

The background image shows the interior of a large, ornate parliament chamber, likely the Dáil Éireann in Ireland. The room features high ceilings, wood-paneled walls, and rows of wooden desks and chairs arranged in a semi-circle. A central aisle leads to a raised platform at the front where a speaker's chair and a podium are located. A flag is visible on the left side of the platform. The entire image is overlaid with a solid red color.

ISD

Powering solutions
to extremism, hate
and disinformation

Analysing Claims of Electoral Interference During the Irish Local and European Elections



Amman | Berlin | London | Paris | Washington DC

Copyright © Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2024). Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) is a company limited by guarantee, registered office address 3rd Floor, 45 Albemarle Street, Mayfair, London, W1S 4JL. ISD is registered in England with company registration number 06581421 and registered charity number 1141069. All Rights Reserved.

www.isdglobal.org

Contents

| | |
|------------------------------------|----|
| Introduction and Key Findings | 4 |
| Background | 5 |
| Findings | 6 |
| "Foreign Interference" Allegations | 8 |
| "Election Rigging" Allegations | 13 |
| Post Election Analysis | 15 |
| Conclusion | 16 |

Introduction and Key Findings

Introduction

Despite a tumultuous political history, election integrity in the Republic of Ireland has rarely been questioned, with public confidence that Irish elections are managed freely and fairly well above European averages. Incidents of election fraud are infrequent, with only one individual charged with attempting the crime since 2019.

Yet, ahead of the Irish local and European elections on 7 June 2024, false, misleading and conspiratorial claims of “voter harvesting”, “foreign interference”, and “polling station irregularities” emerged online. These terms echo the language of the “Stop the Steal” conspiracy narrative deployed in a concerted effort to overturn the results of the 2020 US Presidential election.

Key Findings

Between 26 May and 12 June 2024, ISD documented 162 posts across X, Telegram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok claiming election interference surrounding Irish local and European elections.

- **The total number of views these claims received online was 3,799,962.** At the time of writing, 74% of claims remain online – an indication that despite having policies in place to safeguard election integrity, platforms have so far failed to properly engage on these issues in an Irish context.
- **The primary theme of these claims involved allegations of “foreign interference”,** based mainly on non-citizens’ legal rights to participate in local elections. These often merged with conspiracy theories around “voter harvesting” by political parties and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).
- **Conspiracy theories alleging that the Minister for Justice had sent citizenships via email** and promised passports to asylum seekers in exchange for votes emerged, based on an edited clip originally posted during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Election interference claims peaked during the broadcast moratorium** - a legally mandated period where broadcast media outlets were forbidden from reporting on the election.
- **Claims of “election rigging” at polling stations and count centres were also documented,** with many of these based on narratives imported directly from the US Stop the Steal movement.

While these narratives failed to reach mainstream appeal in June, the upcoming Irish general election on 29 November 2024 offers new opportunities for far-right activists to use social media and gaps in Irish election policy to foment doubts and distrust in Irish elections and potentially damage the foundations of Irish democracy.

Background

In June 2024, Ireland held its local and EU elections, marking the first time in over four years that Irish citizens participated in a national election. In the time between elections, and particularly since the pandemic, an emboldened far-right movement has emerged in Ireland. This movement is rooted mainly in an extreme ethnonationalist ideology as well as a belief in mis- or disinformation and conspiracy theories spread online. Key figures in this movement appear to be highly influenced by similar movements internationally.

In recent years, this growing far-right movement has focused much of its attention on promoting anti-immigration rhetoric, contributing to increased anti-immigrant mobilisation as well as violence and falsehoods levelled at ethnic minority communities in the country. The June elections were the first opportunity this movement had to capitalise politically on their increased public profile. It was clear from the earliest days of the campaign that their attention would focus on attacking the legal rights of non-citizens to vote and participate in local elections - a right enshrined in the Irish constitution in a 1999 referendum.

These elections were also held during a time of regulatory flux. Election integrity in Ireland is governed by An Coimisiún Toghcháin (The Electoral Commission or EC); however, its powers regarding online political advertising and political misinformation remain unenacted. In addition, Coimisiún na Meán (CnaM) enforces the Digital Services Act, which places obligations on social media companies to mitigate systemic online risks that may impact the integrity of elections, including disinformation. However, CnaM's powers are reactive; they must receive a complaint before engaging, and the body does not have the power to remove violative content posted online.

During the election campaign, evidence emerged of violations of TikTok's policies regarding political advertising. Additionally, Global Witness tested the political advertising safeguards of multiple platforms, which again highlighted failures in the enforcement of TikTok's advertising policies. Other concerns regarding candidates' use of crowdfunding platforms and the lack of regulatory accountability for these fundraising streams also emerged. In this regulatory environment that was either ineffective or missing, the social media environment in Ireland was a fertile landscape for rumours, abuse and mis- and disinformation to flourish ahead of these elections.

Another area of concern was the broadcast moratorium, a legally mandated period prohibiting Irish broadcast media outlets (radio/TV) from reporting on election-related information from 2 pm the day before voting. During the Slovakian general election in September 2023, an audio deepfake of a senior politician released during its broadcast moratorium exposed how such media blackouts occur at a moment when democracies are uniquely vulnerable. CnaM has announced that the Irish broadcast moratorium will cease as of late October 2024.

Findings

Between 26 May and 12 June 2024, ISD documented 162 claims about alleged election rigging, manipulation and foreign interference that circulated on X, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube and Telegram before, during and after polling day. ISD analysis shows that mis- and disinformation about the election peaked during the broadcast moratorium, which began at 2 pm the day before polling (6 June) and lasted until polling stations closed (10 pm on 7 June).

ISD analysts broke down these 162 documented claims into three categories and 7 subcategories, as shown in Figure 2.

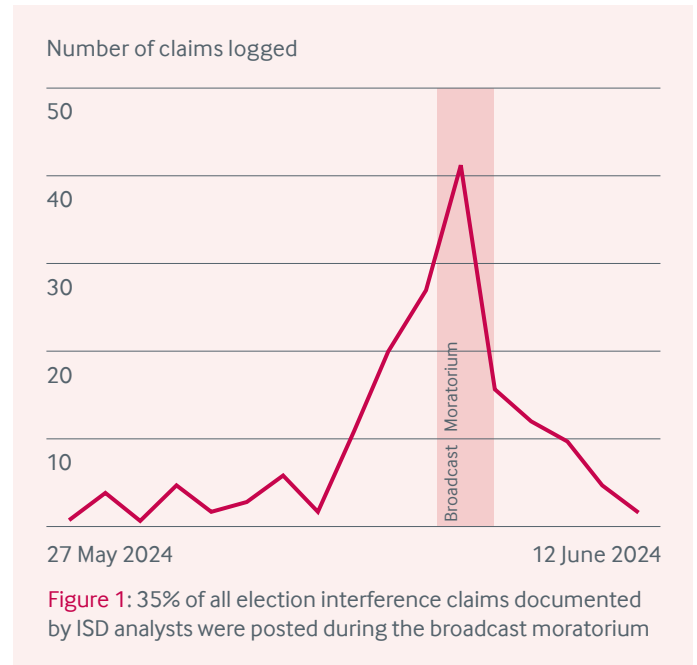
1 “Foreign interference” claims (86%). These included:

- “Foreign candidates”: Candidates from an immigrant background standing for election were viewed as a threat to Irish sovereignty.
- “Voter harvesting”: Claims that political parties and NGOs were registering non-citizen voters in a coordinated attempt to disenfranchise Irish voters.
- “Ethnic bloc voting”: Claims that ethnic minorities were being bribed/ cajoled/ manipulated into voting for establishment candidates.
- “Bussing”: Claims that the transportation of ethnic minority voters to the polls was illegal or fraudulent.
- Citizenship conspiracy theories: Claims that the government fast-tracks citizenships for asylum seekers in exchange for votes.

2 “Election rigging” allegations (13%). These included:

- Polling station irregularities: Allegations of “suspicious” voters; claims of voter disenfranchisement or illegal voting.
- Count centre irregularities: Claims regarding ballot security and the validity of the vote counting process.

3 Other (0.5%). Included calls to mobilise/action in response to poor results/general misinformation. For example, a claim about asylum seekers or refugees voting might also include other pieces of false information regarding housing/benefits they receive from the Irish state.



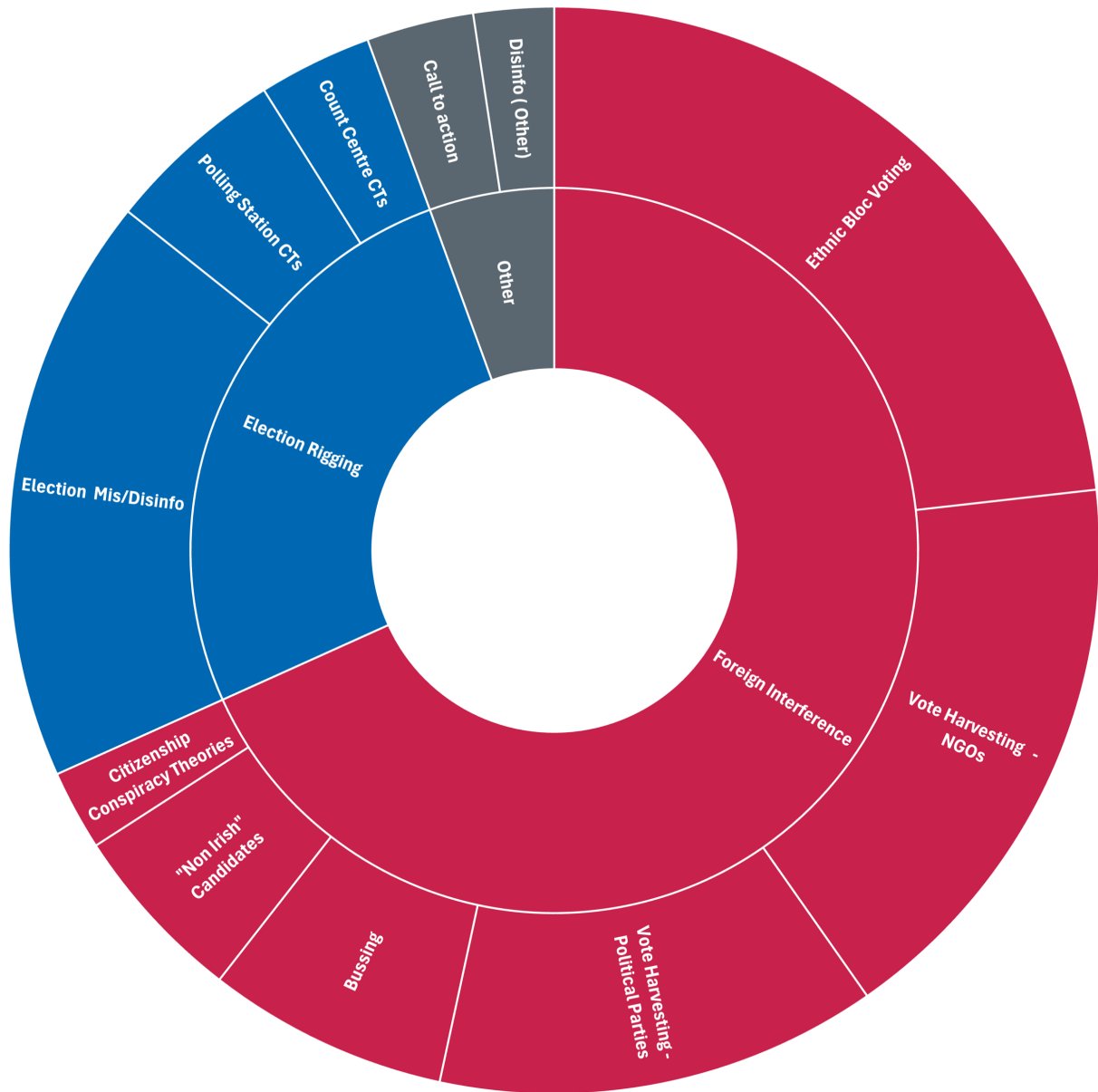


Figure 2: Breakdown of election interference claims by category and subcategory

“Foreign Interference”

“Every foreign vote dilutes an Irish vote. Foreigners will be banned from voting and running in Irish elections. Ireland is ours. Colonisers out.”

The dominant theme apparent in the posts collected by ISD were attempts to frame the legal participation of anyone they deemed “non-Irish” in the elections as a sign of so-called “foreign interference”. These posts targeted candidates from migrant backgrounds, as well as political parties engaging with migrant voters and NGOs advising non-citizens on their voting rights. Long-standing activities within the Irish political system, such as political parties arranging transport to polling stations on election day, were also framed as attempts to disenfranchise Irish voters.

Migrant candidates are “foreign interference”

“She is a criminal interloper and will never belong here. Deport her and everyone like her.”

Record numbers of candidates from migrant backgrounds participated in the 2024 elections, with [ISD analysis](#) finding that such candidates were disproportionately targeted with intimidation, abuse and violence both online and offline. While much of this abuse was rooted in the racist idea that only ethnically Irish people should be able to participate in the country’s elections, as the campaign progressed this morphed into a conspiratorial narrative that framed the

democratic participation of migrant candidates as a sign of “foreign interference” in the elections.

In a video posted to YouTube on 30 May, Ninja Knight, an influential account within the Irish far-right ecosystem, targeted Dr Lekha Menon Margassery, a local election candidate for the Labour Party in Cork. In the video, Ninja Knight belittled Dr Margassery’s experience of racial abuse and claimed that she should not be allowed to run for election because she is “not Irish by blood”. He continued, “No foreigner... should be ruling this country”. The video, titled “FOREIGN INTERFERENCE IN IRISH ELECTIONS”, had received 4.9k views at the time of writing.

In another [example](#), screenshots of messages sent to Ukrainian communities in Ireland informing them about the ideologies of different political parties and providing information about candidates from migrant backgrounds who understand the needs of refugees were framed in posts as “foreign interference”.

Political engagement is “voter harvesting”

“Orchestrated mass registration of undocumented non-nationals for the upcoming elections is a massive assault on our democracy! This planned betrayal against Irish citizens must be exposed and stopped.”

Voter mobilisation campaigns by political parties and NGOs became a target for those spreading claims of election interference. In the US, “voter harvesting” traditionally refers to the collection of absentee/mail-in ballots by a registered agent before an election. Since 2020, however, conspiracy theorists have coopted the term to cast doubt on election integrity. The evocative nature of the language “harvesting” or “farming” has been applied to any organisation or political party promoting voter engagement among migrant communities before the election to frame it as suspicious. In an Irish context, the terms harvesting and farming were used interchangeably; in one example, a Sinn Féin candidate’s engagement with Ukrainian voters in Kenmare, County Kerry, was referred to as “vote harvesting” (see image 2).

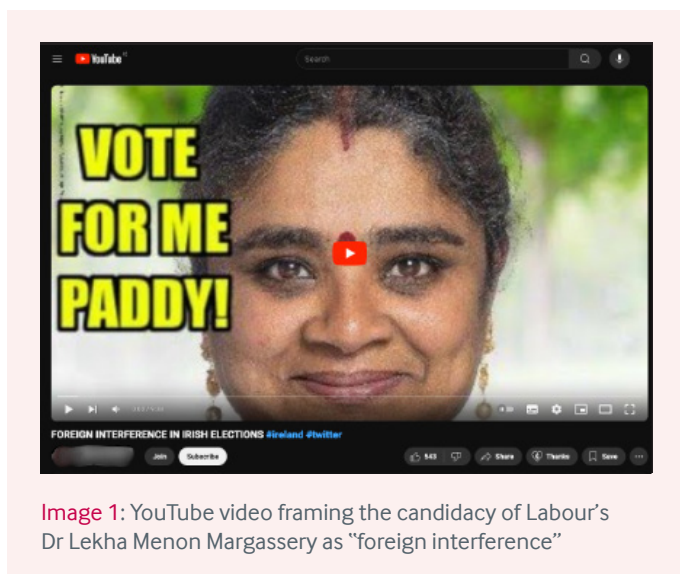


Image 1: YouTube video framing the candidacy of Labour’s Dr Lekha Menon Margassery as “foreign interference”

The role of NGOs in voter participation initiatives also became a focal point for the authors of posts in our sample.

Similar claims - that NGOs are enabling foreign interference - were a significant part of 2020 US election interference conspiracy theories. Since 2020, NGOs and civil society groups have also been the target of claims of electoral interference in elections in [Slovakia](#), [Germany](#) and [Spain](#).

Three days before the election, in an article published by Gript Media, the Immigrant Council of Ireland's engagement effort with non-citizen voters was singled out. Its author claimed, "There has been no national debate on whether non-citizens should have the right to vote in local elections". On the contrary, in 1999 the [20th Amendment to the Irish Constitution](#) was ratified by referendum (by 77% of the electorate) and, since 2004, it has been [legal for anyone living in Ireland, including asylum seekers, to vote in Irish local elections](#).

In the days before the election, the language around non-citizen voter participation became increasingly heated, with their participation described as "[an attack on our democracy](#)". Other posts called it "[a perversion and undermining of our democracy](#)", with those involved in it accused of "[treason](#)". One post claimed that the registration of Ukrainian voters was a "national scandal" and "absolutely voter corruption" (see image 3). The post, which received nearly 500k views, also repeated the false claim about the lack of a referendum.

"Ethnic Bloc Voting"

"Fine Gael are telling migrants that they are the only party who'll allow them to stay here. What's really happened is that Irish voters are having their votes cancelled out by vote-rigging centres known as 'migrant centres'."

Nativist and xenophobic narratives around so-called ethnic bloc voting by non-Irish voters were another dominant theme of "foreign interference" claims. These types of narratives contested that "[illegal undocumented people](#)" who are "fresh off the boat" "[cannot possibly be engaged with Irish politics](#)" and as such could be easily manipulated into voting for the establishment parties.

Claims of ethnic bloc voting merged readily with conspiracy theories that the current influx of asylum seekers is an intentional plot by the government to [replace native Irish people with "planters"](#). The term "planters" refers to an [Irish version of the "great replacement" conspiracy theory](#) that has circulated among the Irish far right for several years.

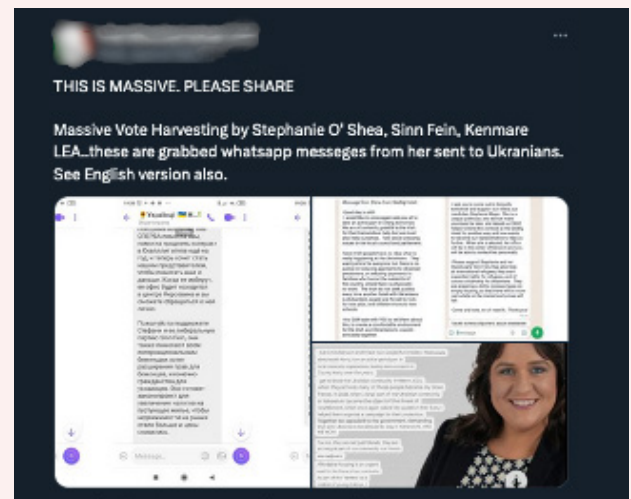


Image 2: A Sinn Féin candidate's engagement with Ukrainian voters framed as "vote harvesting"

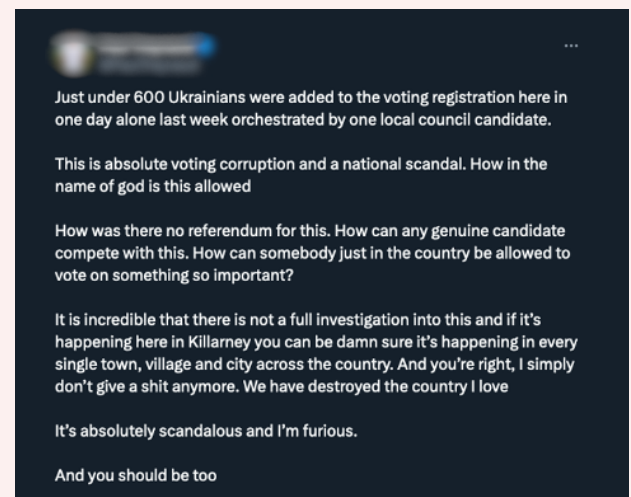


Image 3: Comments about voter harvesting also fed into other accusations, such as ethnic bloc voting

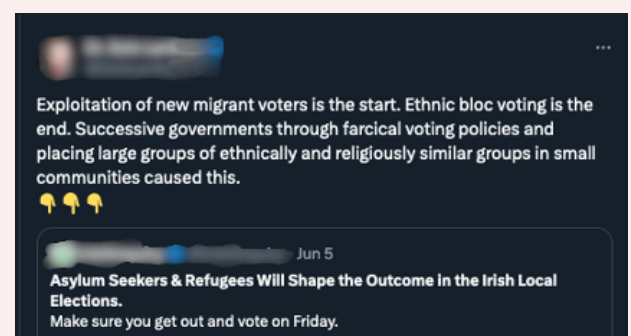


Image 4: Conspiracy theories that IPAS centres were placed in small communities to influence demographics and election outcomes.

Accusations of importing voters were seeded long before the election was announced. In August 2023, Gript Media published a video titled “The Irish Government is Acting Like Citizenship Doesn’t Matter”, in which presenter Ben Scallan described campaigns to encourage non-Irish residents to participate in local elections as a “cynical and Machiavellian ploy by the government to retain power under the guise of being inclusive”. To conclude, he said the government is “bringing in a new electorate” in a “fundamentally anti-democratic sleight of hand.”

Allegations regarding ethnic bloc voting not only feed into xenophobic nativist ideation and conspiracy theories but also, as pointed out in a June report from The European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) Ireland Hub, serve as a “pre-emptive excuse” for far-right candidates who fail to be elected.

Bussing = “foreign interference”

“They can cancel out my vote by busing Mohammed, who arrived last week to the polling station, to vote for an NGO-approved Régime [sic] candidate.”

Political parties in Ireland have arranged transport for voters to polling stations for decades (see image 5). Despite this, evidence of ethnic minority voters availing of this service was seen as further evidence of “interference” in the elections, and any activity by either political parties or NGOs to provide transportation to polling stations for ethnic minority voters was viewed as a further attempt to disenfranchise Irish voters by mainstream political parties, corporations and NGOs.

As election day unfolded, several videos of hostile interactions were posted online, showing volunteer drivers “caught” using private vehicles to transport voters. These were offered as “proof” of election interference.

For example, in Sligo, Rob DeSalle, a local election candidate for The Irish People, posted several videos claiming he had exposed Fine Gael Councillor Thomas Walsh engaging in an “election interference operation” after a volunteer with Walsh’s campaign was stopped and asked whether residents’ accommodation in a local IPAS centre was conditional on their voting for Thomas Walsh. DeSalle goes on to claim that Walsh and Fine Gael need to “buy votes” because the Irish people won’t vote for them. In a separate incident in Donegal (see image 6), a man posted a video of himself driving past a polling station, shouting at a volunteer with a minivan that he was a “fucking bastard” for letting “all the foreigners vote.”

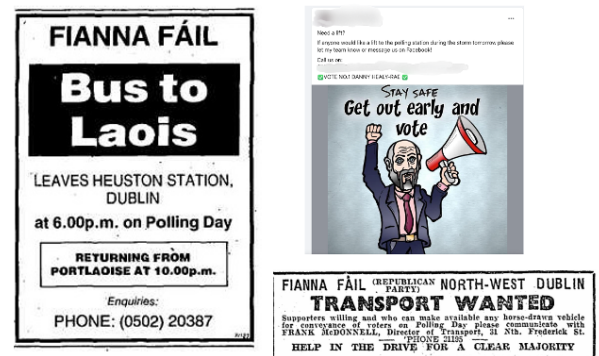


Image 5: Historical and modern offers of transport to polls by candidates and parties

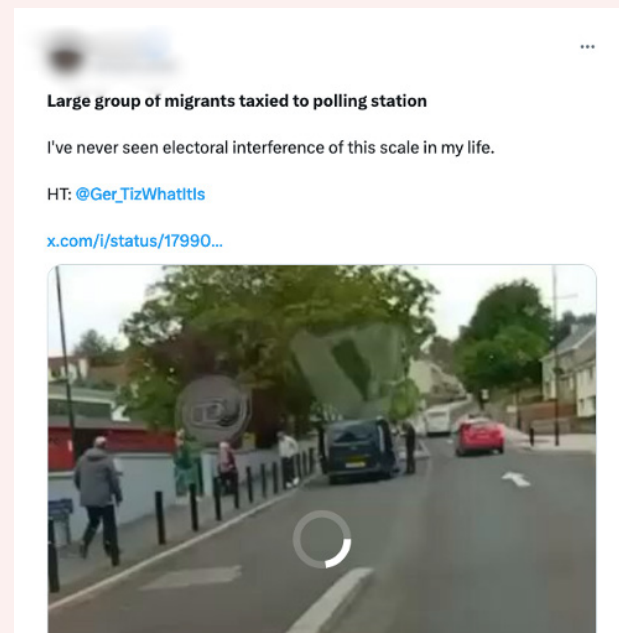


Image 6: In this video, three people, including the driver, can be seen exiting the vehicle.

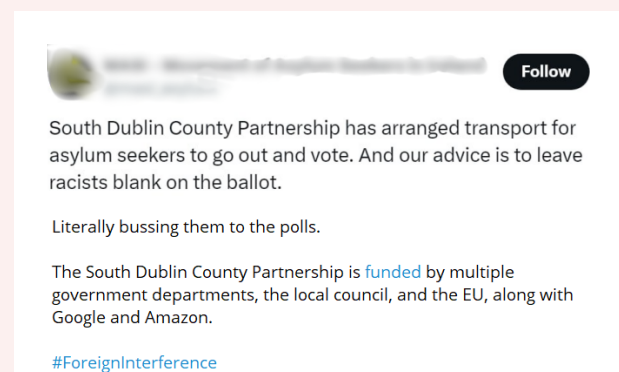


Image 7: A post on Telegram claiming SDCP arranging transport for voters was “#foreigninterference.”

Efforts by NGOs and civil society groups to help voters reach polling stations were the target of similar allegations. One post in our sample accused South Dublin County Partnership (SDCP) of “foreign interference” for arranging transport to polling stations for asylum seekers (see image 7).

Other evidence of mass transportation was fabricated. In one example, Andy Quirke, an Irish actor who has spread far-right and conspiratorial claims in the past, shared an image purporting to show a bus transporting ethnic minority voters to polling stations (see image 8). The photo he used was taken in Dover, England, a month before the Irish elections.

Citizenship Conspiracy Theories

At around 5 pm on election day, during the broadcast moratorium, a video featuring Irish Minister for Justice Helen McEntee was posted to an anonymous TikTok account. In the video, the Minister states that “from today” citizenship certification documentation would be sent to new Irish citizens via email.

The 37-second video is a heavily edited clip of an Instagram post made by Minister McEntee in January 2021 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, the Minister announced the temporary suspension of citizenship ceremonies during the lockdown and introduced a system allowing applicants to complete the final step of their citizenship process via email. In-person citizenship ceremonies resumed in 2022 following the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions.

This video is a textbook example of a “shallow fake”: a piece of media edited in an intentionally deceptive way to remove crucial context. The edited clip circulated widely online and was used to falsely claim that Minister McEntee and the Irish state were “handing out Irish Citizenship via email last minute before the Local and EU Elections”.

Two days after the election, a video was posted online of a woman walking into Tallaght Garda station to report Helen McEntee for “election fraud and election interference”. The woman records herself informing the Garda on duty that “Helen McEntee emailed tens of thousands of illegal migrants, by email, to automatically make them citizens... then bussed them...to all the polling stations to vote for the parties that are running things,” and “she [The Minister] admitted it herself it’s all on video”. Going on to say, “Helen McEntee was all delighted with herself that she...was able to go around to all the IPAS and give them immediate citizenship and then they were bussed to the polling stations by the parties that’s running, obviously to vote for them, and that’s a crime.”



Image 8: The photo featured in this post was taken in the UK in April 2024



Image 9: Screenshot of the TikTok where the false claim originated.



Image 10: One of the many posts resharing the edited video.

Conspiracy theories based on this video continued to circulate post-election. The narrative is referred to as “passport laundering”, alleging that asylum seekers intentionally destroy their documentation before they arrive in Ireland and are then granted fast-track citizenship by the government in exchange for their votes.

Post-election, ISD has observed that citizenship ceremonies have been targeted by actors on the far-right as further proof that the government are intent on “replacing” Irish voters. Far-right election interference claims around citizenship and voting have merged with arguments around ancestral citizenship, helping to propagate the ethnonationalist agenda that only those with “Irish DNA” should be allowed to claim citizenship.

Additionally, announcements about the issuing of new Irish passports have been a focus of far-right influencers. Claims that Irish passports have been reduced to “toilet paper” because the government are “giving them away” become fodder for arguments for DNA based citizenship/passports and the Great Replacement conspiracy theory. While it is true that the number of Irish passports being issued by the state has increased exponentially in the last 8 years, it is widely recognised to be related to Brexit (requests for Irish passports by UK citizens have risen over 1200% since 2016).



Image 11: Passport laundering conspiracy theory

"Election Rigging" Allegations

"Vote rigging is a reality. Every voting station will need to be watched for vote tampering. This will take a major patriotic move to watch and protect the votes."

Even before polling day, posts casting doubts on the validity and security of the voting process were already in circulation. These included claims that votes for "pro-Irish candidates will disappear from boxes", as well as claims that the count will be manipulated to transfer votes to "regime candidates" (see image 12). Additionally, posts claimed that Gardaí had been dispatched to polling stations to "deal with" any "Irish" complaining about election fraud (image 13).

In reality, Gardaí were stationed at some polling stations after several incidents of political harassment that marked the final days of the campaign. Threats and harassment of polling station staff were a feature of both the 2020 and 2024 US elections.

On polling day, other unsubstantiated allegations about irregularities emerged, primarily based on rumours and speculation. These included a video from someone claiming they had been able to cast multiple ballots at the same polling centre (the video does not corroborate the claims). In another instance, an Irish Freedom Party candidate claimed he had been denied a vote in the EU elections due to an administrative error within the electoral register. Despite his local county council admitting to the mistake, he claimed this was "100% election interference".

Once polls closed, attention quickly turned to allegations about the security of ballot storage and the integrity of the ballot counting process. Posts raising suspicion about the types of cable ties used to secure ballot boxes received thousands of views (see image 14), while others alleged that the common practice of separating and transporting ballots to different locations for counting was a sign of electoral interference.

These types of narratives closely echo those that circulated in the US following the 2020 Presidential election. One post, which questioned whether the transport of ballots to Weston Airport from the RDS in Dublin was an effort to "disappear" far-right votes, referred directly to the US 2020 election, saying, "Remember Detroit 2020" (see image 15).



Image 12: Some of the posts about "election interference" often amalgamated several conspiracy theories.

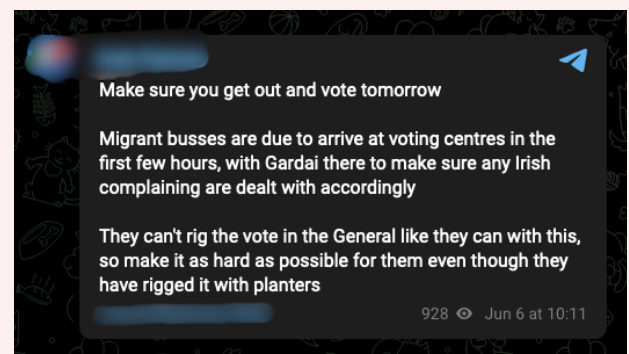


Image 13: The presence of Gardaí at polling stations was viewed with suspicion

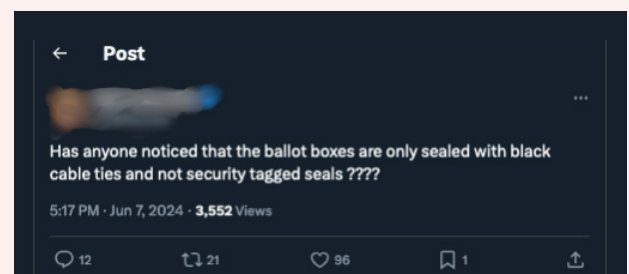


Image 14: Posts raising suspicions about cable ties on ballot boxes

Post-election, no serious attempt to question the validity of the results emerged; however, on 8 June, while votes were being counted, a claim was shared online that Fine Gael had launched an internal investigation into vote rigging allegations involving their candidates. This claim, published on The Irish Channel, was found to be false and based on fabricated quotes from Fine Gael and Irish academics. The article also included indications that it had been created with the assistance of generative AI. In response to a [fact-check of the claims by The Journal.ie](#), the Irish Channel posted a rebuttal, which once again included fabricated quotes and further indications of generative AI in its creation.

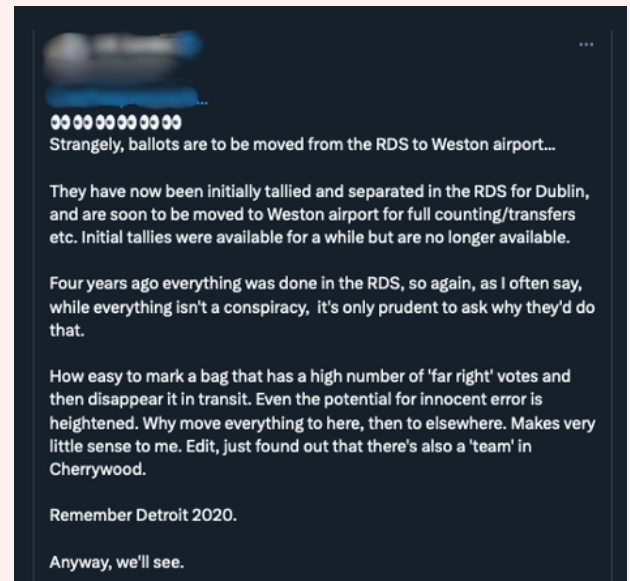


Image 15: Further election rigging allegations referencing the US 2020 election mentioning Detroit specifically

Post-Election Analysis

In October 2024, over four months after the election, ISD examined how many of the claims and posts alleging electoral interference remained online. In total, 74% of the posts collected by ISD were still online, despite the fact that many contravene platform policies around electoral integrity.

| Platform | Posts documented | % of posts that are still online |
|-----------|------------------|----------------------------------|
| X/Twitter | 119 | 86% |
| Facebook | 10 | 60% |
| Telegram | 25 | 80% |
| TikTok | 5 | 80% |
| YouTube | 3 | 100% |

Figure 3: Percentage of posts that remain online (at the time of writing)

During ISD's post-election review, analysts only came across one piece of evidence of fact-checking or any other visible intervention by platforms regarding any electoral misinformation documented in this report.



Image 16: This claim posted to Facebook, was deemed partially false.

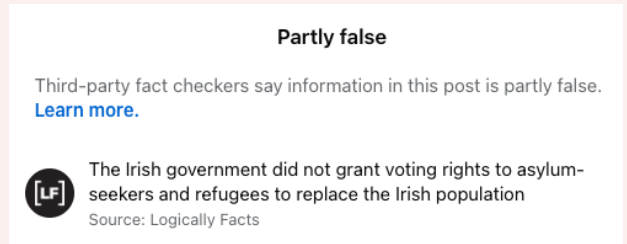


Image 17: Post hoc factcheck added after the election

Conclusion

“We all know what we’re going to see with regards to counting the vote today. Irish voices being stifled by people who came here on a plane from London 2 weeks ago. The Plantation 2.0 has been successful. Our future, our kids futures... requires only physical force action now.”

The claims of “foreign election interference”, “foreign” politicians, and the influence of non-citizen voters spread during the 2024 local and European elections are almost a complete inversion of reality. While a record number of migrant candidates were elected in 2024, Irish politics remains incredibly homogenous, with its migrant populations “vastly underrepresented” politically at both a national and local level. Research has shown that during the 2019 local elections, only one in 10 registered non-EU residents voted in the Dublin area.

Throughout the election, there were calls for mobilisation, protests and even violence based on false claims of widespread electoral interference. However, despite the levels of misinformation generated, no significant offline mobilisation took place, and actual challenges to the election process by far-right candidates were rare. When warranted, recounts occurred, but the election results were widely accepted. Five councillors holding far-right views were elected to local authorities, representing the best electoral result for the far-right in Ireland since the 1940s.

Buoyed by their local election successes, the Irish far-right has been preparing for a general election for months. Only British and Irish citizens can vote in general elections in Ireland; however, within days of its announcement, ISD analysts documented foreign interference conspiracy theories circulating on TikTok and Telegram. The focus of far-right agitators on citizenship ceremonies in recent months indicates how this narrative may shift from targeting the voting rights of asylum seekers and refugees to targeting the voting rights of new citizens. If their vote fails to materialise on 29 November, Irish far-right parties and candidates may use “foreign interference” conspiracy theories and narratives to justify more anti-democratic strategies going forward.

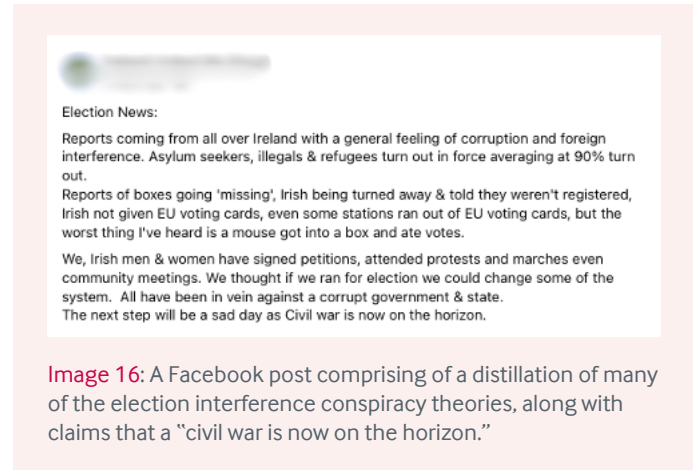


Image 16: A Facebook post comprising of a distillation of many of the election interference conspiracy theories, along with claims that a “civil war is now on the horizon.”

ISD welcomes the recent development that CnaM has decided to do away with the broadcast moratorium for all future Irish elections. However, despite having bodies and regulatory governance in place regarding electoral integrity, disinformation and online political advertising, many aspects of this legislation remain inactivated or are not yet fully operational. Before a crucial general election, the state’s ability to respond to the threat posed by bad actors, disinformation and electoral interference remains dangerously ineffectual.



Amman | Berlin | London | Paris | Washington DC

Copyright © Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2024). Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) is a company limited by guarantee, registered office address 3rd Floor, 45 Albemarle Street, Mayfair, London, W1S 4JL. ISD is registered in England with company registration number 06581421 and registered charity number 1141069. All Rights Reserved.

www.isdglobal.org