

Ireland votes to repeal anti-abortion amendment

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Ireland voted by a wide margin on Friday to repeal the reactionary Eighth Amendment to the Irish Constitution and legalise abortion on demand. The unexpectedly decisive outcome is a blow to the authority of the Catholic Church. It will strengthen demands for anti-abortion laws to be relaxed or repealed in Northern Ireland.

The vote immediately triggered a crisis in British ruling circles. The Democratic Unionist Party, which holds the most seats in the Northern Ireland Assembly and props up Prime Minister Theresa May's Conservative government with its 10 MPs at Westminster, opposes any change in Northern Ireland's anti-abortion laws.

The vote took place only after repeated twists and turns by both the ruling Fine Gael and Fianna Fail, the largest opposition party. The *Oireachtas*, the Irish parliament, is expected to legislate based on the repeal of the Eighth Amendment before the end of the year.

At that point, women in Ireland within the first 12 weeks of pregnancy will finally be able to exercise the basic democratic right to abortion. Between 12 and 24 weeks, abortions will be allowed only in cases involving serious risk to the woman.

Currently, women face up to 14 years in jail for having an abortion, and thousands every year make the emotionally gruelling trip to Britain for termination.

In all, 2,153,613 votes were cast with, 1,429,981 (66.4 percent) in favour of repeal and 723,632 (33.6 percent) against. Turnout was 64.1 percent.

Of the 40 constituencies, 39 voted for repeal. Constituencies around Dublin recorded "yes" margins of well over 70 percent. The highest repeal vote was in Dublin Bay South (78.5 percent). Only rural Donegal voted against repealing the amendment, and then only by 51.9 to 48.1 percent. The next closest vote was in

Cavan-Monaghan, where 44.5 percent opposed repeal against 55.5 percent in favour.

Support for repeal appears to have been particularly pronounced amongst young people. One exit poll reported up to 87 percent of 18-24 year olds in favour. Among women under the age of 25, 90 percent voted in favour.

The number of young people registering to vote was reported by the National Youth Council of Ireland to be "unprecedented." Most of the 125,000 new registrations are thought to have been youthful voters. The referendum itself only emerged after years of intense campaigns, protests and strikes demanding abortion rights, in which young people were heavily involved.

The result signals a shift to the left among broad sections of the Irish population. It is connected to protests internationally, involving millions of workers and young people, against intolerable conditions of life and in opposition to the right-wing, anti-democratic trajectory of the official political set-up.

In the United States, over one million students demonstrated against gun violence and mass shootings in March of this year. Student protests erupted in France last month against anti-democratic higher education "reforms" and in support of rail workers who are striking against French President Emmanuel Macron's policy of social attacks and privatisation.

While support for repeal was highest amongst youth, according to exit polls, it was supported by all age groups apart from those over 65. It is a significantly more decisive result than a 2015 referendum in which 62 percent of voters on a 60 percent turnout supported the right to same-sex marriage.

Among the powerful interventions leading to the repeal vote was the stance taken by the parents of

Savita Halappanavar, who died in 2012 because she was denied an abortion. Halappanavar died in a Galway hospital of septicaemia from complications arising from her pregnancy. She had repeatedly requested an abortion, which could have saved her life. The 31-year-old Indian woman was told by staff at University Hospital Galway that to procure an abortion was impossible as “this was a Catholic country.”

Following Friday’s vote, Halappanavar’s father, Andanappa Yalagi, speaking from India, told the *Guardian*, “We’ve got justice for Savita and what happened to her will not happen to any other family now. I have no words to express my gratitude to the people of Ireland at this historic moment.”

The result is a disaster for the Church. Support for the Church in a country scarred by generations of abusive treatment at the hands of priests and bishops is in sharp decline. Such is the collapse that Catholic organisations, which played a decisive role in the right-wing campaign that led to the Eighth Amendment in 1983, declined this time around to comment at all for fear of increasing the sentiment against them.

According to the *Sunday Business Post*, the Catholic Communications Office was not even invited to provide a bishop or priest for one of national TV channel RTE’s debates.

Commentary on the result was characteristically vindictive. The Catholic primate of all-Ireland, Archbishop Eamon Martin, complained, “We have elevated the right to personal choice above the fundamental right to life itself.” He bemoaned the fact that “this country is now on the brink of legislating for a liberal abortion regime.”

The bishop of Limerick, Dr. Brendan Leahy, called the outcome “deeply regrettable and chilling for those of us who voted ‘no.’” He continued, “It is a vote, of course, that does not change our position.” The pope has thus far declined to comment.

The so-called “Brexit effect” did not materialise in the vote. A number of recent polls had suggested that although the repeal side was always ahead, distrust of the Dublin political establishment was leading, particularly in rural areas, to a right-wing populist groundswell of opposition to repeal. Writing in the *Spectator*, journalist Pádraig Belton suggested that “a fiercely-fought referendum battle has instead weaponised every single divide that was lurking latent

in Irish society: rural versus urban, young versus old, rich against poor.” But rural Ireland also voted for repeal.

The clear outcome portends major class conflicts. The Irish bourgeoisie is attempting to manage the decline of the Church, an institution on which it has relied for the entire existence of the Irish state, and which has served for many decades to suppress the class struggle.

By selecting openly gay Leo Varadkar as *Taoiseach* last year to replace Enda Kenny, the ruling Fine Gael signaled that it was turning away from the Church toward a strategy of relying instead on layers of the wealthy, socially liberal, pro-capitalist upper-middle class as a social prop.

Prior to taking office, Varadkar supported the last four tax-cutting government budgets. As acting minister for health, he cut €12 million from mental health spending. As minister for social protection, Varadkar attacked the most vulnerable in society under the guise of clamping down on welfare fraud. In office, he has championed the role of Ireland as a low-tax investment haven within the European Union amid the turmoil and instability triggered by the British decision to quit the bloc.



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