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Freedom House (Author)

Freedom in the World 2024 - Ireland

FREE

97

/ 100

Political Rights 39 / 40

Civil Liberties 58 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

97 / 100 Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Overview

Ireland is a stable democracy in which political rights and civil liberties are respected and defended. There is some limited societal discrimination, especially against the traditionally nomadic Irish Travellers. Corruption scandals have plagued the police force, and domestic violence remains a problem.

Key Developments in 2023

- Following the November stabbing of three children and a school worker by an assailant believed to be an immigrant, violent anti-immigration riots erupted in Dublin City Centre.
- New hate crime legislation reached its final stages of approval in the Irish parliament. The bill has faced criticism from some advocates for potentially undermining free speech, but the government has defended it as a necessary safeguard for people associated with "protected characteristics."
- In August, the newly established Electoral Commission published a constituency review report based on new census numbers; it

recommends increasing the size of the House of Representatives (Dáil Éireann) and the addition of new constituencies.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 4 / 4

The Taoiseach, or prime minister, is nominated by the Dáil Éireann and formally appointed by the president. Thus, the legitimacy of the prime minister is largely dependent on the conduct of Dáil elections, which historically have been free and fair. As agreed in the 2020 Programme for Government by the parties in the governing coalition—Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and the Green Party—Leo Varadkar of Fine Gael took over as Taoiseach from Micheál Martin of Fianna Fáil in December 2022.

The president is elected to up to two seven-year terms, and as chief of state has mostly ceremonial duties. Michael D. Higgins was reelected in 2018. Voting in presidential elections has historically been free and fair.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 4 / 4

The Dáil's 160 members are elected in multimember districts through a proportional representation system, and their terms last five years. Following the publication of new census figures, the newly established Electoral Commission published a constituency review report in August. Due to an increase in Ireland's population, it recommends increasing the number of Dáil members to 174, and the number of constituencies to 43, from 39.

The Senate (Seanad Éireann), Ireland's upper house of parliament, contains 60 seats; 43 members are indirectly chosen through an electoral college, while 11 are selected by the Taoiseach and 6 are selected from constituencies that represent two higher education institutions. In March, the Supreme Court found that limiting voting for those seats to graduates of only two universities was unconstitutional and that the franchise must be expanded beyond those institutions. The Seanad has limited legislative capabilities: it can introduce, debate and amend legislation, but cannot veto.

The February 2020 Dáil election saw no major irregularities or unequal campaigning.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 4 / 4

Ireland's electoral framework is strong and government bodies hold credible polls. In July 2022, the government enacted the Electoral Reform Act 2022, which established a long-awaited independent Electoral Commission. However, parts of the Electoral Reform Act concerning the regulation of online campaigning have not been enacted yet, following concerns raised by the European Commission as well as by tech companies.

Ireland frequently holds referendums, especially on European Union (EU) treaties.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 4 / 4

Political parties in Ireland are free to form and compete. Among the main parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael do not differ widely in ideology, despite their long history as rivals; they represent the successors of opposing sides in the nation's 1922–23 civil war. Other key parties include Sinn Féin—a left-wing republican party that leads the opposition—the Labour Party, and the Green Party.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 4 / 4

Opposition parties generally do not encounter restrictions or harassment that affects their ability to gain power through elections, and most of the main parties have been part of government at some point in the history of the state.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 4 / 4

People's political choices are generally free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, and other powerful groups.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 4 / 4

Women are underrepresented, holding 23.1 percent of the Dáil's seats. Women are visible in electoral politics, however, with Sinn Féin, The Labour Party, and the Social Democrats all having female leaders.

Taoiseach Varadkar is gay and the son of an Indian immigrant.

While ethnic minority and marginalized groups are generally free to participate in politics, Irish Travellers and Roma have little representation. Travellers were formally recognized as an Indigenous ethnic group in 2017, the same year a National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS) was launched.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 4 / 4

Elected officials freely determine government policy.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 3 / 4

Ireland has a recent history of problems with political corruption but has introduced anticorruption legislation in recent years. The Criminal Justice (Corruption Offences) Act 2018 modernized and consolidated existing anticorruption laws, though critics claimed that the legislation did not adequately address bribery.

Scandals involving Ireland's police force, An Garda Síochána, have raised concerns about a lack of safeguards against police corruption.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 4 / 4

The public has broad access to official information under the 2014 Freedom of Information (FOI) Act, though partial exemptions remain for the police and some other agencies. A comprehensive review of FOI legislation was announced in 2021 but the draft report on the review had yet to be published at end of 2023.

The government has been criticized for failing to consult meaningfully with civil society groups and relevant stakeholders in policy formulation, particularly regarding the Roma, Travellers, and people living with disabilities. In March, the government published its first National Action Plan against Racism, which includes proposals to support political participation and representation of ethnic minorities.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 4 / 4

Irish media are free and independent, and present a variety of viewpoints. However, the media sector is highly concentrated, with one company—Independent News and Media—controlling much of the newspaper market.

In March 2023, the Justice Minister published the general scheme of the Defamation (Amendment) Bill, which would significantly reform the much-criticized 2009 Defamation Act.

Sinn Féin continues to receive criticism by rival parties for the strategic use of defamation cases against broadcast outlets to quash negative press.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 4 / 4

Freedom of religion is constitutionally guaranteed. Although religious oaths are still required from senior public officials, there is no state religion, and adherents of other faiths face few impediments to religious expression. In recent years, the Roman Catholic Church has notably declined in the public eye, following a series of sexual abuse and other scandals involving the Church and its clergy.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 4 / 4

Academic freedom is respected and protected under the Universities Act (1997). The Roman Catholic Church operates approximately 90 percent of Ireland's schools, most of which include religious education from which parents may exempt their children. The constitution requires equal funding for schools run by different denominations.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 4 / 4

There are no significant impediments to open and free private discussion, including in personal online communications. New hate crime legislation was being debated in the parliament in 2023, and has been criticized by some for potentially undermining free speech through the breadth of its provisions. The government has defended it as a necessary safeguard for people associated with protected characteristics.

Ireland's national identity card, the Public Services Card (PSC), has elicited

controversy due to data storage and privacy concerns.

In December, the government published draft legislation allowing for the use of facial recognition technology by An Garda Síochána, a move that has been criticized by the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, among other groups, for its potential threats to privacy and free association.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 4 / 4

The right to assemble freely is respected, and peaceful demonstrations are held each year.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 4 / 4

Freedom of association is upheld, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) can operate freely.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 4 / 4

Labor unions operate without hindrance, and collective bargaining is legal and unrestricted.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 4 / 4

Ireland has a generally independent judiciary and a legal system based on common law. The Judicial Council, a body which promotes judicial excellence, good conduct, and judicial independence, began operating in 2020.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 4 / 4

Due process generally prevails in civil and criminal matters. However, the police force has been affected by repeated corruption scandals in recent years.

A Special Criminal Court (SCC) has functioned since 1972 to hear cases related to paramilitary violence committed during the Northern Ireland Troubles. The SCC does not employ a jury and can consider secret evidence. In June, a government-appointed review into the Offences

Against the States Act, which underpins the SCC, recommended that the act be abolished but that the SCC be retained with significant reforms.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 3 / 4

Irish prisons and detention facilities are frequently dangerous, unsanitary, overcrowded, and ill-equipped for prisoners with mental illness. Concerns over prison overcrowding persisted in 2023.

A series of official inquiries in recent years have detailed decades of past physical, sexual, and emotional abuse—including forced labor—of women and children in state institutions and by Catholic priests and nuns from the early 20th century until 1996, as well as collusion to hide the abuse.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 3 / 4

In November 2023, violent anti-immigration protests took place in Dublin following the stabbing of three children and a staff member outside a school by an assailant rumored to be an immigrant.

The government proposed much-anticipated new hate crime legislation in April 2021, which was working its way through parliament at the end of 2023.

A 2020 survey of Gardaí (police officers) revealed that not a single respondent had a favorable view of the Traveller community, and a study released in 2022 alleged institutional racism against Travellers within the force. The National Action Plan on Racism released in March 2023 includes plans to “eliminate” racial profiling by Gardaí as a priority measure.

An EU report found that racism against Black people in Ireland is above average for countries surveyed and has increased markedly since 2016.

People with disabilities face housing issues, are persistently institutionalized, and have suffered a severe reduction of social benefits in recent years.

Irish law prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation, but some social stigma against LGBT+ people persists. Several alleged hate crimes against members of the LGBT+ community have taken place in recent years.

The asylum application process is complex, and asylum seekers can be housed for lengthy periods in poor living conditions in a system known as Direct Provision. In February 2021, the government published a white

paper on replacing Direct Provision with a new model by the end of 2023. However, progress has slowed and the government indicated in October 2023 that the reform process will extend beyond 2024.

The 2015 International Protection Law expedites asylum procedures but focuses on enabling deportations rather than identifying and processing cases. In April 2023, the High Court ruled that the state had breached EU law and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights by failing to provide accommodation to a 17-year-old Afghan asylum seeker who had been left homeless for several weeks after arriving in Ireland.

Discrimination in the workplace on the basis of gender is illegal, though there is still a substantial gender pay gap.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 4 / 4

There are ordinarily no restrictions on travel or the ability to change one's place of residence, employment, or education.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 4 / 4

Private businesses are free to operate, and property rights are generally respected.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 4 / 4

Individuals in Ireland have gained expanded social freedoms in recent years. In a 2015 referendum, voters extended marriage rights to same-sex couples. That same year, the Children and Family Relationships Act extended adoption rights to same-sex and cohabiting heterosexual couples, and the Gender Recognition Act allowed transgender individuals to obtain legal recognition without medical or state intervention, and—for married transgender people—without divorcing. In a 2018 referendum, voters abolished a constitutional amendment that made nearly all abortions illegal, and health providers began performing abortions in 2019. However, a government-ordered review released in April 2023 recommended significant changes to the country's abortion care infrastructure to address persistent problems.

Ireland enacted the Domestic Violence Act 2018, which criminalized forms of emotional and psychological abuse. However, domestic and sexual

violence against women remain serious problems, and marginalized and immigrant women have particular difficulty accessing support. A bill aimed at strengthening laws on sexual offenses was introduced in July 2023.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 4 / 4

People generally enjoy equality of opportunity. Workers have rights and protections under employment legislation. Although the government works to combat human trafficking and protect victims, undocumented migrant workers remain at risk of trafficking and labor exploitation.

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