

General information

Irish politics is in many ways unique, with names, practices and structures that will be new to many of you starting your journey in Trinity. With that in mind, this guide will hopefully be a helpful introductory tool so you can follow politics in Ireland as we approach a general election during this academic year.

Institutions

Ireland's parliament, the Oireachtas, has two houses, the Seanad (Senate) and the more powerful, directly elected lower house, Dáil Éireann, which we'll focus our attention on. Members of the Dáil are known as TDs. The President of Ireland is Michael D. Higgins, in his second and final term having been in office since 2011. The President is a mainly ceremonial position, power mainly lies with the Taoiseach (equivalent to Prime Minister). The next presidential election is due for 2025.

Elections

Ireland uses Proportional Representation by Single Transferable Vote (PR-STV) for all elections. It's complicated but essentially, voters rank the candidates on their ballot for local constituencies where multiple TDs will be elected. This gives Irish elections a significant local element while keeping the nationwide results mostly proportional. The only other parliaments elected with this system are Northern Ireland and Malta.

Name: Ireland in English, Éire in Gaelic, Airlann in Ulster-Scots
Government: The Republic of Ireland is a parliamentary democracy with a written constitution (1937)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- President: Michael D. Higgins (elected by popular vote; holds mostly ceremonial powers)- Taoiseach (pronounce Tee Shock): Leo Varadkar and Micheál Martin (they will rotate as agreed by the coalition in power)
Legislature: Oireachtas = the 2 houses + the President <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Upper house: Seanad Éireann- Lower house: Dáil Éireann
26 counties in the Republic (+ 6 counties in Northern Ireland)
Provinces of Ireland: Since the early 17th century, there have been four provinces of Ireland: Connacht (west), Leinster (east), Munster (south), and Ulster (north).
Capital and largest city: Dublin (1.9m)
Population: 5.15m (+ Northern Ireland: 1.8m)
Official Languages: English is the common language, but Irish Gaelic (<i>aka</i> Irish) is also an official language and is taught in schools.
Religions: Catholics: 78%; Protestants: 4%; None 10%; Others 8%
GDP: Before the crisis Ireland had a very high GDP per capita (4 th in the world)
Currency: the Euro (EUR - €)

Parties

The largest party is currently Fianna Fáil. They've historically dominated Irish politics, being the largest party after every single election from 1932 until their historic third place in 2011, due to backlash after the 2008 economic crisis. Their leader has been the current Tánaiste (Deputy Prime Minister) Micheál Martin ever since then. A Christian democrat-esque centre-right party, they are part of the current coalition government.

Fine Gael are traditionally the second-largest party, and have been in every government since 2011, being the other major partner of the current coalition. While every government in history has been led by one of the two, this is the first time that they have been in government together. Unlike most other countries, there is no clear left-right divide between the two, with Fine Gael also being centre-right ideologically. Although Fine Gael have generally been more socially liberal, from supporting legal contraception in 1985 to abortion in 2018, many would view the parties as lacking meaningful differences today. Fine Gael is led by current Taoiseach Simon Harris, who became the youngest ever to hold the office in April of this year.

The largest opposition party is Sinn Féin. They are an all-island party, and the largest in Northern Ireland, primarily focused on Irish unity. Usually positioned on the political left, Sinn Féin's historic associations with the IRA are a source of controversy, but under their current leader Mary Lou McDonald, who took over in 2018 from Gerry Adams (leader since 1983), the party has worked to broaden their appeal and has risen to a level of support to rival to the historically dominant Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil.

The third party in government is the Greens, who achieved their best result of 12 seats in 2020. Since going into government after that, they have lost a lot of their support and face the risk of being wiped out at the next election. Their long-time leader Eamon Ryan stood down in June, being replaced by Roderic O'Gorman.

The oldest party in the Dáil is Labour, founded in 1912 and historically Ireland's third-largest party. In 2011 they achieved their best ever result of 37 seats and formed a government with Fine Gael. The austerity measures implemented to combat the recession resulted in them losing many of their voters and they collapsed to 7 seats in 2016. They have 7 TDs, though one was recently elected to the European Parliament and will vacate their seat. They are a centre-left party currently led by Ivana Bacik.

There are a number of relatively newer parties in the Dáil. People Before Profit and Solidarity, founded in 2006 and 2014 respectively, are socialist parties in an alliance, with a combined 5 seats. The Social Democrats, led by Holly Cairns, were founded in 2015 in a split from Labour, and have enjoyed a respectable increase in support, becoming the largest party in Dublin City Council at the recent local elections. Aontú were founded by Peadar Kirby in 2019, after he left Sinn Féin because of their pro-choice stance; they are considered to be socially conservative and fiscally liberal. Right to Change is another minor left wing party, currently with 1 seat. Finally, Independent Ireland was founded in 2023. Led by Michael Collins, they are a conservative party with a focus on rural issues. There are many parties without Dáil representation, including multiple far right ones.

No discussion of Irish politics would be complete without mentioning independent politicians. There are 19 TDs elected as independents in the Dáil – more than in every other EU national parliament combined. Independents have been a mainstay in Irish politics since independence and have propped up many minority governments in the past, even being part of government on occasions (including 2016-2020). They come from all ideological and geographic backgrounds, from left-wingers like Catherine Connolly to rural conservatives like Michael Healy-Rae.

The Famine Memorial - a poignant must-see in Dublin

Jun 13, 2025

Top on the list of tourist attractions for many Americans visiting Dublin is the Famine Memorial near the Custom House, a heartbreaking and poignant work that reflects the most tragic period in Irish history that changed the country forever.

But what exactly is the Famine Memorial in Dublin?
We look at the story and history behind it and why it's so important.



What is the Famine Memorial in Dublin, Ireland?

The Famine Memorial in Dublin Ireland is a collection of statues designed and crafted by Dublin sculptor Rowan Gillespie and presented to the city of Dublin in 1997. The statues depict the starving Irish people walking towards ships to bring them overseas to escape the hunger and poverty of the Irish famine; the women, men, and children shown in the memorial as skeletal figures wearing nothing more than rags. "Famine" (1997) was commissioned by Norma Smurfit and is a commemorative work dedicated to those Irish people forced to emigrate during the 19th-century Irish Famine.

What is the Famine Memorial in Dublin's history?

In 1840s Ireland, many of the country's poor population had come to rely on the potato in their diet. In 1845, however, a late blight caused by the water mold *Phytophthora infestans* is believed to have been accidentally imported from North America and began to appear throughout the country's potato crops. The first year only saw partial crop failure but the returning blight from 1846 to 1849 resulted in the nation's potato crops being almost completely destroyed. With the potato crop destroyed, the Irish suffered years of mismanagement and mistreatment from their colonial power, England, which saw other food products shipped off the island while the people there remained starving. Little else was done to protect the Irish people from hunger and as a result, a million and a half people died and a further million emigrated from the country. The lack of aid from the British during this time has led some to question whether it can, in fact, be called a famine, although many of the main historians specializing in the area continue to call the dark period of Irish history "the Irish famine" or "the Great Hunger." In an attempt to commemorate a tragic event that changed Ireland forever, memorials such as this one in Dublin have been established around the world, often depicting Irish figures traveling toward emigration or the ship that carried them there.

FX's 'Say Nothing' Is a Moving, Empathetic Assessment of the Troubles: TV Review

Nov 14, 2024

By Alison Herman

The 30-year conflict known as the Troubles is frequently cited as a useful, and potentially hopeful, analogy to the entrenched hostilities in Israel-Palestine. That makes the FX limited series “Say Nothing,” a scripted adaptation of journalist Patrick Radden Keefe’s nonfiction account published in 2018, queasily well-timed. More than a year into the latest war in the Middle East with no end in sight, “Say Nothing” is a tragic, empathetic, evenhanded study in a similarly self-perpetuating cycle of violence from recent history — and the trade-offs required to bring it to a close.

Created by Joshua Zetumer (“Patriots Day”), the nine-episode “Say Nothing” is largely faithful to Keefe’s reporting, which used the disappearance and murder of single mother Jean McConville (Judith Roddy) to examine the Troubles’ human cost in Northern Ireland, a territory once bitterly contested between members of the Irish Republican Army and English authorities allied with the area’s Protestant majority. (Catholics were a persecuted minority within Northern Ireland subject to widespread discrimination, while Protestants felt threatened by the prospect of unification, which could put them in the same position.) But because McConville is absent from the story and her 10 children were still young at the time, the active drivers of the narrative and de facto protagonists of “Say Nothing” are the IRA fighters themselves, particularly real-life figures Brendan Hughes (Anthony Boyle) and Dolours Price (Lola Petticrew).

<https://variety.com/2024/tv/tv-reviews/say-nothing-review-fx-the-troubles-1236201749/>

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notes!**

SCAN ME



Easter parades held to commemorate 1916 rising

20 April 2025, Finn Purdy and Bernie Allen, BBC News NI

Events and parades have been held across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to commemorate the Easter Rising.

The 1916 rebellion was an attempt to overthrow British rule in Ireland and has been credited by many historians as paving the way towards an independent Irish republic.

In Dublin, the Irish President Michael D Higgins laid a wreath outside the General Post Office (GPO) to commemorate those who died in the rebellion before a minute's silence was observed.

In Belfast a large crowd gathered for a parade along the Falls Road.

The Sinn Féin leader told those gathered that they must prepare for Irish unity.

Speaking ahead of the event, President Higgins said the men and women who participated in the 1916 Rising were "inspired by the declaration of a Republic, and the dream of a better, fairer future".

"The Proclamation of the Republic, which Patrick Pearse read out from under the portico of the GPO, offers elements of a generous social and political vision that can still inspire us," he said.

At Sunday's event, the 1916 Proclamation of Independence was read by Captain Conor Gibbons from the Defence Forces HQ in Kildare.

In the Belfast parade, some observers placed wreaths while others carried portraits of some of those involved in the Rising. A flute band played as part of the procession.

What was the Easter Rising?

The Easter Rising was a rebellion designed to overthrow British rule in Ireland. It was organised and carried out by members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the Irish Citizen Army, and Cumann na mBan, or the 'League of Women'. Shortly after noon on Easter Monday 1916, Pádraig Pearse accompanied by an armed guard, stood on the steps of the GPO and read a proclamation declaring the establishment of an Irish republic, signalling the beginning of the Easter Rising. The conflict that followed was largely confined to Dublin. The Easter Rising was quelled within six days by British troops, but despite its failure it is seen as a significant stepping stone to the eventual creation of the Republic of Ireland¹ and the partition of Ireland. More than 450 people were killed and 2,500 injured during the fighting. In the aftermath of their surrender to British troops in 1916, 14 rebel leaders were executed by firing squad in the stonebreakers' yard at Kilmainham Gaol. Two other rebel leaders were executed elsewhere - Thomas Kent was shot dead by firing squad in Cork and Roger Casement was hanged at Pentonville Gaol in London. The manner of their deaths is seen by many historians as instrumental in changing public opinion in Ireland in 1916 - which was initially hostile to the rebellion - into sympathy and support for the republican push for independence.

¹ Stages of Independence from the United Kingdom

- Proclamation: 24 April 1916
- Declaration: 21 January 1919
- Anglo-Irish Treaty: 6 December 1921 (The Irish Free State)
- Republic Act: 18 April 1949 (The Republic of Ireland)
- Joined the EEC: 1 January 1973



The third Home Rule² bill was passed in 1914 but immediately suspended because of WWI. The movement started in 1870.

What was the Anglo-Irish Treaty? 6 December 2021, Luke Sproule

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-59460774>

Exactly 100 years ago, after months of negotiations, the British and Irish delegates gathered in the cabinet room of 10 Downing Street in the early hours of the morning and signed the Anglo-Irish Treaty. The document allowed for the creation of an independent Irish Free State within the British Empire, with King George V as its head of state. It also confirmed the partition of the island of Ireland and allowed Northern Ireland to remain in existence if its parliament chose. The treaty was highly controversial and ultimately led to civil war in Ireland between those who supported it and those who opposed it, a war the pro-treaty side eventually won. So what was contained in the treaty?

A new Irish state The very first clause in the treaty said Ireland would become known as the Irish Free State and would have the same constitutional status within the British Empire as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa. Those countries, known as dominions, had a high level of independence from Britain, but were not fully independent countries as they are today. The Free State's parliament would have powers "to make laws for the peace, order and good government of Ireland and an executive responsible to that parliament". Crucially, however, Northern Ireland - which came into existence in May 1921 - would have the option to opt out of this new state, which it ultimately did. This meant the Free State ended up consisting of 26, not 32, counties.

An oath to the King This was one of the most controversial aspects of the treaty and many Irish republicans refused to accept it. The Irish Free State's head of state would be King George V and members of the new country's parliament would have to swear an oath of allegiance to the constitution and fidelity to the king.

Northern Ireland's opt-out Ireland had been partitioned into two entities - Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland - when the Government of Ireland Act came into effect in May 1921. The treaty theoretically applied to both parts of the island, but stated that the powers of the parliament and government of the new Free State would not be applicable in Northern Ireland until one month after the acts of parliament needed to ratify the treaty had been passed. The treaty also said that before this month had passed the Parliament of Northern Ireland could present an address to the King asking that Northern Ireland be allowed to permanently opt out. The Parliament of Northern Ireland did just this in December 1922.

² a political arrangement in which a part of a country governs itself independently of the central government of the country