

# Irish Voters Rebuff Their Political Establishment



A woman arrives at a polling station for a referendum on changes to the Irish constitution called the Family Amendment and the Care Amendment, in Dublin, Ireland, March 8, 2024. (Clodagh Kilcoyne/Reuters)

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## A majority of Irish voters rejected two referendums.

**L**AST weekend, the Irish government suffered an unforeseen and humiliating defeat by its electorate. The two amendments to the Irish constitution that it had proposed were rejected by large majorities in both referendums. To paraphrase Lady Bracknell from Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, "To lose one referendum may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness."

However, it was not only the three parties in Ireland's coalition government that got these issues spectacularly wrong. It was the whole political establishment, supported by a small army of state-funded NGOs.

The two propositions were relatively straightforward. One sought to extend the definition of the family beyond those in conventional marriages to include anyone in a "durable relationship." The second amendment sought to remove language about a woman's role being in the home with something more progressive.

However, as every country with a written constitution knows, the precise moment that things can get tricky is when lawyers adopt Humpty Dumpty's position: A word means just "what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less."

The woke agenda at the heart of this exercise was spelled out by Taoiseach (prime minister) Leo Varadkar when he said that the "very old-fashioned, very sexist language about women" needed to be removed from the constitution. It would have been straightforward, he conceded, to simply remove the reference to women "in the home" but that wouldn't go far enough: "We want to replace it with something affirmative."

Stunned by the scale of the rejection, one by 67 percent and the other by a staggering 74 percent, a clearly shocked taoiseach and tánaiste (deputy prime minister) were reduced to offering platitudinous statements of the obvious to explain the embarrassing debacle.

The former intoned that it was clear the referendums had been "defeated comprehensively," while the latter said voters "were not persuaded by the arguments for changing the Constitution in this way." However, neither offered any opinion as to why so many voters had remained unconvinced by the proposed constitutional changes.

The 1937 constitution which these referendums sought to modify was the brainchild of the Irish-American statesman Eamon de Valera — in close consultation with John Charles McQuaid, who would become the Catholic archbishop of

Dublin and Ireland's leading cleric. The document they produced reflected the conservative Catholic ethos of its time by prohibiting divorce, recognizing the "special position" of the Catholic Church, and by stipulating that "mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home."

As a founding document, it expressed the new state's pride in having thrown off the shackles of British colonial rule, meanwhile celebrating its newfound freedom with a distinctly Irish identity.

Ten years after the U.S. Supreme Court issued its landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision protecting a woman's constitutional right to choose abortion, Ireland did the opposite. In 1983, following a highly acrimonious public debate, the eighth amendment to the Irish constitution guaranteeing the right to life of the unborn was approved by 67 percent of voters. It was a cathartic moment that, in retrospect, also marked the high-water mark of conservative Catholic Ireland.

In the two and half decades preceding the millennium, Ireland experienced enormous social, economic, demographic, and political change. A predominantly rural, agricultural society had been transformed into an urban one with a modern manufacturing and services-based economy. A 30-year terror campaign of murder and mayhem by the Provisional Irish Republican Army had finally ended with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

By the early decades of the new century, a plethora of legislative and constitutional social reforms were enacted. In 2018, 35 years after it had been passed, Ireland's eighth amendment to the constitution guaranteeing the life of the unborn was removed in a referendum by 67 percent of voters — the same majority that had originally passed it.

For many, Ireland had come of age as a modern state and society. Yet despite the tumultuous reforms that had taken place, under the influence of the culture wars then in full swing, there was still some unfinished business. The tone, tenor, and intent of the subsequent referendum amendments can be gauged by a parliamentary report by the Gender Equality Committee and placed before the Dail (lower house of parliament) a year before the vote. It was titled "Unfinished Democracy: Achieving Gender Equality."

Nothing could stay the hand of the coalition government in its determination to prove its progressive bona fides. And what better day to hold the two referendums than on March 8, International Women's Day. A further beneficial political consequence that is unlikely to have escaped the government's notice is the opportunity a victory would have afforded Varadkar a week later on March 17. That's when the Irish taoiseach receives the traditional bowl of shamrock from the U.S. president in the White House on Saint Patrick's Day.

In a society where prohibitions on contraception, divorce, and abortion are now a thing of the past and gender self-identification and same-sex marriage have been legalized, constitutional provisions designed to protect the traditional notions of marriage, the family, and the role of mothers in the home were deemed by the government to be anachronisms from a bygone era.

Voters were asked to remove a reference to marriage as the basis “on which the family is founded” and replace it with a clause that said families could be founded “on marriage or on other durable relationships.” The phrase “durable relationships” immediately opened up a definitional and legal can of worms. When asked, neither the government nor anybody else was able to define what was meant by “durable.” As a result, many voters seem to have adopted the position “when in doubt leave out” and rejected the proposition.

Though workforce-participation rates of women in Ireland are extraordinarily high, the other reality of modern Ireland is that nearly 95 percent of the people who are looking after the home or family are women.

Far from being “sexist,” as the taoiseach (who is unmarried but in a same-sex relationship) argued, the constitutional provision on women in the home is viewed by many as protecting the rights of women who choose that lifestyle. It is not, as its critics have argued, designed to “chain women to the kitchen sink.” On the contrary, a majority of citizens, both men and women, saw this referendum as an attempt by the government to abolish the uniquely Irish constitutional rights of motherhood, and they did not like it.

The referendums may have enjoyed the support of Ireland’s political, cultural, and media elites, but this attempt of what many saw as an attempt to embed woke values in the Irish constitution has backfired. The scale of the rejection indicates the extent to which those elites are out of touch with the Irish people.

We have witnessed a similar phenomenon of elite disconnect in the U.S. and throughout Europe. For the last decade in Europe, populist parties of both right and left have been surging in the polls. The latest example was last Sunday’s Portuguese election, in which the right-wing populist party Chega — founded five years ago — quadrupled its parliamentary representation from twelve to 48, thereby becoming the third-largest party.

With elections to the European Parliament just a few months away, a further shock awaits Europe’s ruling elites. They are about to learn something that Lady Bracknell knew instinctively: In politics as in life, the distance between carelessness and misfortune can be very short.