



# Maximalist or minimalist: Assessing the impact of Michael D. Higgins on the office of president of Ireland

European View  
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DOI: 10.1177/17816858251341117  
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## Abstract

On 27 October 2025, Irish citizens will vote to decide who will become the tenth president of Ireland and succeed President Michael D. Higgins after his 14 years and 2 terms in office. As the campaign to elect the next president begins, an analysis of the legacy of the Higgins presidency has also started. Throughout his presidency, Higgins, a former minister, poet and academic with a political background on the left of Ireland's Labour Party (Socialists and Democrats), has attracted significant controversy for breaking with a convention that sees holders of the office refrain from engaging in political debate. Indeed, Higgins has frequently placed himself (and subsequently the office of the president of Ireland) in unprecedented conflict with the Irish government. This article examines his presidency in a comparative context in terms of whether it was maximalist or minimalist, while offering a broader assessment of his impact over the past 14 years.

## Keywords

Ireland, President of Ireland, Neutrality, Constitution, Presidential democracy, Parliamentary democracy, Head of state, Constitutional democracy, Executive power

## Introduction

Occupants of the office of President of Ireland do not start with a blank sheet. The manner they conduct the office is conditioned by public perceptions of how that President's predecessors discharged their duties.

(Coakley and Rafter 2014, 13)

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As president of Ireland (Uachtaráin na hÉireann), the office holder serves as the nation's directly elected head of state. A largely ceremonial role, the presidency carries limited executive powers, the details of which are set out in articles 12, 13, 14, 26 and 27 of the 1937 Irish constitution, *Bunreacht na hÉireann*.<sup>1</sup> The president is the third strand of Ireland's parliamentary democracy (*Oireachtas*), alongside the *Dáil Éireann* (lower house) and the *Seanad Éireann* (upper house).

In an address to the Irish parliament (*Dáil Éireann*) explaining the function of the role upon its creation, then Taoiseach Éamonn de Valera stated that its purpose was 'to guard the people's rights and mainly to guard the constitution' (Houses of the *Oireachtas* n. d.).

While the role has been the focus of comparatively little academic study, Coakley and Rafter (2014) offer a comprehensive analysis of the office and how previous holders have approached the exercise of its functions during their respective tenures. In opening their analysis, the authors posit that a president of Ireland can be described as either 'maximalist' or 'minimalist'.

A maximalist president, they state,

would do everything possible to advance his or her own political goals, attempting to thwart actions of governments of any political persuasion that did not meet with his or her liking. A partisan maximalist president would be keen to support measures passed by a parliament controlled by the party to which he or she belongs and to delay or block measures emanating from governments of the opposite political persuasion. Such a president would routinely refer major bills to the Supreme Court.

They would make frequent speeches and addresses in support of the government at times when his or her own party was in office and would test to the limit the power to address the nation by attempting to communicate messages critical of the government at other times, as well as frequently convening parliament so that it could hear his or her views on current events. Such a president might feel secure in office in that the process of removing a president is not straightforward. (Coakley and Rafter 2014, 47)

In contrast, a minimalist president

would operate much like a ceremonial monarch, discharging the formal duties of the office (greeting foreign dignitaries, making state visits, signing bills into law, visiting groups in civil society and praising their contribution, and so on) but without seeking any involvement in day-to-day politics. Presidential elections would not be dominated by partisan considerations. While some candidates would be more credible than others in promising to bring dignity and sound judgement to the office, it would not really matter, in policy terms, who became president. Presidential elections would be candidate-dominated, with party allegiance having only a minor impact on voting behaviour. (Coakley and Rafter 2014, 47)

## Execution of executive powers

A primary responsibility of the president of Ireland is to ratify new legislation upon its successful passage through the Irish parliament. In this regard, the president has at his or

her discretion the ability to delay legislation by referring the proposal to the Supreme Court if concerned about the bill's constitutionality. In keeping with the president's function as a guardian of the constitution, this action may only be taken following consultation with a deliberative body known as the Council of State. In the context of this article, the use of this power is a benchmark of whether a president has taken a maximalist or minimalist approach to exercising the constitutional power at his or her disposal.

Since the creation of the office, the presidents of Ireland have collectively convened the Council of State to scrutinise legislation on 28 occasions; on 16 of these, a referral was made to the Supreme Court. Research has shown that Irish presidents are slightly less likely to refer bills when the government contains the party to which they belong, or used to belong, than when it does not (Tavits 2009, 112–4). By this metric, it is Higgins's immediate predecessor, President Mary McAleese, who was the most maximalist, having invoked the power on eight occasions, followed by her predecessor, President Mary Robinson (on seven occasions). In contrast, Higgins has been minimalist in his use of this power, having convened the Council of State to scrutinise legislation on just four occasions, namely

- 29 July 2013, to consider the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Bill 2013;
- 29 December 2015, to consider the International Protection Bill 2015;
- 11 October 2023, to consider the Judicial Appointments Commission Bill 2022; and
- 15 July 2024, to consider the Defence (Amendment) Bill 2024.

Indeed, Higgins has demonstrated a strong commitment to fulfilling this constitutional responsibility and on occasion has resisted significant political pressure to intervene and obstruct the passage of politically controversial pieces of legislation (Collins 2014; *BBC* 2020). It can therefore be argued that a more maximalist president would have used the powers at his or her disposal on more occasions. It must also be noted that Higgins's tenure has coincided with a period of relative political stability in Ireland. He has served alongside three centrist coalition governments, each of which has reached its natural conclusion. As a consequence, his decision-making has not been significantly challenged by potentially awkward requests to invoke the other powers at his disposal such as to dissolve parliament in contentious circumstances.

## **Execution of soft and non-constitutional powers**

Aside from his or her constitutional powers, as head of state and representative of the Irish people at home and abroad, the president of Ireland has significant soft and symbolic power, and his or her interventions have the potential to influence debate and shape public perception. Officially, the president has the right to address the Irish nation on matters of public importance by convening a meeting of both houses of the Irish parliament. In practice, it is through media contributions and public speeches that the role of the president as a moral voice in Irish society has evolved over time. While the constitution stipulates that the president must receive the prior approval of government before

speaking to the nation, there is ambiguity over whether this constraint also applies to press engagements, informal speeches and other modern forms of communication (McDowell 2019). Mary Robinson, a Senator in Ireland's upper house at the time of her election, assumed office at a moment of profound social and economic change in Ireland. Robinson is credited with expanding the informal role of the office. However, her interventions caused tension with then Taoiseach Charles Haughey, who claimed she was constitutionally required to seek government approval prior to giving press interviews or speaking independently. Robinson disagreed, however, arguing that such approval was only required in the case of a formal address to the Oireachtas (Ferri and Ryan 2023)

Similarly, McAleese, originally from Belfast, made strategic use of the Irish presidency to solidify the gains of the nascent peace process after assuming office in the immediate aftermath of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. An example of such activism was the arrangement of the 2011 state visit of Queen Elizabeth II to Ireland, a visit which marked a historic high point in relations between the two nations.

By adhering to the definition set down by Coakley and Rafter (2014), it is clear that Higgins has been significantly more maximalist in utilising the soft power at his disposal than any of his predecessors. This maximalist approach is most visible through Higgins's interventions on matters of international policy. The international dimension to the Irish presidency was initiated when Ireland became a republic as a result of the 1948 Government of Ireland Act, which holds that 'the President, on the authority and on the advice of the Government, may exercise the executive power or any executive function of the State in or in connection with its external relations' (Irish Statute Book n.d.). In practice, previous presidents have served as ambassadors for Ireland by travelling overseas on official visits and hosting dignitaries from overseas nations with a view to cultivating improved relations for Ireland in line with government policy. By contrast, Higgins has allowed his personal worldview to shape his work in this area. In 2016, on the death of Cuban dictator Fidel Castro, Higgins published a fawning tribute on his official website which expressed his own 'great sadness' at the news, before praising Castro as a 'giant among global leaders', who had brought a 'remarkable process of social and political change' to Cuba (President of Ireland 2016). Similar sentiments were expressed by Higgins upon the death of Venezuelan dictator Hugo Chavez in 2013 (*Irish Times* 2013).

As a consequence of Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, much of Higgins's second term has coincided with increased debate in Ireland about the country's future defence and security arrangements and its long-held principle of military neutrality. It is in this context that Higgins, a lifelong critic of US foreign policy and NATO, has brought the Irish presidency into unprecedented conflict with the Irish government. In June 2023 then Tánaiste (deputy prime minister) Micheál Martin established a Consultative Forum on International Security to examine the issue of Irish security. In a strategically timed and stinging intervention the day before the forum began its work, Higgins launched a direct attack on the body via an interview with *The Business Post*, saying that Ireland was playing with 'fire' during a dangerous period of 'drift' in foreign

policy, describing the forum's participants as 'the admirals, the generals, the air force, the rest of it' as well as 'the formerly neutral countries who are now joining NATO' and insulting the forum's chair, Dame Louise Richardson—as a person 'with a very large DBE—Dame of the British Empire' (Whyte 2023). The president's intervention effectively derailed the forum's work and, seeking to prevent the country from moving to the brink of a constitutional crisis, the government decided not to respond to the president's remarks. Sensing a hesitancy from the government to directly challenge him, since then, Higgins's interventions have repeatedly questioned the government. At the meeting of the UN General Assembly in September 2024, Higgins attracted significant international attention after he accused the Israeli embassy in Dublin of leaking a letter he had written to Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian upon the death of his predecessor, Ebrahim Raisi, in which he had expressed condolences on behalf of the Irish people (Moore 2024). The allegation provoked a furious response from Israeli officials and forced Taoiseach Harris to use his own address to come to the president's defence. A curious final example of where the Higgins presidency has expanded its political role can be seen in a June 2022 letter written to *The Irish Times* (which also appeared on the official presidential website) by the president's wife, Sabina Coyne, concerning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The letter, seen as blurring the lines with regard to who was responsible for the ongoing hostilities, attracted praise from the Russian embassy in Dublin, and led to Higgins facing questions from politicians and diplomats about whether he shared his wife's opinion (Pogatchnik 2022). Significantly, the incident raised questions about the constitutional and political role of Ireland's 'first lady', as no responsibilities are currently defined (Casey 2022).

When viewed together, these interventions from Higgins can be understood as carefully considered political decisions and as taking a very maximalist approach to exercising the soft and non-constitutional power at his disposal. Throughout his tenure, and with increasing frequency during his second term, Higgins has felt secure to directly challenge the authority of the Irish government, particularly on matters of foreign affairs. In doing so, he has reshaped the perception of the Irish presidency from one of unifying force to one of political actor, albeit one that current polling indicates has strong support from the Irish public.

## Conclusion

The maximalist or minimalist binary as set out by Coakley and Rafter (2014) offers a useful approach for contextualising the impact that Michael D. Higgins has had on the office of Uachtaran na hÉireann.

A distinction must be made between the conservative (minimalist) approach that Higgins has taken to harnessing the executive and legislative powers at his disposal and his radical reshaping of the presidency's more ceremonial and less clearly defined functions. Indeed, considering the scale and nature of Higgins's political interventions, it is inaccurate to describe him as the latest example in a line of activist presidents that started with Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese, both of whom worked assiduously to protect the office's

impartiality. However, while the more cavalier approach of Higgins may be unprecedented, there is ambiguity over whether his interventions can be deemed unconstitutional.

While the long-term consequences of this president's approach are yet to be seen, it can be said with a degree of confidence that Higgins has normalised a more interventionalist, political and partisan Irish presidency.

## Note

1. A description of the Irish president's constitutional role can be found in President of Ireland (n.d.).

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