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IRISH AMERICANS AND US POLITICS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Freed from its post-Famine roots, Irish-American identity continued the process of redefinition in the twenty-first century. The foundations of that identity—the Catholic Church, the Democratic Party, and the labor movement—had begun to change from the 1960s since, with the growth of economic prosperity and social acceptance, these foundations were no longer considered crucial. Like Americans as a whole, Irish Americans came to be differentiated by politics, class, and education. Some felt no real connection to the past and their identity as Irish had thinned to the point of non-existence. Others were reshaping their connections, abandoning the automatic association of Irish and Catholic in favor of the cultural expression of Irish identity. But one facet of Irish identity that has survived and thrived since the nineteenth century is the Irish-American love of and aptitude for politics. As noted in earlier chapters, the post-Famine Irish immigrants enjoyed two major advantages over many other immigrants: they spoke English and they had a tradition of political organizing in the homeland from Daniel O’Connell’s Catholic Emancipation movement to the Land League. What changed in the mid-twentieth century was that Irish Americans did not remain exclusively Democratic in their politics, but also became prominent in the Republican Party. While we will see that twenty-first century Irish Americans differed sharply on domestic issues such as taxes and abortion, they presented a powerful, united front in sustaining peace and equality in Northern Ireland. The continuation of this significant political role by Irish Americans in US politics and in supporting peace in Ireland remains to be determined, as Irish Americans transition from a closed community of shared education, religious, and social organizations to one that is more open and diverse, more loosely organized around cultural, business, and professional affinities.

Earlier chapters in this volume examined the evolution of the Irish-American identity in the United States since the immigration of eighteenth-century Ulster Protestants who were prominent in the American Revolution, and who produced ten American presidents, including Ulysses S. Grant, who visited Ireland in 1879. While the predominantly Presbyterian Irish remain a majority of the estimated 32 million Irish Americans, they are only intermittently engaged in their Irish identity. By contrast, Irish-American Catholics who fled the Great Famine in their millions remain much more invested in their ancestry, celebrating their ultimate triumph over disaster and defeat, and relishing their artistic and cultural heritage as they rose to the top of political, business, and academic life in America.

Once a solid Democratic voting bloc that dominated numerous city and state governments, many Irish Americans have since the 1960s drifted to the Republican Party. Historian Terry Golway stresses the major impact the Irish-American conservative William F. Buckley Jr. and his *National Review* had in reviving modern American conservatism. “Without *National Review*, it is hard to imagine Ronald

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Reagan (Irish but not Catholic). Without Reagan, well, you get the idea.” Many Irish Americans continued to join the Republican Party as they became more prosperous and voted for less tax and business regulation. “We may love those wistful rebel songs that evoke the centuries our ancestors struggled against a superpower attempting to impose its language and values on our people,” noted the Jesuit *America Magazine*, “but many of us seem less sympathetic to sharing our now-comfortable status with others.” As will be discussed later, conservative Catholic Irish Americans were drawn to the anti-abortion position of the Republican Party.

By 2023, a survey of Irish Americans showed that 48 percent were Democrats, 38 percent Republicans, and 15 percent independents. Irish Americans, no longer an exclusively Democratic voting bloc, have become powerful in both political parties, resulting as one member of Congress said to being “over-represented numerically when it comes to Washington DC, whether in Congress or the White House.” Indeed, one could generalize that Irish Americans have a gift for politics, having an identity that is generally popular, and being responsive to the everyday needs of people. For example, Matthew J. O’Brien’s chapter in this volume demonstrates how his “Irishness” played a role in John F. Kennedy’s political career. Moreover, historian Hasia Diner has recorded how American Jews in the early twentieth century looked to Irish Americans to teach them how to resist antisemitism and to become politically effective.¹

The Peace Process and Special US-Ireland Relationship

Importantly for Ireland, Irish Americans, while divided along party lines on US domestic issues, remained united in pursuit of peace in Northern Ireland and in maintaining a special US-Ireland relationship. The *Economist* magazine observed that “Ireland’s soft-power triumph is mainly testament to the continued enthusiasm of 32 million Irish-Americans for their heritage, and to their equally remarkable dominance of American politics.” President Biden and other leading Irish Americans understood that the ability of the United States to influence policy in Northern Ireland was much greater if done on a bipartisan basis. “Supporting the people of Northern Ireland, protecting the peace, preserving the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement is a priority for Democrats and Republicans alike in the United States,” Biden said, adding, “and that is unusual today because we’ve been very divided in our parties. This is something that brings Washington together. It brings America together.”²

For over half a century since the 1970s, Irish-American Democrats and Republicans have demonstrated their political skill in deploying power to achieve peace and equality in Northern Ireland. Senior Irish Americans in Congress, notably the so-called “Four Horsemen”—Speaker Tip O’Neill, Senators Ted Kennedy and Pat Moynihan, and New York Governor Hugh Carey—worked with Irish diplomats and the Irish Government to persuade American presidents to pressure their British ally to take a balanced approach to both the Irish nationalists and British unionists in Northern Ireland, instead of exclusively favoring the latter. As Andrew Sanders demonstrates in his chapter in this volume, President Carter became the first US president in history to recognize the role of Dublin in a Northern Ireland solution in 1977; a breakthrough bitterly resisted by the British government and British tabloid media.

The Republican President Ronald Reagan, responding to the Democratic House Speaker Tip O’Neill, leaned on UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to sign the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985, despite objections from her own party and, most bitterly, from pro-British Ulster loyalists. In the 1990s, the Democratic President Clinton took a deeply personal and pivotal interest in negotiating a solution, appointing Senator George Mitchell as his Special Envoy. Mitchell devoted five years to negotiating the end of the killings in Northern Ireland, culminating in the 1998 Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement. The United States government was one of the guarantors of the Agreement and has remained politically committed to it ever since.

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While he did not highlight his Irish roots, the Republican President George W. Bush, elected in 2001, did assist the peace process by appointing the skillful diplomat Richard Haass as Special Envoy to Northern Ireland. The Democratic President Barack Obama, who made two presidential visits to Ireland to support the peace process, was both African American and Irish American, a descendant of Ohio and Indiana immigrants who came from Counties Offaly and Tipperary in Ireland. His administration included Irish Americans in high standing positions such as Bill Daley, the White House chief of staff; Tom Donilon, the head of the National Security Council; another chief of staff, Denis McDonough; press secretary Jay Carney; and Irish-born UN Ambassador Samantha Power. The successive visits to Ireland by American presidents, including those by Donald Trump and Joe Biden, were a reminder of the central role of Irish Americans in US political life.³

The Congressional Friends of Ireland is the best example of bipartisan Irish-American political power since its formation in 1981 by Speaker O'Neill. One of its rising stars noted that "Irish-American politicians in both parties in Congress have used their positions to fight to ensure the US remains active in the Northern Ireland Peace Process." The President of the Ancient Order of Americans confirmed that the AOH was most effective by being bipartisan. "We can work with a government leader in common cause on one issue," explained Danny O'Connell, "while reserving the ability to disagree on another, all while maintaining an attitude of respect and friendship."⁴

With the cessation of violence and the success of the peace process in Northern Ireland in 1998, Irish-American political engagement in Irish issues lessened significantly. However, the UK's decision to leave the European Union in 2016 (Brexit) threatened the reestablishment of a military border dividing British-controlled Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland (which remained within the EU). Such a hard border would have undermined the Good Friday Agreement and likely provoked renewed violence by paramilitary organizations. Responding to growing Irish-American concerns, the Democratic Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, organized a bipartisan Congressional coalition to prevent the resumption of this militarized border by blocking a proposed new US-UK trade deal. This effectively stymied President Trump, who supported the UK's exit from the EU and favored a US free trade agreement with London. Congressional leaders, opposed to Trump's ignoring of the threat to peace in Ireland, were supported by Irish-American organizations and transnational advocacy networks (TANS) such as the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) and the bipartisan Ad Hoc Committee to Protect the Good Friday Agreement. This latter committee, co-chaired by former Members of Congress, Bruce Morrison, a Democrat, and Republican James T. Walsh, comprised over 60 former senior US diplomats and academics who met regularly with all the parties in Northern Ireland in addition to British and Irish officials.

Irish Americans: Political Relatability and Advocacy

To what extent did American politicians' support for peace in Ireland or the fact that they had an Irish-American identity help secure votes from Irish Americans? Or did domestic issues like healthcare, housing, and the so-called "culture wars" play a much bigger role in voting patterns? More research is needed here, but in a 2017 survey, 51 percent of Irish Americans aged 18–45 years, said their identity influenced their political perspective, but that influence decreased as their families' departure from Ireland went further back through the generations. Former Republican Congressman James T. Walsh noted that both Republicans and Democrats saw the benefit of engaging with Ireland because it is popular with their constituents, "so if you can do something that is popular, why the hell wouldn't you?" Congresswoman Mary Gay Scanlon noted that being Irish American helped secure votes in certain states. "In my state, Pennsylvania, and in other states like Massachusetts, New York, and New Hampshire with large Irish-American populations," she said, "being Irish helps to make a candidate more relatable to voters." This relatability is also indicated

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by a survey, where 23 percent of respondents said they were attracted to their Irish heritage based on the positive perceptions of Irish identity in the US.⁵

During a state visit to Ireland in 2023, which had echoes of President Kennedy's visit 60 years earlier, President Biden equated middle-class values with being Irish, making Irish identity a positive attribute in contrast with the hard-drinking stereotype of the past. As one newspaper noted, "Biden's account of that value—getting up when you are knocked down, making a better life for your children, judging a person's honesty by the sweat on their brow—is indistinguishable from how he depicts Irishness." Susan Davis, the Chair of Irish-American Republicans, said that in a Congressional district with a significant number of Irish Americans, Republican candidates should embrace their Irish heritage. "You can't be guaranteed the Irish vote," noted Davis, "but it creates an affinity, making you more relatable to voters." Davis was pleased that more young Irish-American business men and women were taking an interest in their ancestry, becoming especially involved in promoting trade between Ireland and the US. This last point is reinforced by a survey finding that Irish Americans believe that the most important issue for US politicians to address in relation to Ireland, after a peaceful united Ireland, is two-way trade and investment policy between Ireland and the US.⁶

Stella O'Leary, Chair of the Irish-American Democrats PAC, noted the commitment of scores of members of Congress to peace, justice, and prosperity in Ireland. "We have so much to be grateful for," O'Leary said, "including the generosity of the United States for contributing half a billion dollars to the International Fund for Ireland since 1986." O'Leary added that every American president had appointed a special envoy to Northern Ireland since Bill Clinton. In the 2020 election, the Biden campaign made a special commitment to securing Irish-American votes for Democratic candidates, coordinating with the "Irish Americans for Biden" voluntary committee in 2020. Actor Mark Hamill (Luke Skywalker in the Star Wars franchise) headlined ten online Irish-American rallies for Biden, which included prominent Irish-American politicians, community leaders, and musicians. One poll of Irish-American voters indicated that 52 percent had voted for Biden versus 39 percent for Trump in the 2020 Presidential election. It seems fair to suggest that this Irish-American vote would have made a significant difference in an election where, out of 156 million votes counted, if just 43,000 votes had not been cast for Democrats in battleground states, Trump would have won the Electoral College despite losing the popular vote by seven million votes.⁷

The Irish-American vote for Biden contrasts with the white Catholic vote as a whole, which voted for Trump over Biden by 57 percent to 42 percent. This demonstrates the folly of equating the white Catholic vote with the Irish-American vote as is sometimes done in the absence of consistent nationwide polls of Irish-American voting patterns. The evidence available suggests that a majority of Irish Americans supported presidential candidates from different parties since the 1950s, voting for Republican Dwight Eisenhower in the 1950s because of his World War II record, switching to John F. Kennedy in 1960, then supporting Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, but supporting Bill Clinton twice in the 1990s. Clinton himself believes that the Irish vote was key to his critical New York primary win over Jerry Brown in 1992, which catapulted him to the Democratic nomination. In 2012, an *Irish Central* poll found that 51 percent of Irish-American voters planned to vote for Barack Obama with 48 percent leaning toward Mitt Romney. The survey indicated that 57 percent of respondents had voted for Barack Obama in the 2008 election, whereas 43 percent had voted for Republican candidate John McCain.⁸

Irish Americans were also politically active at the state level, with many later moving to national office. The American-Irish State Legislators Caucus created by Irish senator Mark Daly is a bipartisan network of Irish-American legislators and public officials across all 50 states, which promotes links between the US and their Irish counterparts. Irish Americans no longer dominated city government as they once did, but they continued to be elected as governors, including in New Jersey, New York, and Massachusetts, with, in 2023, Maura Healy becoming with Tina Kotek the first openly lesbian governors in the US.

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Labor unions, once a powerful platform for Irish Americans, had weakened by 2021, with the percentage of workers belonging to a union at 10.3 percent compared to 20.1 percent 40 years earlier. By contrast, business leaders, following the Supreme Court's decision to end campaign finance restrictions on corporations in 2010, exerted outsized influence on legislators when it came to tax laws and regulations. Irish-American Helen Clark, CEO of the powerful US Chamber of Commerce, voiced the general discontent of American business with the ideological divisions in Washington, calling on the House to "forge a serious bipartisan approach" and "strike a balance" in the new House Select Committee on China. "Do your jobs," she said, "so we can do ours."⁹

Did all this mean there was still an Irish-American voting bloc? Not really, as John McCarthy put it before he became a Special Advisor in President Biden's White House. "It's more of an Irish lobby, and it's even more than that," explained McCarthy. "It's an advocacy arm." The publisher Niall O'Dowd agreed. Irish Americans have "successfully organized support on policies of interest to us, such as peace and equality in Northern Ireland and immigration reform," O'Dowd noted. "We cultivate influential political relationships at the highest levels through lobbying, media advocacy, canvassing at elections, and personal relationships. We are fortunate to have such responsive Irish Americans and political leaders."¹⁰

Irish-American Responses to Growing Political Divisions in America

America was a badly shaken nation following the 9/11 attacks by Muslim extremists at the beginning of the century, but it quickly united behind a resolve to defeat the terrorists. However, the subsequent 20-year "War on Terror" in Iraq and Afghanistan weakened that unity and significantly undermined American economic power and global leadership. At the same time, working Americans became increasingly angry in the Midwest and the South by the belief that they were forgotten by the coastal elites who enriched themselves through free trade and preferential tax and industrial policies. The surprise election of Donald Trump as president in 2016 was a response to this anger. While a majority of voters voted for the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, the Republican celebrity television candidate won the Electoral College with a populist message denouncing the endless wars, opposing free trade, and bringing back jobs to the forgotten Americans.

Contrary to his promises, President Trump increased the income inequality gap and stoked fears and anger among Americans, forging a zeitgeist of mistrust and alienation fueled by a flood of misinformation on social and hard-right media. An epidemic of mass gun shootings and deaths from the fentanyl drug crisis added to Americans' despair that they were losing control of their society. In addition, billions of dollars spent on political campaigns funded floods of disparaging negative television ads about candidates, threatening to turn America into a dysfunctional plutocracy.

Unlike any previous American president, President Trump challenged the fundamental rules of American democracy by falsely claiming that the 2016 election was rigged and that he should have won the popular vote. He doubled down on these dangerous, baseless assertions in 2020 when he lost to Joe Biden, fomenting an invasion of Congress on January 6, 2021 in an effort to prevent Biden being certified as president. "This was," noted one historian, "an explicitly anti-democratic act in a way not seen since the Civil War." Trump was later charged by Federal and State prosecutors with two vast alleged criminal conspiracies to overturn the 2020 presidential election.¹¹

Trump's brutalizing political style and deviousness combined with his stirring up of class resentment traumatized the country even before the three agonizing and isolating years of the Covid pandemic, which killed over one million Americans. Each side of the political divide saw the other as an existential threat, a dynamic that made political compromise very difficult. According to *Pew Research*, members of both parties who had unfavorable opinions of the opposing party doubled between 1994 and 2022, while those who had very unfavorable opinions of the opposing party were

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at record highs as of 2022. In another poll, sizable majorities of US adults said that by 2050 the US economy “will be weaker, political divisions will be wider, and the United States will be less important in the world.”¹²

The prominence of Irish Americans in the Trump White House led to a public perception that Irish America had turned hard right. The reality, however, was that Irish Americans were prominent across the political spectrum. For every rightwing journalist like Bill O’Reilly and Sean Hannity, there was a liberal Maureen Dowd or a Stephen Colbert. For every conservative Chief of Staff like General John Kelly, there was former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director John Brennan, who attacked President Trump for being drunk on power. For every Sean Spicer or Kellyanne Conway serving President Trump, there was a Jake Sullivan or Mike Donilon in the Biden White House. For Justice Brett Kavanaugh, there was a Senator Patrick Leahy who tore into the Trump Supreme Court nominee at the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings, accusing Kavanaugh of lying under oath.¹³

Irish Americans demonstrated their diverse political identity by the contrasting responses to Trump’s assault on democracy. Of course, Irish-American Democrats vigorously opposed Trump, including voting for his impeachment in the House of Representatives. But even among Republican Irish Americans, there was opposition to Trump’s attempt to subvert democracy. Vice-President Mike Pence refused Trump’s orders to suspend the ratification of the election vote on January 6, being rewarded by having to flee for his life from Capitol Hill when the mob overwhelmed the police. The Republican Senate leader, Mitch McConnell, of Scotch-Irish ancestry, said Trump was “practically and morally responsible” for the January 6 attack. Mick Mulvaney, formerly Trump’s Chief of Staff, resigned as special envoy to Northern Ireland in response to Trump’s role in the storming of the US Capitol.

Kevin McCarthy, who became Speaker of the House when Republicans won a majority in 2022, initially condemned Trump, but later aligned himself with the former president as many of his party, including Irish Americans, continued to propagate the Big Lie. Sean Hannity became the leading proponent of the stolen election on Fox TV, broadcasting false conspiracy theories to millions of viewers. All of these different reactions confirmed that while Irish Americans enjoyed a proficiency in American politics, they were divided on partisan lines except when it came to Ireland, and in particular, peace and equality in Northern Ireland.

Majority of Irish Americans Favor Equal Marriage and Abortion

How did ordinary Irish Americans respond to these traumatic events and the so-called culture wars stirred up by Republicans and by rightwing and social media? The Irish vote in the 2016 presidential campaign between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump has not been clearly analyzed, although one pre-election poll suggested Irish Americans favored Clinton over Trump by a narrow majority of 52 percent. A 2023 survey of Irish Americans indicated that a majority held progressive political views, supporting Democratic policies on marriage equality and LGBTQ rights, climate change, gender equality, labor rights, racial equality, abortion and reproductive rights, and protecting Social Security and Medicare. Republican positions were favored by a small majority on national security, crime, and gun rights. The evolution of Irish-American views on social issues became evident in 2015 with the removal of the long-standing ban on gays marching in the St Patrick’s Day parade in New York City. Three years later, the gay Irish-Indian Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of Ireland, Leo Varadkar, marched with his partner in that parade, receiving cheers of encouragement from the crowds. Meanwhile, Ireland in 2015 became the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage through a referendum.¹⁴

In 2022, the US Supreme Court’s decision to overthrow the Court’s 1973 *Roe v Wade* ruling reversed the movement toward women’s rights by permitting individual states to pass legislation outlawing abortion, despite approximately 60 percent of Americans supporting the right to abortion.

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Conservatives in the evangelical Protestant and Catholic churches had sought for decades to ban abortion and were finally rewarded by a Supreme Court with three Irish-American Catholic justices. However, prominent Irish-American Democratic members of Congress like Kirsten Gillibrand, Chris Murphy, Madeleine Dean, Chrissy Houlahan, and Mary Gay Scanlon opposed the Court decision and actively supported abortion rights. One survey indicated that Irish Americans supported the Democratic position on abortion rights over the Republican position by 51 to 32 percent.¹⁵

In their presidential election campaigns, both Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton who supported abortion rights were attacked by the large conservative movement opposing abortion. Donald Trump and the Republican Party, backed by anti-regulation and low-tax business leaders, effectively used opposition to abortion to win a significant number of conservative Catholic and evangelical Protestant voters. The majority of Irish-American Catholic bishops were anti-Biden during the 2020 election campaign. New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan even attended the Republican convention that nominated Trump in 2020 and prayed there publicly for “the innocent life of the baby in the womb.” Arch-conservative Cardinal Raymond Burke, former head of the Church’s Supreme Court, stated that President Trump was “undoubtedly” preferable to Hillary Clinton, asserting that abortion was the acid test for voters and more important than welcoming refugees or helping the poor. However, Cardinal Robert McElroy criticized those questioning Biden’s personal devotion to his Catholic faith based on his positions on abortion, characterizing “the public denial of candidates’ identity as Catholics because of a specific policy position they have taken [as] an assault on the meaning of what it is to be Catholic.” Pope Francis, closer to Cardinal McElroy’s views, sent a message to newly elected President Biden accentuating common ground and offering prayers for “understanding, reconciliation and peace.”¹⁶

Waning Influence of Catholicism on Irish-American Political Views

With many Irish-American Catholics prepared to support the legal right to abortion despite Catholic Church opposition, what did that say about their relationship with the Church? In truth, since the end of the twentieth century, Catholicism had played a diminishing role in Irish-American identity and its political views. One survey showed that only 12 percent of the 47 percent of respondents who identified as Catholic regularly attended church, 20 percent did not, and 15 percent no longer identified as Catholic. In addition, young Irish Americans did not identify with Catholicism as much as their older counterparts, with only 23 percent of those under the age of 35 identifying as Catholic. Interestingly, 16 percent of the Irish-American respondents said they were non-religious. These trends were part of an overall decline in church observance, with a Gallup poll showing that the number of Catholics belonging to a parish dropped from 76 percent in 2000 to 58 percent in 2020. Among Protestants, the membership decline in the same period was smaller, from 73 percent to 64 percent. The writer James Carroll connected the collapse of Catholic moral authority to the clergy sex abuse scandal, which is addressed by Sally Barr Ebest in her chapter in this volume. “The betrayal by abusive priests and bishops (who protected the abusers instead of the victims),” Carroll argues, “was part of the larger transition of religious meaning that began with the Second Vatican Council when Catholics left the closed-in world of the parish for the larger world of religious tolerance and secular enlightenment.” In addition, many Irish Americans, who were raised Catholic, and whose values were shaped by the *Rerum Novarum* encyclical on social justice, ceased practicing when the US Catholic bishops became more conservative.¹⁷

Ever since the Great Famine influx to America, most Irish Americans had identified their neighborhoods with the name of their Catholic parish, which was the core of Irish-American identity and community, connecting young and old through church halls, weekly Mass, high schools, colleges, and even hospitals. Did the fracturing of this Irish-American Catholic identity from the end of the twentieth century weaken Irish-American political influence? Fergal Cochrane’s book, *The End of*

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Irish America?, seems to confirm this fear, but his actual findings concluded that Irish-American identity was simply redefining itself. A survey of Irish Americans supported this conclusion, indicating that more than half of them attended Irish-themed music concerts. Peter Quinn agreed, saying that “the rise of secular Irish-American institutions like Glucksman Ireland House, the Irish Repertory Theater, the Irish Arts Center (all located in New York) seemed to track with the decline of the Church.” “The same phenomenon is operating in Ireland,” continued Quinn, because “the end of the Church’s predominance over all aspects of Irish life has cleared the ground for new and vibrant cultural and artistic expressions of Irishness.” James Carroll noted that,

The transition may have made us less explicitly ‘Irish Catholic,’ but it made us more fully American and more fully, well, Christian. The innate goodness of Irishness, for all of its ‘fall-
-eness,’ has come through powerfully and continues as a pillar of American virtue, for all of its falleness.¹⁸

Dan Rooney, the President of the Pittsburgh Steelers football franchise from 1975 to 2002, is an illustrative example of someone who, having grown up in an Irish-American Catholic culture relatively removed from Ireland, became intensely engaged in the Northern Ireland peace process, eventually being appointed US Ambassador to Ireland in 2009. Rooney, a devout Catholic, whose great-grandparents had emigrated from Newry in Ulster in the 1880s to become bricklayers in the Pittsburgh steel mills, grew increasingly concerned about the bloodshed and suffering in his ancestral homeland. Together with Anthony O’Reilly, then CEO of the global HJ Heinz company, he founded the Ireland Funds which has raised over \$600 million for peace, culture, and community development on the island of Ireland. Rooney also promoted the so-called “Rooney Rule” in the NFL requiring league teams to interview ethnic-minority candidates for head coaching roles. Rooney endorsed Barack Obama during the Democratic primary in 2008, seeing in him a commitment to fairness and to helping working people. Rooney’s Irishness was deeply influenced by his Irish-American wife, Patricia, who taught and loved Irish literature, prompting the creation of the Rooney Prize awarded annually to outstanding young Irish poets and fiction writers.¹⁹

The Scotch Irish, Irish Americans, and Race

The 2022 US Senate race in Ohio between two Irish Americans depicted the continuing political divisions among Irish Americans when the conservative libertarian and best-selling author of *Hillbilly Elegy*, J. D. Vance, and liberal Democrat Tim Ryan opposed each other. One journalist wrote that Vance, who self-identified as Scotch Irish, won largely because of his support for Trump’s narrative of white nationalism and the fear of the Great Replacement. “Vance has just won an election based on the idea that white people are victimized by progressives,” wrote Meredith McCarroll, “and that experience as an exceptional white—better than the rest of Middletown, Ohio—makes him the leader worth following.”²⁰

Jim Webb, the decorated former US Marine, Secretary of the Navy under President Reagan, and one-term Democratic senator from Virginia, has written many books including *Born Fighting: How the Scots Irish Shaped America*, extolling the contributions of the Scots Irish to America. One journalist noted that Webb “has been writing about the dignity of his people—the gun-loving, country-music-singing, working-class whites of Scotch-Irish descent who fight in wars, staff the nation’s factories and shop its Wal-Marts.” These people, Webb wrote, “gave our country great things, including its most definitive culture.” Webb also noted in interviews that other Americans had ethnic pride, but the identity of his own culture had been lost. Niall O’Dowd called Webb’s book “a cry from the heart to recognize what the mainly southern Americans of Irish heritage, from Andrew Jackson and

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Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett on down, have done to shape this country. These days,” O’Dowd continued, “Scots Irish are the poor and working-class whites who are deeply alienated from the Democratic party and who have turned the south almost all red Republican.” Pro-British Unionist politicians from Northern Ireland have made some efforts to secure the political support of the Protestant Scotch Irish but without any real success. The Irish government, as part of its outreach to Unionists in Northern Ireland, has sought to widen Irish-American identity to include the Scotch Irish as well as Black and Brown Irish.²¹

According to one political analyst, partisanship in the United States had by the 2020s become a “mega-identity,” “representing both a division over policy and a broader clash between white, Christian conservatives and a liberal, multiracial, secular elite.” This is a somewhat simplistic analysis of the division as illustrated by the more complex reasons for why Irish Americans voted for either Democrats and Republicans in the twenty-first century.²² Yes, Irish Americans had a mixed record on race relations, with some being anti-racist and others supporting white Christian nationalism, the reactionary racist movement that claimed whites were endangered by the “Great Replacement.” Former presidential candidate Pat Buchanan promoted an anti-Semitic, racist, and anti-immigrant ideology, openly affiliating with white supremacists. In his 2011 book, *Suicide of a Superpower*, Buchanan complained that the United States was becoming an increasingly diverse country, that minorities would soon outnumber white Americans and that the country “is disintegrating, ethnically, culturally, morally, politically.” The *Irish Times* columnist, Fintan O’Toole, focusing on the conservatism of some Irish Americans, asked what Irishness brought to this nexus that Catholic conservatism alone did not. “The one-word answer is: victimhood,” O’Toole asserted.

In the stew of far-right reaction, a crucial ingredient is the transference of victimhood: the claim that white men, rather than being (as they are) relatively privileged, are in fact victims... This is a strange and poisonous outgrowth of our particular history.²³

However, as noted earlier, many Irish Americans were on the progressive side of American politics and fought for racial equality and civil rights, including the Jesuit Berrigan brothers, the New York lawyer Paul O’Dwyer, and courageous Irish nuns and priests who marched for civil rights in the South. Irish-American radicalism goes back to Mother Jones in the nineteenth century, and two heads of the American communist party, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and William Foster, were the children of Irish immigrants. Dorothy Day established the Catholic Worker Movement in the 1950s, combining aid for the poor and homeless with nonviolent direct action. More recently, the Boston-based band Dropkick Murphys, popular with working Irish people in New England, loudly proclaimed its opposition to white nationalism and support for the rights of labor and veterans. Reinforcing anti-racism, 60 Irish-American political and cultural figures sent a public letter to the Congressional Black Caucus in 2020, following the death of the civil rights leader John Lewis urging, “the great institutions of Irish America, particularly our colleges and universities, as well as our civic and fraternal organizations, to address their role in maintaining the institutional racism that has plagued this nation.”²⁴

It is also probable that many Irish Americans and Scotch Irish who voted for Trump and other white conservatives were not racist but more focused, as was noted earlier, on neglect of their economic interests by “coastal elites.” The conservative Christian columnist, Lee Habeeb, argued that “Trump dared to challenge the US Chamber of Commerce, which loves cheap labor, and the Democratic Party, which cared more about building a voting block than attending to the needs of struggling Ohioans.” Indeed, by the 2020s, taking a cue from Trump populism, the Biden Democrats were more attuned to non-college educated rural Americans than previous Democratic presidents like Obama and Clinton. In 2020 Joe Biden defeated Donald Trump in the race for the White House largely because he promised to reverse the years of neglect of working Americans, a promise fulfilled

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by his passing some of the most pro-labor legislation in his first term since President Johnson's administration.²⁵

Recent research is bringing to light the complex interrelationship between Irish Americans and people of color. The African-American Irish Network, founded in 2021, fosters relations between African Americans and Ireland through their shared heritage and culture. (Cara McClintock-Walsh's chapter earlier in this volume similarly examines cultural cross-pollinations between African-American and Irish theater in the last century). The Black, Brown and Green Voices series by Gluckman Ireland House at New York University represents a targeted documentation strategy of the Archives of Irish America, giving voice to the diversity of the Irish diaspora. The late musicologist Mick Moloney championed both the overlap between Irish, African, Jewish, and Galician music and culture and the inclusion of women artists in Irish music performances, including "Cherish the Ladies" which has performed at the House Speaker's annual St Patrick's Day lunch for the US president.

For many years, conservative Americans advocated the trope that black Americans could succeed like other immigrants such as the Famine Irish if they really wanted to, and that social welfare programs only encouraged dependency. Their reasoning, which ignored the fact that there were no restrictions on the Irish immigrating to America in the nineteenth century, was reinforced by the myth that the Irish were an enslaved white race who by virtue of hard work had been more successful than African-American descendants of slaves. Some Irish were indentured servants for a period, but their children were free and they enjoyed American citizenship, a status far from chattel slavery. The false "Irish slave" narrative has been effectively debunked by Liam Hogan, an Irish scholar who assiduously tracked the myth in social media usage, noting that "this continued misuse of Irish history devalues the real history." As historian Kevin Kenny makes clear in his book on immigration, while nineteenth-century Irish immigrants undoubtedly faced prejudice and bigotry, they could enter the US, move freely within and between the states, naturalize as citizens, vote, hold office, testify in court, and serve on juries, which most Black people, free or enslaved, could not.²⁶

Conclusion

Only time will tell if American politics will remain deeply polarized or if that will prove to have been a passing, ugly phase. Meanwhile, as Irish Americans grapple with these divisions, their political influence continues to thrive in both major political parties at both state and federal levels. If the past is any indication, the island of Ireland will continue to need the critical support and engagement of Irish-American political influence, both politically and economically, to secure a peaceful and prosperous future. While the guns in Northern Ireland have remained mostly silent since 1998, memories of atrocities and stubborn sectarianism prevail, inhibiting any serious reconciliation among the two communities. Some predict a united Ireland is inevitable, as demographics shift, but others feel an "agreed Ireland" has to come first. As the poet Paul Muldoon wrote on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement in 2023: "We've come a ways already, we've got a ways to go."²⁷

The continuation of Irish-American political influence in support of Ireland will be dependent on the regeneration and sustainability of Irish-American identity, where "attention needs to be paid to the particular needs and interests and the shifts in tastes and platforms used by younger diaspora cohorts." This shift in tastes among the younger Irish generation on both sides of the Atlantic is encapsulated in the novels of Sally Rooney, who has been described as "the first great millennial author." With few new immigrants from Ireland to refresh the "late-generation ethnicity" of Irish America, greater efforts will be required to provide opportunities for young Irish Americans to study, work, and volunteer in Ireland. With nearly two million American visitors to Ireland every year, Irish Americans and the Irish in Ireland are, as Mark O'Brien discusses in his chapter in this volume, increasingly connected by the internet and by Irish literature, films, sports, and music. As one writer put it, "New

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York and Dublin are now suburbs of each other.” The *New York Times* described the globally popular Dublin folk music group, Lankum, as “a gang of drone-loving experimentalists who have become a lodestar for the scene [...] their creative bounty echoed in other Irish arts resonating abroad despite—and arguably because of—their rich, resolute Irishness.” This “new” Irishness includes the TV series “Derry Girls” and “Bad Sisters,” and the films “The Quiet Girl (An Cailín Ciúin)” and “The Banshees of Inisherin,” with both films part of the so-called Green Wave at the 2023 Oscars.²⁸

In 2020 the emergence on TikTok of a Black-American performer of Irish step dancing who had no Irish ancestry signaled another new turn in Irish-American cultural identity. “With an acoustic remix of rapper Megan Thee Stallion’s song ‘Savage,’ Sandra Bullock burst onto social media, garnering a loyal following in America and Ireland almost immediately,” notes historian Cólín Parsons. “This kind of emerging, loose affiliation between young Americans and Irish culture points the way to a future relationship between Ireland and America that is not strictly tied to identity or lineage.” Bullock went on to join the Riverdance troupe, itself a fusion of old and new, which since 1994 has been seen live by millions of people in over 50 countries across six continents.²⁹

Caitriona Perry, the former Irish television correspondent in America, advocates a multifaceted approach to sustaining Irish-American identity and influence in America, combining the love of Irish music, culture, and art with “new approaches that include economic arguments, two-way investment and educational opportunities, both for younger generations of Irish Americans and for those who have no ancestral connections.” The success of this multifaceted approach remains to be determined as Irish Americans transition from a closed community of shared education and community organizations to one more open and diverse, and organized around cultural, business, and professional affinities. The Irish Ambassador to the United States, Geraldine Byrne Nason, believes that “the arts and soft power of both Ireland and Irish America, together with U.S.-Ireland business relationships, seem to be the principal assets in sustaining our evolving Irish-American identity.” The ambassador confidently predicted that “with our deep and diverse cultural relationship, Irish Americans will remain an influential voice in US politics throughout the twenty-first century.”³⁰

Notes

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- 10 Perry, Caitriona, *The Tribe*, 74. O'Dowd, Niall, Publisher of *IrishCentral.com* and *Irish Voice*. Interview with author, March 26, 2023.
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