

# **Abortion debate in the Republic of Ireland**

Analysis of the development of the abortion debate  
in the Oireachtas

*Research Paper*

*“Big Data: Quantitative Text Analysis”*

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

In February of this year, the German Bundestag voted to reform the paragraph 219a of the criminal code, allowing doctors, hospitals and medical institutions to inform their patients about carrying out abortions as well as providing general information about the procedure (Deutscher Bundestag, 2019). This reform once again sparked a public discourse about the legal status of abortions in Germany which, under §218 of the criminal code, are still illegal and only under certain conditions unpunished (Bundesamt für Justiz, 2019).

There are several studies which have been published about abortion research. Two of those are the in the year 2002 published book *Shaping Abortion Discourse* written by several researchers and the German study *frauen leben 3* by the German center for Health Education. The former outlines a comparative analysis of Germany and the United States which analyses, amongst other things, the cultural background, history and development of the opinion on abortions in both countries. The authors conduct a content analysis of different newspapers, surveys “of organizations attempting to influence the discourse” (Ferree, Gerhards, Gamson, & Rucht, 2002, S. 4) and interview the spokespersons of the mentioned organizations and journalists. (Ferree et al., 2002, S. 4, 5) However, this paper lacks a policy dimension which additionally would show the development of the legislative debate.

The german study *frauen leben 3* focuses on a survey on unwanted pregnancies and deals with various research questions such as the women’s situation in life at the time of (un)wanted pregnancies, contraception and the women’s decisions on terminating the pregnancy or keeping it. As in the study mentioned above, this survey also lacks a political dimension as well as an analysis of the media or public discourse. (Helfferich, Klindworth, Heine, & Wlonewski, 2016, S. 11-13)

Hence, regarding the political dimension of the abortion discourse, this research paper takes a look at the abortion debate in the Republic of Ireland which fully legalized abortions in 2018. This liberal and progressive legislation which acknowledges women’s reproductive rights stands as an example for every state.

More precisely, the paper is going to outline the development of the debate on abortions in the Oireachtas, the legislature of the Republic of Ireland, which led to the legalization of abortions. With regards to this, the paper is trying to answer the question, whether there was a growing consensus in the political debates on abortions from 1983 up until the referendum in 2018.

The following paragraphs outline the descriptive analysis of the dataset, the method used to analyse the data, the analysis and the presentation of the results.

## 2. DATA AND METHOD

### a. DESCRIPTION OF THE DATASET

The original dataset was downloaded from the database of Cornell University and was processed before first loading it in R. The processed dataset consists of the title of the respective speeches, the speeches, the names of the speakers, the names of the participating parties and the dates of the debates and a speech ID. The mentioned dataset contains those variables, but includes less observations due to removing certain data from unnecessary debate dates.

Relevant for this paper are the debate dates of the years 1983, 1992, 2001 and 2018. Those dates include the Eighth, Twelfth, Thirteenth, Fourteenth, Twenty-fifth and Thirty-sixth Amendments of the Constitution Bill which were debated before holding a referendum.

The Eighth, Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Thirty-sixth Amendments were approved by referendum, whilst the Twelfth and Twenty-fifth were rejected. Those Amendments include the “right to life of the unborn” (Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, 2019, S. 36) in 1983, three Amendments in 1992 which are “freedom to travel outside the State for an abortion” (Irish Family Planning Association, 2019), the freedom to get information about abortions outside of the Republic of Ireland (Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, 2019) and the exclusion of the risk of “suicide as grounds for abortion” (Irish Family Planning Association, 2019), which was rejected. In 2002, the removal of the “threat of suicide as grounds for abortion” (Irish Family Planning Association, 2019), known as the Twenty-fifth Amendment Bill of the Constitution was narrowly rejected again by referendum (The debates on this amendment were being held in 2001). The referendum on the Thirty-sixth amendment which took place in 2018 was approved, making abortions lawful and legal in the Republic of Ireland and finally putting an end to the debate on legalizing abortions.

The general underlying dimension of the mentioned debates can be identified as the topic of abortion which will be used in the following analysis.

### b. DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

With regards to the debates analysed below, it is also interesting to take a look at the development of the number of male and female speakers from 1983 to 2018.

While in 1983 only one tenth of the speakers were women, in 2018 the female speakers even exceeded the male speakers by eight percentage points, as seen in Figure 1. It is also important to note that, with the debate getting more liberal and gaining more freedom for women, there were more and more female speakers participating in those debates.

This shows a great example of the growing inclusion and participation of women in the debate on abortions which should also stand as an example for the debate in every other state on its way to legalize abortions.

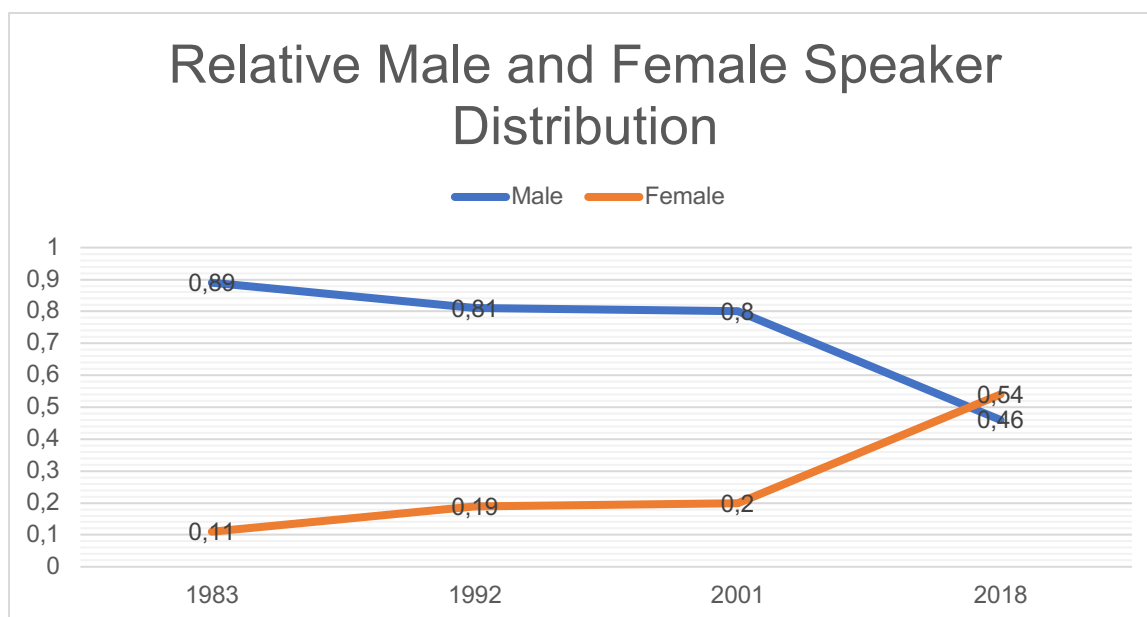


FIGURE 1 – RELATIVE MALE AND FEMALE SPEAKER DISTRIBUTION

### c. DATA AVAILABILITY

The data needed for the analysis is easily accessible through the database of the Cornell University. For this paper, the dataset was processed in advance to include only the dates possibly important for the research question.

Although it would go beyond the scope of this paper, it would lead to an even more significant result to include other surveys and studies analysing not only political speeches, but also, amongst other things, social consequences of legalizing abortions and the public opinion during the whole development of the debate. Unfortunately, collected data is not available for all studies and surveys done on abortions.

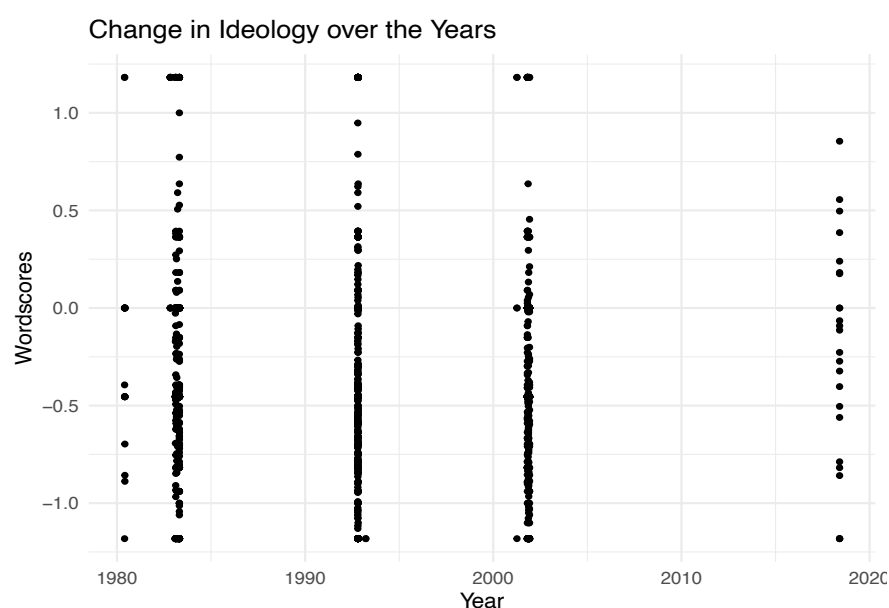
### d. METHOD

In order to analyse the development of the consensus of the abortion debate, the ideological position of all the speeches in relation to one another had to be calculated (Proksch, 2018). Hence, the supervised scaling method called Wordscores was used to scale the ideological positions on a one-dimensional scale (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013, S. 26). More accurately, Wordscores are calculated which assign scores to the speeches of the members of the Irish parliament on grounds of “word counts and known document scores” (Lowe, 2008, S. 356). To do so, two reference speeches out of the dataset had to be identified which represent the most extreme pro-choice and pro-life viewpoint. For the most extreme pro-choice reference speech, a speech from Liz McManus from the year 2001 was chosen. Liz McManus was a member of the Democratic Left (later Labour Party) and held a speech about the right to abortions and the right to travel to other states to get an abortion. In her speech she stresses the fundamental right of women to choose for themselves and the unacceptable restriction of women’s rights in the Republic of Ireland. A speech from Joseph Doyle, a politician from the Fine Gael party, from 1983 was selected as the most extreme pro-

life speech due to his emphasis on Christianity and the “right to life of the unborn” (Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, 2019, S. 36).

The selection of the reference speeches was based on the previously described distribution of male and female speakers from 1983 to 2018. To be able to get the most representable results, the pro-life speech was taken from a male speaker in the year 1983 while the pro-choice speech was selected from a female speaker in the 2000’s.

After the selection of the reference speeches, the value -1 was computed for the speech of Joseph Doyle and the value 1 for the speech of Liz McManus which allows the computer to scale the speeches on a one-dimensional scale as seen in Figure 2. Afterwards, the Wordscores were generated which provides information on the “relative frequencies of words” (Klüber, 2009, S. 537) in the reference speeches. Those scores were then compared with the “relative frequencies [of words] in ‘virgin texts’” (Klüber, 2009, S. 537) which are all the other texts apart from the reference speeches. With this comparison, the probability was calculated that some of the words out of the reference speeches are also existent in the virgin texts. With this, the virgin texts were scaled on a one-dimensional scale to see which speeches resemble one another the most. Through this procedure, it is possible to observe the shift in ideology over time as seen in Figure 2.



**FIGURE 2 – WORDSCORES**

To be able to understand and to see, whether there is a development of the debate on abortions in the Oireachtes of the Republic of Ireland, it is necessary to analyse the possible change of ideologies of the speeches overtime. To do so, the different used ideologies had to be scaled over time to see their position on a one-dimensional scale between a pro-Life and a pro-choice Ideology.

### 3. RESULTS

In order to have representable results for this analysis, a mean and variance were calculated for each debate year. At this point it is important to note that those results were calculated out of the created Wordscore dataset with the already calculated appropriate values. Figure 3 shows the development of the two parameters from 1983 to 2018.

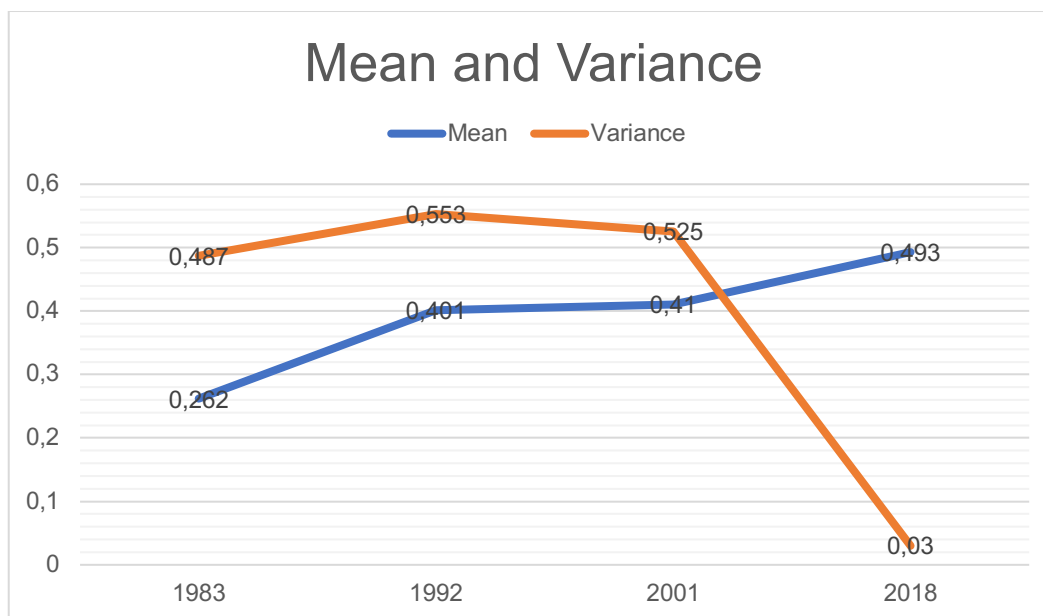


FIGURE 3 – MEAN AND VARIANCE

The most significant change in the variance on the scale is seen from 2001 to 2018. The value drops from 0,525 to 0,03 which shows a strong shift in the homogeneity of the speeches held in the Oireachtas. Consequently, the similarity of the ideology in the speeches in 2018 grew significantly. Also seen in Figure 3 is the development of the mean over time which shows a steady growth towards the value 1 which is defined as the pro-choice ideology. This result is additionally supported by the results seen in Figure 2. The distribution of Wordscores in 2018 is way more spread out between the values -1 and 1, whereas in the previous years, the majority of the calculated results had a (decreasing) tendency towards -1 which suggests that most of the speakers in the Oireachtas had a pro-life opinion and not a pro-choice one. This development shows a shift in the general ideology which approaches the pro-choice view more and more.

Consequently, the hypothesis of the paper can be verified. Seen through the various mean values, the overall opinion on abortions developed towards the pro-choice viewpoint. Additionally, the consensus of the speakers on abortions and therefore the homogeneity of abortion ideology in the Oireachtas grew over the years and complies with the people's will recorded in the referendum held in 2018. Hence, not only did the consensus on abortion ideology grow over the years, but also the overall opinion of the speakers developed more and more to a pro-choice standpoint which in the end made the referendum to repeal the Eighth Amendment possible (Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, 2019).

Scaling is only one possible method to analyse the speeches of the Oireachtas. It would go beyond the scope of this paper to look at, amongst other things, the sentiment with which the speeches were held and analyse the development of personal attitude of the speakers towards abortions.

Whereas there are so many more dimensions to look at when analysing the development of such a controversial topic as abortion in a society, within the framework of this work it is only possible to look at the policy dimensions and the development of ideology in parliamentary speeches.

As seen in the two studies mentioned in the Introduction, a lot of the work done on abortion research focuses on the consequences of legislative decisions such as public opinion, media discourse or personal qualitative consequences, as seen in the study *frauen leben* 3, and not on the development of the legislation concerning abortions.

This is, amongst other things, one of the reasons for the research question of this paper. The debate on abortions in parliament is one of the most crucial steps to even be able to conduct surveys on personal consequences or family planning. Those laws passed or referendums held in consequence of the debates also directly influence the life of every woman living in this country.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Lastly, it can be said that the homogeneity of the ideology of the speeches has been growing over the past decades and the overall opinion shifted more and more to a pro-choice standpoint. In order to verify the hypothesis as well as answering the research question, the mentioned results of the analysis were calculated firstly by computing the Wordscores from the reference speeches to the virgin ones, and secondly by calculating the mean and the variances for each year.

Hence, there was a growing consensus in the abortion debate which ended in the legalization of abortions in the Republic of Ireland.

The analysis of the legislative process towards legalizing abortions may be able to contribute to the understanding of the different policy issues and ideologies of politicians in different countries. Thus, not only politicians, but also the public would be able to see the whole political picture of the question on why abortions are still illegal in their country, even though anti-abortion legislations are heavily criticized by the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which has been adopted by the United Nations. (United Nations Human Rights - Office of the High Commissioner, 2019)

Concluding, Ireland stands as an example in the legislative development of a consensus and policy making concerning the debate on abortion.



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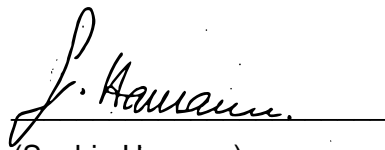
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## 7. DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this research paper in the course *“Big Data: Quantitative Text Analysis”* by Jens Wäckerle was written without any help from others and without the use of documents other than those listed in the Bibliography above. The use of literal quotations as well as the thoughts of other authors were marked at the appropriate places.

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