

LORRAINE BOWMAN GRIEVE

COVID-19 CONSPIRACY IN IRELAND AND THE FAR-RIGHT NEXUS

Many have asked if there is a link between a rise of the far right and COVID-19 related conspiracy theories. Lorraine Bowman Grieve looks at the evidence in Ireland.

‘The rise of the far right’ in Ireland has been widely discussed in [mainstream media](#), however, the extent of this ‘rise’ remains largely unknown. Additionally, with much uncertainty remaining about the future and the ongoing impact of COVID-19, it is perhaps unsurprising that conspiracy theory belief also appears to be on the rise in Ireland.

Is there a nexus between the two? While much has been written about the [psychology of conspiracy theories](#) and how best to [measure](#) the [construct](#), there remains a dearth of any applied research in the Irish context.

During the global pandemic, there has been a rise in [conspiracy theory production](#) and dissemination, with many theories having an [international component](#) while also demonstrating a more [localised impact](#). For example, the theory of a (globally) planned pandemic to facilitate (national) government control. The nature of conspiracy theories is such that once they are in the public sphere, they can be influential in various aspects of decision making, although the extent of this remains poorly measured.

LOOKING FOR ANSWERS

Since March 2020, Ireland has used ‘rolling lockdowns’ in attempts to lessen the impact of COVID-19. This has resulted in varying levels of frustration with pandemic related government policies, such as travel limitations, mask requirements, and vaccine rollout. In turn, this has compounded existing dissatisfaction with government policies (relating to homelessness, housing, and unemployment) and created a space for angry and disillusioned people looking for answers.

Some people are finding these answers in far-right ideologies, COVID-19 conspiracy theories, and ‘scamdemic’ rhetoric. What we do not yet know, and need to understand more fully, is the extent of belief in far-right ideologies in Ireland. This will allow

us to examine the nature of the relationships between these beliefs and COVID-19 conspiracy creation and dissemination and understand the potential impact on behaviour.

To date, despite Ireland having some conditions which may seem conducive to the growth of the far right (such as economic change, fluctuating employment levels, a housing crisis, and continued emigration and immigration), it has remained the less popular option.

The results of the 2020 General Election demonstrated how little palate the Irish voting public have for a right-wing nationalist party. Neither the National Party nor the Irish Freedom Party (both considered far-right in terms of ideology) has representation at a local or national level and, between them, received less than 1% of the vote in the 2020 election. This could be because Sinn Féin has [increased in popularity](#) and provides the alternative people seek in the [Irish context](#).

THE FAR RIGHT AND COVID-19 CONSPIRACY

However, as Sinn Féin has become more mainstream, this may provide the necessary ‘space’ for the far right to begin to flourish.

Globalism vs Nationalism, 2020 | Flickr.com



National Party members at the March for Innocence, 2020 | Flickr.com

To this end, there are vocal proponents of right-wing ideology within the Irish context, and interestingly these [individuals](#) are now often linked with the dissemination of COVID-19 [conspiracy theories](#). Currently, we find intertwined discourses created around anti-lockdown restrictions, anti-mask and anti-vaccination campaigns, as well as anti-immigration views more broadly.

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Increased online monitoring by [Moonshot](#) (following the events at Capitol Hill in January 2021) has led to some shifts in online media use by far-right proponents in Ireland. For example, according to [Gallagher and O’Connor](#) (2021), Telegram has become one of the main communication tools for Irish far-right groups, influencers, and supporters. Their analysis illustrates that the far-right is intersecting with Irish anti-lockdown and COVID-19 conspiracy theory Telegram channels, actively encouraging followers to spread disinformation.

Realistically, in Ireland as elsewhere, more data are needed to provide a clear picture of how the far right interacts with COVID-19 conspiracy theories (and indeed the far left). There are inherent challenges in gauging the popularity of an ideology within a population. However, much of what we assume to know about ‘the rise of the far right’ in Ireland is based on media speculation and a limited number of empirical studies.

As the COVID-19 pandemic does not seem to be ending any time soon, there is an urgent need for in-depth studies of these communities, their messaging, and the evolving channels they communicate through. Comparison of in- and between-country change will also help understand and disrupt two global challenges, with significant national impacts.

Dr Lorraine Bowman Grieve is a Lecturer in Psychology at Waterford Institute of Technology, Ireland. She is primarily interested in the application of social psychology to understanding behaviour and phenomena related to terrorism, counter-terrorism, and the range of ethical issues related to such research. She has published research on the conceptualisation of cyberterrorism, understanding anti-abortion extremism, Irish republicanism online, and right-wing extremism.