

## 'Morality Policy' vs Social or Development Policy: The Catholic Church in the Politics of Abortion in Ireland and Poland

Sydney Calkin and Monika Ewa Kaminska



The relative political power of the Catholic Church in Poland and Ireland explains why the two countries have diverged sharply on the issue of abortion.

State policies on matters like abortion, euthanasia, assisted reproduction and capital punishment are generally framed with reference to moral values rather than distributive claims. However, such 'morality policies' can nevertheless have a serious impact on matters of equality and equity, the underlying goals of social and economic development. It is therefore important to identify the factors that may - respectively - hinder and facilitate their change.

Abortion is a notoriously contested policy issue across the world. Nonetheless, in the last decades, a number of countries have adopted permissive legislation driven by changing lifestyles, feminist movements and concern about the toll of unsafe abortions. In Europe, almost all states have liberalized abortion laws: Britain (1967), Finland (1970), France (1975), Greece (1986), Portugal (2009) and Spain (2010), among others (Nebel and Hurka 2015). However, Ireland and Poland, often described as the "last bastions" of Catholic anti-abortion politics in Europe, long resisted this trend, despite large-scale pro-choice mobilisations and public protests, international judicial rulings against them, high-profile cases of death and injury from lack of abortion access, and widespread non-compliance by thousands of people who obtained abortion abroad or resorted to clandestine self-managed abortion at home each year.

Yet, Ireland and Poland have recently diverged in their stance on abortion law. After a 2018 referendum to repeal its constitutional abortion ban, Ireland legislated for abortion provision beginning in 2019. In contrast, after failed attempts to further restrict its already extremely conservative abortion law in 2016 and 2018, Poland's constitutional court succeeded in imposing additional constraints in 2020 in spite of large-scale protests.

What explains this divergence? In Calkin and Kaminska (2020), we tried to answer this question by combining insights from morality policy scholarship and actor-centred approaches to policymaking.

According to the political science literature, changes on morality policy issues like abortion, same sex marriage and euthanasia are most likely to be induced by a combination of cultural pressure and widespread non-compliance (Knill et al. 2015). Ireland's recent experience aligns with this model of policy change: as its abortion law was publicly delegitimized, criticized, and flouted, reform was eventually implemented. Poland has also seen widespread protests and non-compliance with its abortion law but, instead of liberalization, further restrictions have followed. We argue that the main factor explaining these divergent policy outputs is the difference in the political power of the Catholic Church in the two countries.

In Ireland the Catholic Church has lost the power to exercise veto over abortion reform. This is the product of long-term social and political developments. Institutional changes lessened the Church's power in state administration and policymaking from the 1960s onwards, while sexual and child abuse scandals undermined its moral authority from the 1990s. Ireland continues to report high levels of religiosity compared to other Western European countries, but Irish Catholics are increasingly deviating from Church guidance in matters of sex and family life. The diminished influence of the Church was evident in the 2018 abortion referendum, where the anti-abortion campaigns shied away from overtly religious anti-abortion discourse, arguing instead that the proposed law to replace the 8th amendment

was “too extreme” for Irish voters. In moving away from explicitly religious messages, Irish actors reflect wider changes in the global anti-abortion movement, whose arguments are increasingly framed in terms of fetal rights and “women-protective” restrictions rather than religion.

In Poland, on the other hand, the Catholic Church retains great political influence. It enjoys numerous access points to both conservative and left-wing parties who accept the Church’s interference in the functioning of the state. This is a relationship shaped by the Church’s role in the nation’s history, which increased during the communist period. The collapse of the regime in 1989 turned the Church into a powerful veto player, allowing it to obtain substantial concessions from the newly democratic state, including the highly restrictive 1993 abortion law. Efforts to effectively ban abortion in Poland have intensified since the right-wing national-conservative Law and Justice Party came to power in 2015. Draft bills were introduced proposing further criminal sanctions and restrictions. These met enormous resistance from the public in the form of the Black Protests and Women’s Strikes in 2016 and 2018. Moreover, while only around 1,000 legal abortions were performed annually before 2020, feminist organizations estimate that effectively between 80,000 and 190,000 terminations are obtained every year by Poles through clandestine abortion at home or abortion travel abroad. Yet, political parties are reluctant to endorse abortion reform because they see their survival as dependent on the Church’s favor.

Catholic Church power in Poland has kept pro-choice forces there on the defensive. Public mobilisation against further restrictions materializes on an ad hoc basis, with little organized momentum for pro-choice policy change. This has been borne out by recent developments. In late 2020, the Law-and-Justice-dominated constitutional tribunal removed an important plank of the 1993 law that allowed for abortion in cases of serious fetal anomaly, thus outlawing 98% of the abortions that were still permitted until 2020. Mass mobilization against the ruling filled the streets in Poland, but to no avail.

In sum, a Catholic Church with institutional power that continues to act as a “societal veto player” poses a significant obstacle to policy reform on abortion despite pressures from feminist organizations and the public. What does this mean for those who seek progressive, pro-choice reform? Even where formal policy change is obstructed and delayed by church veto, the pro-choice movements in Ireland and Poland have mobilized in large numbers to give voice to public dissatisfaction with current and proposed abortion laws. They also developed sophisticated networks to help women obtain abortion, whether by travelling abroad or accessing self-managed abortion at home. This strategy of protest and organised non-compliance has contributed to the policy change in Ireland (and most recently in Argentina).

In Poland, to close the existing “escape valves”, the government has announced its intention to effectively press charges for self-managed abortion and criminalize abortion travel. Nevertheless, the pro-choice networks have been solidifying, gaining in numbers and outreach, and building new political alliances abroad. After the 2020 ruling, women’s organizations, political parties and government agencies in a number of EU countries have explicitly offered their support to Poles seeking abortion across borders. This might signal opportunities for building up transnational pressure for change and perhaps also strengthening the hands of the pro-choice sections in the political parties.

## CONTACT

Sydney Calkin, School of Geography,  
Queen Mary University of London  
s.calkin@qmul.ac.uk

Monika Ewa Kaminska, SOCIUM/SFB  
1342,  
University of Bremen  
m.e.kaminska@uni-bremen.de

## References

Calkin, S. and Kaminska, M.E. 2020. “Persistence and Change in Morality Policy: The Role of the Catholic Church in the Politics of Abortion in Ireland and Poland.” *Feminist Review* 124 (1): 86 – 102.

Fink, S. 2009. “Churches as societal veto players: religious influence in actor-centred theories of policy-making.” *West European Politics* 32 (1): 77–96.

Knill, C., Adam, C. and Hurka, S. 2015. *On the Road to Permissiveness? Change and Convergence of Moral Regulation in Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nebel, K. and Hurka, S. 2015. Abortion: the impossible compromise. In C. Knill, C. Adam and S. Hurka, eds. *On the Road to Permissiveness? Change and Convergence of Moral Regulation in Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 58–78.



Opinions expressed are those of the author(s); not the Section on the Sociology of Development nor the American Sociological Association..