

Connolly ran as an independent candidate but received the backing of left-wing parties (Sinn Féin, Social Democrats, The Labour Party, The Green Party and People before Profit) (Deloy, 2025; Finn, D., 2025). Similarities in her own views and that of her predecessor were noted, specifically resisting ‘the pressure to embrace neoliberalism and austerity in the name of “realism”’ and her record of challenging Western foreign policy (Finn, D., 2025). A contrast emerged between the two campaigns with Humphreys arguing of the importance of maintaining strong relationships with other European states. Indeed Connolly was accused of jeopardising these relationships by Humphreys, for example, with statements made in the past criticising European leadership for its alleged support for Israeli leadership (Finn, D., 2025). In contrast, Connolly argued in favour of maintaining the ‘triple lock’ on the Irish military which, it was argued, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael opposed in order to push a narrative of Ireland being ‘part of the “Western military bloc”’ (ibid.).

Besides foreign policy, a number of other issues dominated the campaign. Connolly faced criticism for employing a woman as an intern who had been convicted of a firearm offence by the Special Criminal Court. In response, Connolly noted the importance of the rehabilitation of ex-prisoners (McGee, 2025). Following former Fine Gael politician Ivan Yates stating in a Newstalk podcast that if he were asked for advice by Fine Gael in relation to how they could regain momentum in the presidential campaign, he would advise the party that it should ‘smear’ Connolly’s campaign. In turn, Connolly’s campaign argued that Fine Gael were indeed organising a deliberate smear campaign (ibid.). Yates, it was later revealed, had coached Gavin for his campaign while also acting as a media commentator during the election, prompting him to be removed from this role as co-podcast host with Today FM presenter Matt Cooper (Ryan, Ó, 2025). Moore (2025) argues that tactics were used to paint Connolly’s campaign as containing a ‘radical left bogeyman’, with Humphreys stating multiple times (incorrectly) that Paul Murphy, TD, was Connolly’s campaign manager.

Further allegations of a smear campaign were made by the Connolly team following the release of a video by Fine Gael called ‘The Hypocrisy of Catherine Connolly’, regarding Connolly’s work as a barrister appearing for banks in home repossession cases (Leahy, Horgan-Jones & Coyne, 2025). There was pushback against the video from both Connolly’s supporters who argued the government were responsible for the housing crisis and the removal of the eviction ban (Gataveckaitė, 2025) as well as from Fine Gael backbenchers who described the video as ‘unsavoury’ (Leahy, Horgan-Jones & Coyne, 2025). Fine Gael denied that there was a smear campaign, however, contrast was drawn by media commentators between the video released by Fine Gael in comparison to what they viewed as a more positive campaign strategy from Connolly, notably a viral video of her performing ‘keepie-uppies’ (McGee, 2025).

The aftermath of the election was also of note. The high level of spoiled votes (13 per cent) in the election was suggested by some commentators to reflect conservative or right-wing discontent at establishment parties (Deloy, 2025). If it was the case that there was a large level of discontent from various factions of the right, it is unclear whether this indicates a growth in support for right-wing parties. Daniel Finn (2025) notes that even if all spoilt votes represented support for socially and or economically conservative parties, this would only be slightly higher than the combined vote received by Independent Ireland, Aontú and smaller right and far-right parties in the 2024 general election. Moreover, the backing Connolly received from all left-wing parties was argued to reflect a victory for the left in Ireland (Deloy, 2025; Finn, D., 2025). It was suggested that this provided ‘momentum’ for a unified left within Irish politics (McGee, 2025). This is argued by one commentator to be already in place, with the strategies taken at grassroots level for the Galway by-election to replace Connolly through the group *Tonn na Clé* campaigning on a ‘vote left, transfer left’ platform although left-wing parties have all announced they will run their own candidates in the by-election (Hamilton, 2026).

Lastly, Gavin’s vote share meant Fianna Fáil was not eligible to recoup election expenses (RTÉ News, 2025) and the controversy surrounding Gavin’s dropout resulted in ‘the most serious existential threat’ to Martin’s leadership of Fianna Fáil (Coyne, 2025a). A December Fianna Fáil parliamentary meeting was rumoured to contain a motion of no confidence following Martin’s handling of the presidential election; while this did not emerge, *The Irish Times*

contacted the seventy-one Fianna Fáil parliamentary members (excluding Martin) of which thirteen offered on-the-record responses with eleven stating they supported Martin's leadership (Leahy et al., 2025). Two trends that emerged from this reporting were the question of whether Martin would stay on for Ireland's presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2026 and whether a credible alternative leader had emerged, despite rumours of Minister Jim O'Callaghan, TD, being a potential successor (ibid.).

Israel and Palestine

Israel's war in Gaza continued in 2025. Following a ceasefire in early 2025, Israel launched airstrikes on Gaza in March 2025; with 400 people killed in a single day it became one of the deadliest days since the war began in 2023 (Shurafa et al., 2025). A subsequent ceasefire declared in October was violated on an almost daily basis by Israel from October 2025 to February 2026 with at least 576 Palestinians killed in that time and a continuation of humanitarian aid being blocked from entering Gaza (AJLabs, 2025).

An investigation by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights found that Israel had committed four out of the five genocidal acts defined by the 1948 Genocide Convention (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025). Taoiseach Micheál Martin used similar language at the United Nations General Assembly claiming Israel had 'genocidal intent from day one' (Duggan, 2025). Ireland's official position remains supporting a two-state solution and humanitarian aid being provided to Palestine was increased in 2025 (Government of Ireland, 2025). That being said, Ireland received criticism following a separate United Nations report, which found Ireland complicit in the genocide through allowing the transfer of weapons through ports and airports indicating 'intent to facilitate Israeli crimes'. It also noted that Ireland continues to trade with Israel, with an increase in dual-use trade in integrated circuits from 2022 to 2024 (the highest level of dual-use trade) (United Nations, 2025). Activists in Ireland have similarly criticised the government, noting the continued use of the Irish Central Bank selling Israeli 'war bonds' and the lack of passage of the Occupied Territories Bill (Finn, M., 2025), therefore arguing direct action was required through protests, civil disobedience and flotillas sailing to Gaza in an attempt to deliver aid (Dolan, 2025).

Continuing from 2024 (Finn, M., 2025), the policing of protests were at times criticised owing to violence by police forces both domestically and internationally (Dolan, 2025). An Irish woman in Berlin who was violently assaulted by German police resulting in a broken bone prompted the Taoiseach and Irish ambassador to Germany to criticise the approach taken (Conneely, 2025). Domestically, a report by the Irish Council for Civil Liberties (2025) stated that An Garda Síochána violated both its own policies and international human rights law in its policing of a protest through the use of violence (via batons), pepper spray and ‘significant force’. The United Kingdom (UK) government proscribed the group Palestine Action as a terrorist group following members of the group breaking into a Royal Airforce Base and spray-painting an airplane (Rooney, 2025). The proscription was criticised by multiple groups (including, privately by MI6) and resulted in large-scale peaceful protests across the UK where thousands were arrested on terrorism charges for holding signs in support of Palestine Action (Weizman & Browne, 2025). It was argued that the use of this act and level of force by the British government reflected the fact that Palestine Action demonstrated the UK’s complicity in genocide (ibid.). It prompted worldwide attention, including in Ireland. This ranged from Irish author Sally Rooney stating she would donate the royalties from BBC adaptations of her work to support Palestine Action (Rooney, 2025) to Dáil debates where the issue was referenced in a discussion on The Criminal Justice (Terrorist Offences) (Amendment) Bill 2025 with opposition TDs stating that the bill resembled the UK’s approach, whereas Minister Jim O’Callaghan argued this was not the case with the Irish legislation focusing only on inciting someone to commit a terrorist activity (Dáil Éireann, 2025). Lastly, there were parallels drawn with how the UK chose to enforce this legislation in Northern Ireland with the point being made that an Ulster Volunteer Force mural re-erected in Northern Ireland did not receive the same level of arrests, despite the fact that the Ulster Volunteer Force is also a proscribed organisation (Rooney, 2025).

United States of America–Ireland relations

Upon coming into office, US President Donald Trump indicated, then formally announced, a range of tariffs on international trading partners in 2025. The potential for tariffs to be levied against the European Union (EU) prompted Ireland to call for a unified

approach and to avoid escalating the situation, as Ireland would be acutely impacted by US tariffs (Power, 2025). Despite the impasse, a US–EU trade deal was ultimately agreed in July 2025 averting a trade war however concern remained in Ireland regarding the reliance on tax revenue from US multinationals located in Ireland and the potential for US fiscal policy to reduce this (Murphy, 2026). Grant Thornton (2025) notes that Budget 2026 was in the context of this backdrop of tariffs and geopolitical instability, with Finance Minister Paschal Donohoe stating that ‘uncertainty is the defining feature of the global landscape’. Concerns of an overreliance on corporate tax revenue led to Budget 2026 being more prudent with a long-term focus rather than ‘giveaways’ (ibid.).

Ireland–United Kingdom relations

Improvement was evident in Ireland–UK relations in 2025. The UK general election in 2024 and change to a Labour-led government, was argued to allow for a reset in relations between the two countries following turbulence during Conservative Party rule and Brexit (O’Carroll, 2025). This was signalled by the first (planned to be annual) UK–Ireland summit in March 2025, focusing on areas such as net-zero, economic growth and domestic security (ibid.). While a welcome change in Anglo–Irish relations, some commentators have noted that if Nigel Farage’s Reform Party (currently the most popular party in opinion polls) is successful in the next UK general election, to be held by August 2029, that this would have profound implications for Ireland, possibly requiring a re-negotiation of the Good Friday Agreement (Gillespie, 2025). The reason for this is that Farage wishes to withdraw the UK from the European Convention on Human Rights, which prohibits expelling immigrants (ibid.).

Housing

The government launched a new housing plan entitled *Delivering Homes, Building Communities* in November 2025 (Government of Ireland, 2025b). There was a strong focus on meeting the goal of 300,000 new homes by 2030 by pursuing private investment into housing and a reform of rent pressure zones (Coyne, 2025a). The plan itself, when launched, received a mixed reception. Certain industry groups welcomed the plan, noting in particular the changes

around planning regulations, however, a number of academics noted that it did not reflect any substantive change in approach (MacRedmond, 2025). Analysis by the Department of Finance projected that the housing crisis would not end for fifteen years owing to under-delivery on building and pent-up housing demand (Burke-Kennedy, 2025).

One additional action proposed by government in this area was to appoint the Chief Executive Officer of the National Asset Management Agency, Brendan McDonagh, as the so-called ‘Housing Tsar’ to lead the new Housing Activation Office; however, McDonagh decided not to take up the role after public comment that he would retain his National Asset Management Agency salary (Coyne, 2025a).

Migration

Immigration attained a heightened political focus in 2025, with Jim O’Callaghan, TD, as Minister for (the newly named) Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration placing an ‘increased, visible focus’ on deportation flights, with 2025 having the highest number of deportations in twenty years (Coyne, 2025a). Opposition to migration has been a growing feature of Irish political life, perhaps most notably seen with the Dublin riots of 2023 (Finn, M., 2024); however, in 2025, it arguably became more politically prominent, including criticism for certain remarks made by politicians. For example, Tánaiste Simon Harris was criticised by the head of the Irish Refugee Council among others for claiming the number of migrants and asylum seekers was too high; the comments came in late 2025 following an arson attack on an International Protection Accommodation Services centre in Drogheda, Co. Louth (Dalton, 2025). Harris claimed that criticism of the comments amounted to an attempt by those on the left to ‘shut down’ discussion (ibid.). Similarly, O’Callaghan was criticised for ‘victim blaming’ when claiming that asylum seeker numbers posed a threat to social cohesion (Sloane, 2025). In terms of actual levels of migration, the European Migration Network (2025) notes that, using Central Statistics Office data, there was a 16 per cent decrease in migration from 2024 to 2025, coupled with an increase in emigration since 2020. The highest level of net migration and immigration into Ireland was in 2007 (European Migration Network, 2025). The Department of Finance also noted in its report on housing that Ireland’s aging population presented a future threat to the economy, emphasising the importance of migration (MacRedmond, 2025).

Defence

In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Ireland was criticised for its defence spending being lower than the EU average (Finn, M., 2023). This push has continued in 2025, with many EU leaders advocating for increased spending on defence at a unified EU level in response to a potential threat from Russia (Power, 2025). This is seen in the wider context of a changing world order, in particular around US relations. While Irish neutrality remains largely supported by the public (Bresnihan, Brodie & Rowan, 2026), the wider remilitarisation of Europe has been debated extensively. For example, the Tánaiste stated that Ireland would need to ‘ramp up’ defence spending owing to the world being ‘very uncertain’ specifically doubling the current level of spending (Wilson, 2025). This would allow for Ireland to reach level 3 of the three levels of ambition set out in 2022 by the Commission on the Defence Forces that is ‘Developing full spectrum defence capabilities to protect Ireland and its people to an extent comparable to similar sized countries in Europe’ (ibid.). The issue of cybersecurity was also raised; Johnny Ryan (2025) argues that European defences are vulnerable as technology companies (largely US-based) are currently hosting content that increases political extremism, including that which undermines democratic principles. Ireland was specifically mentioned here with criticism coming from Europe that Ireland does not sufficiently regulate these companies, which are often based in Ireland (ibid.). Minister Jack Chambers, while not supporting Harris’s call for doubling of spending, did state support for increased cyber capability in the area of defence (Wilson, 2025). Lastly, Bresnihan, Brodie and Rowan (2026) argue that a push on remilitarisation of Europe has a foreign direct investment implication for Ireland with companies having infrastructure in Ireland that Ireland benefits from but does not pay to defend.

Opinion polls

Opinion polls remained relatively consistent across 2025. Fianna Fáil held the lead position followed by Fine Gael, followed by Sinn Féin as the year began at 23 per cent, 21 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively. Sinn Féin however eclipsed both parties to the most popular party in the country from April to the end of the year at 23 per cent. Conversely, both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael ended the year on 18 per cent each. Of the smaller parties, the Social Democrats were consistently the most popular party ending the year on 8 per cent,

followed by Independent Ireland (5 per cent), Labour (4 per cent), Aontú (4 per cent), The Green Party (3 per cent) and People Before Profit (2 per cent) (Politico, 2026). In October 2025, an *Irish Times*/Ipsos B&A poll saw a fall in the satisfaction rating for Micheál Martin following the withdrawal of Jim Gavin from the presidential race alongside a fall in Simon Harris's support with Mary Lou McDonald being the most popular party leader at 39 per cent. The majority of voters also did not believe the state was 'generally moving in the right direction' at 55 per cent (Finn, S., 2025).

Other significant political events

Death of Pope Francis

On 21 April, Easter Monday, Pope Francis died aged 88. His death was met with condolences from Irish leaders, including President Michael D. Higgins and Taoiseach Micháel Martin. Similar messages of condolences were expressed by party leaders in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, with Northern Ireland First Minister Michelle O'Neill praising Francis's marking of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, compassion on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues, and speaking out against 'right wing extremism' and 'the Israeli war in Gaza'. Democratic Unionist Party Leader Gavin Robinson noted that while the unionist community hold different theological views that it was important to recognise 'the profound respect and admiration' that many held for the late Pope (Wood, 2025).

Following the papal conclave, Pope Leo XIV was elected in May 2025 both the first American and first member of the Augustinian order to hold the role. The initial months of the papacy were contrasted to the approach of his predecessor noting that while they shared 'similar progressive political views' that Leo has restored certain Vatican traditions such as living in the Apostolic Palace. He has made an impact on geopolitics, meeting twice with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and offering to host Russia-Ukraine peace talks. Additionally, he has condemned the 'barbarity' of Israel's war in Gaza along with Israel's 'indiscriminate use of force' (Giuffrida, 2025).

Irish language

The year 2025 was noted as a year of continuation of the 'cultural momentum'. Building upon the increase in Irish speakers according to

census data and the majority of residents wishing to speak more Irish day-to-day (McCarron, 2025). This was exemplified during the presidential election with commentators noting President Michael D. Higgins's use of the role to promote the language and discussion of the candidates' abilities to speak Irish in the context of survey results showing support for promotion of the language among the public (Murphy, 2025). Carroll (2025) noted that President Catherine Connolly's fluency in Irish, compared to her opponent Heather Humphreys, bolstered Connolly's appeal and built upon an recent revival of the language. Following her election, it was announced that Connolly would use Irish as the official working language of Áras an Uachtaráin (Deloy, 2025).

Further examples of the increased use of the language in 2025 included the UK ambassador to Ireland Kara Owen introducing herself in a bilingual video, the success of films such as *An Cailín Ciúin*, the rap group Kneecap (ibid.) and new Irish Language Policy from Belfast City Council, which created provisions for the use of the Irish language across services, signage and communications (Conradh na Gaeilge, 2025). It has been argued by activists however that to maintain the momentum, further supports are needed from government (McCarron, 2025).

Data Protection Commission

The Department of Social Protection was fined €550,000 by the Data Protection Commission following an inquiry commencing in 2021 about the department's use of biometric facial templates and the use of facial matching technology as part of the public services card registration process. Specifically, it was found that the department breached data protection regulations for not identifying a valid lawful basis for the collection and retention of biometric data (O'Brien, 2025). The department was ordered to cease collection of such data by March 2026 unless a lawful basis could be found (Walsh, 2025). The Irish Council for Civil Liberties welcomed the decision but stated it came 'too late' and that the data currently held should be deleted (ibid.).

Cabinet reshuffle

Following the 'surprise' resignation of Finance Minister Paschal Donohoe to take a job at the World Bank, there was a cabinet reshuffle in November 2025 (Finn, C., 2025b). Tánaiste Simon Harris became Minister for Finance with Helen McEntee succeeding Harris

as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade. Hildegard Naughton was promoted to succeed McEntee as Minister for Education and Youth (ibid.).

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