

**From Global Power to Political Paralysis:**  
How Ireland Can Help the Sick Man of Democracy

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Comparative Case Study of National Governments

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## INTRODUCTION

The Age of Enlightenment triggered the Age of Revolution, which traded absolute monarchy for democracy. In the three centuries since one or the other, more than half of the globe has adopted a form of democracy. While democracies share common fundamentals, the system of governance allows quite a bit of customization. Comparative study and research of different national governments evidence this well. Analysis can also deliver a critique to illuminate areas for improvement and best practices. This essay will consider the governments of the United States (US) and the Republic of Ireland to compare and contrast them.

As the age of technology made way for infotainment and disinformation, it is arguable whether the education system has delivered adequate relief or mitigation. In some part due to this atmosphere, the foundation of democracy as a global norm may be in jeopardy, a suggestion that is recurrent in contemporary political discourse. The United States is generally regarded as the oldest continuous democracy.<sup>1</sup> That designation is pertinent when considering whether the US is a deteriorating hegemon. For the sake of this research, it is. Comparing the US Electoral College and winner-take-all plurality voting to Ireland's system of parliamentary proportional representation (PR) through single transferable vote (STV) might construct a solution to the crisis of democracy evident across the globe.

The world is a collective of interconnected countries that, for better or worse, impact each other in tangible and inevitable ways. The US has been the leader of the liberal world order since the conclusion of World War II. It stands to reason that if the nation abandons her democratic ways, fragile democracies around the globe may too, especially when nationalism is in

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<sup>1</sup> Desjardins, Jeff. "Mapped: The World's Oldest Democracies." World Economic Forum, August 8, 2019. <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2019/08/countries-are-the-worlds-oldest-democracies/>.

resurgence. This essay examines malleable aspects of US political institutions that could be adjusted to counter the degeneration of democracy by drawing insight from the Republic of Ireland's parliamentary democracy, which operates under a system of proportional representation. Through comparative analysis, the research explores how similar systems could address challenges stemming from the United States' expansive geopolitical and multicultural diversity.

### LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC REPUBLICS & FEDERALISM

The governments of the US and Ireland can be identified by all four of the terms in the above section heading. Influenced by factors like hyperpolarization, inadequate education practices, and general disengagement, many American voters are oblivious to the systems and structures that underpin US government and elections. This has been made exceptionally clear through election denial from both sides of the two-party system in the last decade, culminating most profoundly with the storming of the Capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Americans who are unfamiliar with or misappropriate political terminology are likewise easily misguided by them. For example, Republicans and Democrats argue over whether the country is a democracy or a republic. Some far-right ideologues even suggest that democracy is a predecessor to communism. The argument is arbitrary; the US is a constitutional federal republic with democratically elected representatives. It is both, similar to the Republic of Ireland.

Ireland has the word republic in its full name; nonetheless, the nation is a unitary parliamentary republic with a constitution and democratically elected representatives. Both countries are referred to as liberal democracies, and Ireland is additionally a part of the European Union (EU), which is not entirely dissimilar to the US federal system. Ireland is the younger

democracy, having gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1921.<sup>2</sup> There are two dominant parties in Ireland, like the US, but the multi-party system is extremely different in spirit and utility. The most profound trait Ireland lacks is the intense partisan polarity that exists in the US, attributable to its superior party system, leadership model, and electoral structure.

### PARTY POLITICS

Partisanship in the US runs rampant and has instigated historical events such as a sitting vice president's murder of a Founder, a civil war, and physical altercations on the Senate floor. Most recently, party politics have delivered massive uncertainty for the nation's future, particularly in international affairs. The Republic of Ireland descended into civil war just months after gaining independence from the UK. The country's fight for self-determination was kindled by nationalism, and the conservative Fianna Fáil held government for all but a single decade between 1932 and 1977.<sup>2</sup> Why then does the current iteration of nationalism and partisanship in the US seem so volatile in comparison? One supposition is that the two-party system encourages and enables malevolence and escalation. When a polity is voting between the 'lesser of two evils' in a winner-take-all electoral system, the outcome is exponentially worse candidates and division.

That hypothesis is antithetical to archaic academic notions that a two-party system and plurality voting are inherently more cohesive and stable. Political scientists like R.K. Carty and Manus I. Midlarsky revealed the preeminence of multi-party systems and alternative electoral

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<sup>2</sup> Carty, R. K. *Electoral Politics in Ireland: Party and Parish Pump*. Dublin: Brandon Books Publishers Ltd., 1994, 88, 27.

structures in the early 1980s.<sup>3</sup> Juxtaposing the US and Ireland renders the same verdict, as does the examination of other global democracies. The 2023 *Democracy Index* rated the most long-standing democratic nation, the US, at twenty-nine of seventy-four countries, under the designation “Flawed democracy.”<sup>4</sup> Ireland was rated at number seven in the top ten “Full democracy” countries.<sup>4</sup> More germane to the topic, all ten top democracies are multi-party systems, including Taiwan, and several monarchies. Empirical evidence shows that multi-party democracies are quite stable and strong, contrary to the previously established convention. The Economic Intelligence Unit’s (EIU) assessment supports this postulation with data on “electoral process and pluralism, government functionality, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties.”<sup>4</sup>

Carty appropriately referred to Ireland’s structure as a “bipolar multiparty system.”<sup>5</sup> The US and Ireland are alike in the dominance of two parties. In Ireland, that is a matter of preference and competition, but the two-party system in the US is deliberate and excessively restricts the access of minor parties.<sup>6</sup> The two-party system is codified in laws that are based largely on corruption in lobbying and campaign finance. Additionally, the US party system incentivizes career and dynastic politicians, inordinately shielding them from the accountability of their

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<sup>3</sup> Midlarsky, Manus I. “Political Stability of Two-Party and Multiparty Systems: Probabilistic Bases for the Comparison of Party Systems.” *American Political Science Review* 78, no. 4 (December 1984): 929–51. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1955799>.

<sup>4</sup> Rep. *Democracy Index 2023 - Age of Conflict*. London, UK: the Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, 2024, 9, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Carty, *Electoral Politics in Ireland*, 47.

<sup>6</sup> Coll, Joseph, Caroline J. Tolbert, and Michael Ritter. “Understanding Preferences for Comprehensive Electoral Reform in the United States.” *Social Science Quarterly* 103, no. 7 (October 21, 2022): 1523–38. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.13220>, 1524.

constituents.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, Irish politicians engage in a parliamentary party system that *requires* coalition, not only across the aisle, but encompassing multiple parties and public policies.<sup>8</sup>

Both nations exhibit a conservative tendency because their systems developed out of personal and communal societies.<sup>8</sup> Expansive geography and cultural diversity mean that the US is more heavily geopolitical and exploitative of social cleavages.<sup>7</sup> Unlike their American counterparts, Irish representatives have long avoided the politicization of social cleavages, instead generating support based on partisan policy alignment rather than ‘otherness.’<sup>8</sup> The multi-party system displayed in Ireland and other European democracies is reminiscent of the goals espoused in a 1950 American Political Science Association (APSA) report titled, “Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System.”<sup>9</sup>

Articles reviewing the report were more prolific and productive than the original publication, for example, Austin Ranney’s 1954 critique. In the 1970s, Gerald M. Pomper disparaged proponents of multi-party structures but still supported the normative theory of responsible party governance in his conclusion. Responsible party theory comes back every few decades, such as David R. Jones and Monika L. McDermott’s comprehensive nod in 2004.<sup>10</sup> Jones and McDermott’s contemporary framework, viewed through the lens of the recent EIU

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<sup>7</sup> Bagashka, Tanya, and Jennifer Hayes Clark. “Electoral Rules and Legislative Particularism: Evidence from U.S. State Legislatures.” *American Political Science Review* 110, no. 3 (August 2016): 441–56. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055416000228>, 441,442.

<sup>8</sup> Carty, *Electoral Politics in Ireland*, 32, 141, 150.

<sup>9</sup> Pomper, Gerald M. “Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System? What, Again?” *The Journal of Politics* 33, no. 4 (November 1971): 916–40. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2128416>.

<sup>10</sup> Jones, David R., and Monika L. McDermott. “The Responsible Party Government Model in House and Senate Elections.” *American Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 1 (January 2004): 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1519893>.

report and an analysis of Ireland, demonstrates that multi-party systems are more stable and sustainable than the decaying two-party structure of the United States.

### EXECUTIVE AND LEGISLATIVE STRUCTURE

Depending on the scholar, party politics may take center focus, but to American citizen-voters, the most visible and engaging element of government is the president.<sup>11</sup> Theodore Roosevelt popularized the presidential bully pulpit, and Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) joined Americans in their homes via his fireside chats. FDR was also the first president on television, but it was Woodrow Wilson that Jeffrey K. Tulis credited with reinterpreting the Constitution to accommodate his rhetorical presidency.<sup>12</sup> The Founders intentionally overpowered the Legislature because they were supposed to be immediately beholden to the people. Wilson set the precedents that were perpetually expanded since and are currently playing out in the Trump regime's exercise of unilateral executive theory. Wilson was not shy about his preference for a parliamentary system, disdain for the separation of powers, and insistence on being overly involved with legislation. In relation to executive expansion and the media advancement, both the system and the public have adjusted to an overpowered American executive branch.

The Republic of Ireland does have a president who is directly elected by the citizenry and granted powers in the Bunreacht na hÉireann (the Constitution of Ireland).<sup>13</sup> Most functions of the office are contingent on the directive of the bicameral, to include the appointment of the

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<sup>11</sup> Marsh, Michael. "Candidates or Parties? Objects of Electoral Choice in Ireland." *Party Politics* 13, no. 4 (July 2007): 500–527. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068807075944>, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Tulis, Jeffrey K. *The Rhetorical Presidency*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987, 118.

<sup>13</sup> Bunreacht na hÉireann - Constitution of Ireland, July 1, 1937. <https://assets.gov.ie/6523/5d90822b41e94532a63d955ca76fdc72.pdf>.

Taoiseach (Prime Minister). The previous Taoiseach was Leo Varadkar, who sent the country and government into a tailspin with his abrupt resignation. By Varadkar's own admission, his resignation was for reasons parallel to those of Justin Trudeau's in Canada.<sup>14</sup> Donald Trump's re-election serves as a cautionary notice to complacent liberal parties globally; democracy is indeed being challenged, and it is time to fortify. The Taoiseach, like the US President, is the leader of their party, in government and foreign affairs, but the individual is drawn from the Dáil (Ireland's legislature) and additionally maintains a local constituency of twenty to thirty thousand. While the Taoiseach fills more roles, more formally than the US President, the combined powers and duties of the Irish President and Taoiseach are more comparable to the US presidency. This may be hard for an American to imagine because it is tremendously different than the US system. The Taoiseach *is* a legislator; despite the power of his pen, President Trump is not.

This section started where the American public starts, the executive, but it is best to step back and outline the full structures of Ireland's unitary parliamentary republic versus the US constitutional federal republic. The reader should note that starting with the president is not effective for analysis, let alone public understanding. It is also an important reminder that this essay will not breach the depth of Ireland's federalist implications as a member of the EU, but that additional layer exists. Irish citizens vote in EU elections as well as benefit from and contribute to the union, which is not officially federated, but resembles American federalism to some extent.

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<sup>14</sup> Varadkar, Leo. "Former Taoiseach Leo Varadkar - Full Interview." Hosted by Patrick Kielty. The Late Late Show, April 27, 2024. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8\\_yew-unZlg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_yew-unZlg).



Both nations are republics; simply put, the people elect representatives to adjudicate power. Next, we tackle the level of government identified by the terms unitary and federal. In the Irish unitary system, authority is centralized at the national government.<sup>15</sup> In the US, power ostensibly lies first with the people, then is divided between state and national governments.<sup>15</sup> This is oversimplified and perpetually argued, however, because Article VI, Clause 2 of the Constitution clearly established the supremacy of federal law.<sup>16</sup> That outcome is a feature rather than a bug because the Founders purposely created a slow-moving system of compromise, and while it is still debated, the Federalists won.

Moving forward, the most convoluted comparison is between the structure of each country's three branches. The executive, legislative, and judiciary are present in both governments, but how they are filled, relate to one another, and are checked varies. In the US, the three branches are supposedly fully separated, but Richard E. Neustadt's mid-century view that the three institutions *share* power is the prevailing academic stance.<sup>17</sup> The US executive is the enforcement branch, but now runs an extensive bureaucracy and enjoys various authorities that Congress has incrementally ceded to it. In *Marbury v. Madison* (1803), the Supreme Court (SCOTUS) of the judicial branch established judicial review, giving the body the final decision

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<sup>15</sup> "Division of Powers Graphic." Open Education Resource Commons. Accessed February 15, 2025. <https://img.oercommons.org/780x780/theb-production/media/courseware/lesson/image/0a258d10-2aea-431c-a5e3-567accdf1641.jpg>.

<sup>16</sup> "ArtVI.C2.1 Overview of Supremacy Clause." Constitution Annotated. Accessed February 15, 2025. [https://constitution.congress.gov/browse/essay/artVI-C2-1/ALDE\\_00013395/](https://constitution.congress.gov/browse/essay/artVI-C2-1/ALDE_00013395/).

<sup>17</sup> Neustadt, Richard E. *Presidential Power - The Politics of Leadership*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1964, 42.

on constitutional legality. Finally, the US legislative branch, Congress, consists of two chambers, the House of Representatives and the Senate. Since the ratification of the 17<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1913, all members of Congress have been directly elected. Action between the three branches have remedies to support a check and balance on power, for instance, Congress can overturn a Supreme Court ruling, and the president can veto a bill.

In the Republic of Ireland, the apex of the courts is the Court of Final Appeal, also called the Supreme Court, which reserves the power of judicial review, codified in the Bunreacht na hÉireann.<sup>18</sup> The legislature in Ireland is a parliamentary system called Tithe an Oireachtais.<sup>19</sup> The Oireachtas is composed of the Dáil Éireann (House of Representatives), the Seanad Éireann (Senate), and the Uachtarán na hÉireann or President of Ireland.<sup>19</sup> As was previously discussed, the Taoiseach is also a part of the Oireachtas because he is a member of the Dáil. Thus, the judiciary is adjacent, but the legislative and executive branches are intertwined, not unlike Wilson's presidency, and reminiscent of Neustadt's theory of shared power. For all intents and purposes, the Dáil retains tangible power, the Seanad and the president are primarily ceremonial and oversight, while the Supreme Court is the check on constitutionality. As the directly elected house, the Dáil's powerful status effectively consolidates power to the citizenry.

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<sup>18</sup> "Bunreacht na hÉireann," 132, 136.

<sup>19</sup> "How Parliament Works." House of the Oireachtas, November 9, 2020. <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/visit-and-learn/how-parliament-works/>.

## ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND VOTING

The authority of the directly elected Dáil is further legitimized and fair because of the nation's institution of proportional representation via single transferable vote (PR-STV) (STV).<sup>20</sup> Proportional representation is an electoral system that accounts for all groups and/or parties in an electorate, correlating to their proportion in a governing area. The system also incorporates a threshold, which offers insurance against a tyranny of the majority. Ireland's implementation of STV takes an extra step to protect the integrity of a voter's choice. Voters are afforded the opportunity to choose each candidate they like, whether it is just one or multiple, and order them by preference.<sup>20</sup> If an individual's first choice is eliminated or surpasses an established threshold, their vote is transferred, and their second choice receives the 'unused' vote. Voting systems like PR mitigate the propensity toward disapproval voting, waste no votes, and remedy disenfranchisement. Nine of the EIU's top ten democracies employ some version of proportional representation, but the single transferable vote is more elusive.

Along with alleged election fraud and voter suppression, one of the more controversial US election institutions is the Electoral College. The US is the only remaining country that uses this system. The Electoral College is extraordinarily unpopular and has come close to being abolished on multiple occasions.<sup>21</sup> Both proponents and opponents of the mechanism claim its removal or retention marginalizes them. At least seventeen states and the District of Columbia

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<sup>20</sup> "Ireland's Voting System." An Coimisiún Toghcháin - The Electoral Commission, November 29, 2024. <https://www.electoralcommission.ie/irelands-voting-system/>.

<sup>21</sup> West, Darrell M. "It's Time to Abolish the Electoral College." The Brookings Institution, October 15, 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/its-time-to-abolish-the-electoral-college/>.

have joined a compact initiative wherein they agree to appoint “electors consistent with the national popular vote.”<sup>22</sup> Opposite of the electoral college, the nation’s use of plurality, or first-past-the-post voting is common, yet enduringly archaic and disproportionate. The re-election of Donald Trump is an excellent example; more people voted for anyone other than him than for him, nevertheless, he occupies the Oval Office. Winner-take-all is also an oversimplified, outdated, and inequitable procedure employed in the US electoral scheme; the convoluted and varied primary system is another. Americans have been rallying for reform on behalf of all the wrong and heavily partisan reasons. The system of elections needs to be reformed because it is bad. Too much innovation, technological, and social advancement has occurred in the last century, not to mention 250 years, for the United States to stubbornly cling to institutions that were conceived with concepts like chattel slavery, aristocracy, and peasantry in mind.

## CONCLUSION

If Canada and Ireland’s response to Trump’s second term is indicative to the health of global democracies, intense and immediate reform may be the only chance the United States has to preserve her liberal foundations. This research has revealed some peculiarities within each of the examined republics, but overall, their structures are more alike than different. Reason dictates that the superior systems the Republic of Ireland employs, like proportional representation, single transfer vote, and responsible multi-party governance, could replace outdated and unsustainable US policies like the two-party system, electoral college, and plurality voting. Other elements that are more deeply vested in the Constitution could be amended, adjusted, or simply held to a higher degree of accountability and legality, such as the bloated bureaucracy and

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<sup>22</sup> Garrett, R. Sam. “Electoral College Overview.” Congressional Research Service, June 5, 2024. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12682>.

overreaching executive branch. Congress could pick up its mantle of responsibility, especially if the corrosive conduct of campaign politics and finance were brought into ethical compliance.

Of the three structures this essay analyzed, party politics, executive and legislative systems, and electoral methods, the two-party system should be prioritized for reformation. It is hyper-partisanship that exacerbates the breakdown of shared power and balance. Partisanship, too, commands the obstinate grip on election methods that suppress citizens, encourage disfranchisement, and force unwanted results on two-thirds of the population. A multi-party system that encourages independent thought is clearly more suitable for a nation as culturally and geographically diverse as the United States.

As the policies of Trump's second administration and repetitive constitutional crises exhibit real erosion of American democracy, the US has twenty-eight higher ranked state role models to look to for inspiration. The top nine democracies in the world utilize proportional representation and multi-party systems, but the US should start by emulating the Republic of Ireland. Other global democracies have thus far proven to be stronger in character and substance than their US predecessor. The leader of the liberal world order is beginning to resemble the 19th-century sick man of Europe. The downfall of the Ottomans can be attributed to an overreaching administration, devolution, and insurmountable debt. World War II propelled the United States into prestige and respect, but like the Ottoman Empire, she is but one war away from history.

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