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Ireland Votes to End Abortion Ban in Rebuke to Catholic Church

By Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura

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DUBLIN — Ireland voted decisively to repeal one of the world’s more restrictive abortion bans, sweeping aside generations of conservative patriarchy and dealing the latest in a series of stinging rebukes to the Roman Catholic Church.

The surprising landslide cemented the nation’s liberal shift at a time when right-wing populism is on the rise in Europe and the Trump administration is imposing curbs on abortion rights in the United States. In the past three years alone, Ireland has installed a gay man as prime minister and has voted in another referendum to allow same-sex marriage.

But this was a particularly wrenching issue for Irish voters, even for supporters of the measure. And it was not clear until the end that the momentum toward socially liberal policies would be powerful enough to sweep away the deeply ingrained opposition to abortion.

“What we have seen today really is a culmination of a quiet revolution that’s been taking place in Ireland for the past 10 or 20 years,” Prime Minister Leo Varadkar said at a counting center in Dublin hours before the results of Friday’s vote were fully tallied.

“This has been a great exercise in democracy,” Mr. Varadkar said, “and the people have spoken and the people have said: We want a modern constitution for a modern country, and that we trust women and that we respect them to make the right decisions and the rights choices about their own health care.”



A mural in Dublin of Savita Halappanavar, who died in 2012 of complications from a miscarriage after a hospital rejected a request for an abortion. Barry Cronin/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

By the time all the votes were counted on Saturday, the “yes” camp had taken more than 66 percent of the vote, according to the official tally. About 64 percent of voters turned out.

“Today is a sad day for Ireland and for people who believe in genuine human rights,” the deputy chairwoman of one of Ireland’s biggest anti-abortion groups, Cora Sherlock, said in a Twitter message. “The struggle to defend the most vulnerable has not ended today, it’s just changed.”

The vote repeals the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution — a 1983 measure that conferred equal rights on the fetus and the mother and banned abortion under almost all circumstances. Before the referendum, the government had pledged to pass legislation by the end of the year to allow unrestricted terminations up to 12 weeks if the amendment was set aside.

The outcome signaled the end of an era in which thousands of women each year had been forced either to travel abroad or to buy pills illegally online to terminate

their pregnancies, risking a 14-year jail sentence. The government has said that general practitioners — doctors who are the first port of call for patients — will be asked to provide abortions, although they will still be allowed to conscientiously object to termination at their clinics.

The vote “now means I can do my job without the fear of going to jail,” said Grainne McDermott, a doctor who works in intensive care in a Dublin hospital.



Counting votes in Dublin on Saturday. Jeff J Mitchell/Getty Images

Dr. McDermott described one case in which a mother whose life was in danger first had to follow a complex procedure involving hospital lawyers and other medical experts before obtaining abortion pills.

“This was the absolute reality,” she said. “I used to think: This cannot go on.”

The vote followed months of soul-searching in a country where the legacy of the Catholic Church remains powerful. It was the latest, and harshest, in a string of rejections of the church’s authority in recent years.

The church lost much of its credibility in the wake of scandals involving pedophile priests and thousands of unwed mothers who were placed into servitude in so-called Magdalene laundries or mental asylums as recently as the mid-1990s.

The church was, in fact, largely absent from the referendum campaign. Anti-abortion campaigners actively discouraged its participation, preferring to emphasize moral values and human rights rather than religion, possibly to avoid being tarnished by the church-related scandals.

During the campaign, the Association of Catholic Priests urged its members not to preach politics from the pulpit. The guidance came after some priests had threatened their congregations that they would not be able to receive Communion if they voted “yes,” according to people who attended the Masses.



Casting a vote in Dublin on Friday. Peter Morrison/Associated Press

“This is devastating for the Roman Catholic hierarchy,” said Gail McElroy, professor of politics at Trinity College Dublin. “It is the final nail in the coffin for them. They’re no longer the pillar of society, and their hopes of re-establishing

themselves are gone.”

Globally, the Catholic Church’s center of gravity continues to shift away from Europe to Africa and Latin America. Pope Francis, the first pontiff from the New World, has sought to realign the church’s priorities in political discourse, and has often prioritized economic and environmental issues over divisive cultural ones such as abortion and same-sex marriage.

In August, Francis will visit Ireland for the World Meeting of Families, a gathering held in a different country every three years, to promote Catholic family values.

The result caught most observers and voters off guard. In the final weeks leading up to the referendum, observers and pollsters had said that the gap between “yes” and “no” voters had narrowed significantly.

“I’m very surprised,” said Theresa Reidy, a professor of politics at the University College Cork who researches referendums.



The referendum repeals the Eighth Amendment of the Irish Constitution — a 1983 measure that banned abortion under almost all circumstances. Jeff J Mitchell/Getty Images

Abortion supporters had campaigned heavily on so-called hard cases faced by women, such as rape or fetal abnormalities. The referendum result showed that many Irish voters agreed that women in those circumstances should be allowed a choice.

That shift in attitude was driven in part by prominent cases, such as the 2012 death of Savita Halappanavar, who had asked for a termination of her pregnancy but later died of complications from a septic miscarriage. Ms. Halappanavar's face was printed on placards supporting abortion, and on Saturday morning people placed flowers in front of a mural of her face in Dublin.

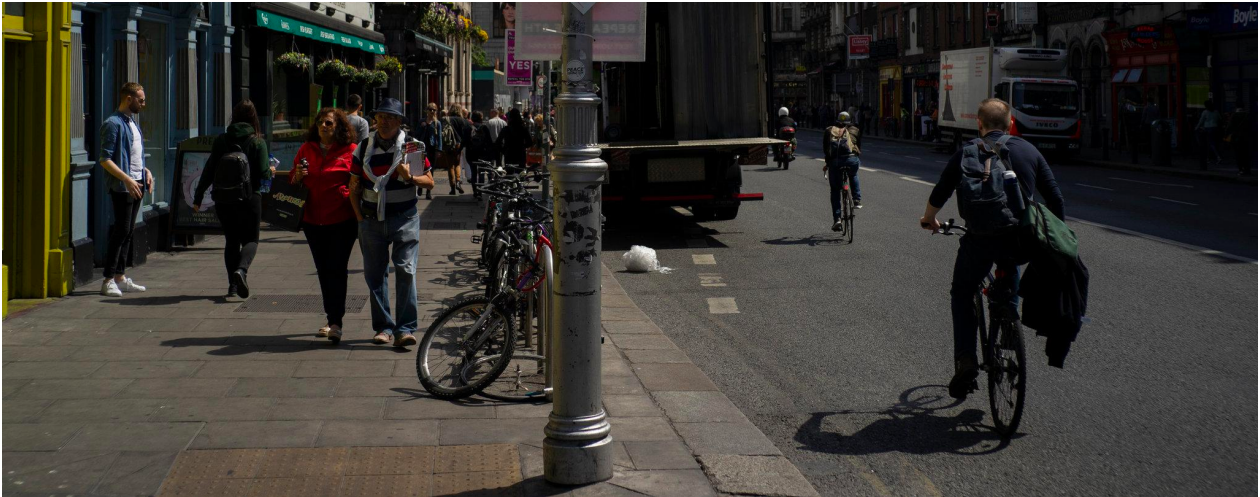
“People started realizing that compassion didn't fit just one side,” Ms. Reidy said.

The campaign over abortion many years ago “was initially portrayed in very black-and-white terms, crude and simplistic terms like murder,” Ms. Reidy said. But in more recent years, she added, “the whole issue has broken apart.” Women have talked more openly about abortion, too, tearing down what for a long time had been considered taboo.

Activists on both sides campaigned relentlessly for months in a debate that set family members at odds over the rights of an unborn child versus a woman's right to control her own body. There were more philosophical questions, as well: When does life start? When is a fetus a human? Should a victim of rape or incest be forced to carry out a pregnancy?

Both campaigns came under fire for using women's personal tragedies in an effort to try to sway the vote, and the nation was virtually plastered with signs showing women or embryos, and, in some instances, grisly pictures of babies being cut out of wombs.





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Paulo Nunes dos Santos for The New York Times

For many opponents, abortion amounts to murder, while others worry Ireland is losing its identity as a Catholic country. For many abortion supporters, the result was an affirmation of their respect and acceptance by society.

Ireland "is taking the proper steps to separate church and state and to move forward as a more progressive country," said Conor Flynn, a 22-year-old student.

Una Mullally, a prominent campaigner for abortion rights, said the issue was more than just a medical procedure. It's about how women have been oppressed.

"All of us have underestimated our country," she said before breaking down in tears. "I dreamed for people to think like this, but didn't believe it."

Still, many who voted in favor of same-sex marriage and laws easing rules around abortion — such as allowing women to travel abroad to get it — found the latest measure a step too far. Abortion is still a highly personal issue for many voters, shaped by personal experiences such as miscarriages or fetal abnormalities.

"We're a Roman Catholic nation. We don't believe in taking a life," said Michael Eustace, 55. "Go over to England and get it done there, not here."

Still, just before slipping his vote into the ballot box, he said, he whispered a prayer for victims of rape and incest, who, had the "yes" vote been rejected, would be barred from having an abortion.

Elizabeth Dias contributed reporting.

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