

Framing Immigration: A Comparative Sentiment Analysis of Irish Party Manifestos and Parliamentary Speeches (2020–2024)

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Introduction

Background

In recent years, immigration has remained a salient and often polarising issue in public discourse across Europe. Ireland, although historically a country of net emigration, has experienced a significant increase in immigration levels since 2022 – primarily driven by a significant influx of Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers into the country (Laurence, McGinnity & Murphy, 2024). This surge in immigration has coincided with growing public unrest, including protests led by far-right groups opposing the housing of asylum seekers across the country, which culminated in the Dublin riots on 23 November 2023 (Moore, 2024).

In response to shifting public attitudes towards immigration, political rhetoric and positioning have also started to change. Since the riots, support for Independent candidates – many of whom have adopted strong anti-immigration narratives – has increased significantly. In response, key political parties such as Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Sinn Féin have publicly acknowledged the need for wholesale changes to Ireland’s existing immigration policies (Moore, 2024).

These developments raise important questions about how political parties are adapting their messaging in light of changing public sentiment towards immigration - and whether these changes are reflected consistently across different forms of political communication. In particular, it is worth investigating whether the tone and framing of immigration differs between formal policy documents, such as party manifestos, and more reactive formats like parliamentary speeches.

Importantly, prior empirical research has highlighted meaningful differences between the ideological content of political manifestos and the language used in parliamentary speeches by party members (Proksch & Slapin, 2015). On the one hand, manifestos tend to adopt a more strategic and unconflictual tone, with an emphasis on clarity and aspirational goals to sway voters. On the other hand, parliamentary debates – where language is shaped by institutional constraints and power dynamics – involve more reactive and context dependent framing of issues (Abercrombie et al. 2019; Toomey, 2015).

The extent of this disconnect is illustrated by Navarretta and Hansen (2020), who find that only 40% of the terminology used in parliamentary speeches overlaps with that found in party manifestos. However, it is important to note that Navarretta & Hansen (2020) used full manifestos to compare speeches with. In contrast, my paper adopts a more targeted and granular approach, isolating only those manifesto sentences that specifically relate to immigration. By narrowing the comparison in this way, I expect a greater degree of lexical similarity between immigration-related manifesto content and corresponding Dáil speeches.

Research Question and Hypotheses

The growing political salience of immigration in Ireland raises important questions about how political parties are responding, both in terms of formal policy platforms and everyday parliamentary discourse. By conducting text analysis on political manifestos and Dáil speech data, this paper seeks to investigate two interrelated questions:

1. To what extent does sentiment towards immigration differ among Irish political parties?
2. Are these sentiments consistent across different communication channels, namely party manifestos and Dáil Éireann debates?

Furthermore, given the significant increases in immigration into Ireland since 2022, this paper seeks to determine whether sentiment towards immigration has changed over time by comparing party manifestos from 2020 and 2024 and speeches delivered in the Dáil between 2020 to 2024.

In light of the above, this paper proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Political parties express more positive sentiment toward immigration in their manifestos than in their Dáil speeches, reflecting a more strategic, voter-oriented tone in manifestos versus a more reactive or emotive tone in live debate.

H2: Left-leaning parties are more likely to express positive sentiment toward immigration than right-leaning or centrist parties, across both manifestos and speeches.

H3: Sentiment toward immigration became more negative in 2024 party manifestos and post-2023 Dáil speeches, following the public backlash and riots in late 2023.

By employing dictionary-based sentiment analysis on both manifestos and parliamentary speech data, this research offers empirical insights into how Irish parties frame immigration, and whether rhetorical consistency is maintained across strategic (manifestos) and reactive (parliamentary debate) contexts. While a growing body of research has examined political language and sentiment in broader European contexts, as yet there has been no empirical study on how immigration is framed across political texts in Ireland. This research aims to fill that gap by analysing how sentiment toward immigration differs not only between political parties, but also across different modes of communication and over time, thereby contributing to our understanding of party strategy and framing in the Irish political context.

Methodology

Speech Data

This paper uses two main sources of textual data to conduct its analysis. The first source is the complete debate records from the 33rd session of the Irish Parliament (Dáil Éireann). The 33rd Dáil consisted of 160 members and lasted six sessions, beginning on February 20th, 2020 and concluding on November 7th, 2024. The full dataset contains 591 949 individual speeches delivered by members of nine different political parties.

The dataset contains approximately 160,000 entries (27%) where party affiliation is missing (NA). These were reviewed and found to represent contributions from non-partisan individuals, such as civil servants, agency heads, or guest speakers appearing before Dáil committees (e.g., the Secretary General of the Department of Health). Because these individuals do not represent political parties and are outside the scope of this analysis, their speeches were excluded from both the sentiment and similarity analyses.

To focus on immigration-specific discourse, the dataset was then filtered for speeches containing immigration-related keywords. The keywords were selected by creating a dictionary of keywords related to a range of immigration-related issues. The dictionary was created using generative AI¹ with the following prompt: “Give me a list of terms/phrases that are associated with immigration in political manifestos and debates. I will use this list as a dictionary that I’ll apply in a quantitative text analysis of manifestos and debates from Irish political parties.” The full dictionary is in the Appendix.

Following this filtering, the final dataset used for analysis included 36,351 speeches from the Dáil. These speeches were then tokenised and cleaned using the Quanteda package in R, which removed punctuation, numbers, and symbols. Furthermore, only English speeches were included by using the English stop words function available in the package.

¹Using Claude 3.7 Sonnet

Manifesto Data

This paper also uses the manifestos of the nine political parties that are included in the Dáil debates in order to compare differences in language and sentiment for the parties across these two modes of communication. In total, 17 manifestos were included: eight of the nine parties had both 2020 and 2024 manifestos available, while Independents 4 Change only had a manifesto from 2024. Nonetheless, this party was retained in the analysis because of its active participation in immigration-related Dáil debates, allowing for a valid comparison between manifesto and speech sentiment.

Manifestos were analysed at the document level, with each party’s immigration-related manifesto content treated as a single document in the document-feature matrix (DFM). To isolate only relevant content, manifestos were first tokenised and cleaned using the Quanteda package in R. Immigration-related content was then extracted by subsetting only those portions of the text that contained at least one term from the immigration keyword dictionary. This approach ensures that sentiment scores specifically reflect party positions on immigration, rather than overall manifesto tone, allowing for meaningful comparison with immigration-related Dáil speeches.

Sentiment Analysis and Comparison

Sentiment towards immigration-related issues was calculated using the Lexicoder Sentiment Dictionary 2015 (LSD2015), a lexicon-based dictionary commonly used in political text analysis (Bestvater & Monroe, 2022; Müller, 2022). The dictionary classifies words into positive and negative sentiment categories, allowing for the construction of sentiment scores based on word frequency.

To calculate sentiment, both the immigration-related speeches and manifesto segments were transformed into document-feature matrices (DFMs) using the Quanteda package. After applying the LSD2015 dictionary, sentiment scores were computed as the difference between the number of positive and negative words in each document. Sentiment scores were normalised to account for differences in text length using the following formula: $(\text{positive} - \text{negative}) / \text{total words}$. This approach, commonly used in political text analysis, improves interpretability and reduces the influence of outliers by producing a mean sentiment score per word, typically ranging between -1 and 1 (Algaba et al. 2020). Alternative sentiment metrics were also included for robustness checks, the results of which are in the Appendix (Table 5). Importantly, all measures displayed consistent results, reinforcing the validity of the normalised sentiment scores, which remain the primary focus of this paper due to their ease of interpretation.

To explore how sentiment varies between manifestos and speeches, the normalised sentiment scores were averaged for each party across both manifestos and Dáil speeches. Sentiment trends over time were also assessed by aggregating party sentiment scores from Dáil speeches between 2020 to 2024. Similarly, sentiment in party manifestos was compared between 2020 and 2024 to assess whether attitudes toward immigration evolved across electoral cycles.

Similarity between speeches and manifestos was measured using two complementary approaches. First, by comparing average sentiment scores across the two text types for each party. Second, by calculating cosine similarity between texts, which captures the degree of lexical overlap between immigration-related manifesto content and parliamentary speeches. In combination, these two methods provide a robust measure of similarity between speeches and manifestos.

Results

This section presents the findings of the analysis, focusing on immigration sentiment variation across party manifestos and parliamentary speeches, changes in sentiment over time, and the cosine similarity between manifestos and speeches. Importantly, the comparison of party manifestos and Dáil Éireann speeches has received relatively little attention in the political science literature. Although Navarretta and Hansen (2020) investigated lexical overlap between speeches and manifestos, their approach differs significantly from the one used here, as they analysed full manifestos rather than topic-specific content. Their finding of a 40% overlap is therefore not directly comparable to the results of this study. As such, the findings presented

here should be understood as exploratory, offering a baseline for future comparative research on rhetorical consistency across political communication channels.

Sentiment Analysis

Mean differences in Manifestos vs Speeches

Results from the overall sentiment analysis indicate that the majority of Irish political parties display pro-immigrant stances in both manifestos and speech data. This is unsurprising, given the relative lack of far-right parties in Irish parliamentary politics.

Table 1 displays the mean sentiment scores for party manifestos and speeches from 2020 to 2024.

Table 1: Mean Message Positivity Scores by Party and Source

Party	Manifesto Sentiment	Speech Sentiment
Fine Gael	0.347	0.200
Green Party	0.323	0.252
Labour Party	0.279	0.105
Fianna Fáil	0.276	0.189
Social Democrats	0.255	0.020
Sinn Féin	0.231	0.014
Independents 4 Change	0.213	-0.156
People Before Profit	0.105	-0.296
Aontú	-0.016	NA
Independent	NA	0.035

The mean manifesto score represents the average sentiment towards immigration across a party’s 2020 and 2024 manifestos, while the mean speech score reflects the average sentiment across all immigration-related speeches delivered between 2020 and 2024. Positive values indicate a pro-immigration sentiment, while negative values suggest a more negative stance on immigration-related issues. The table indicates that, on average, the majority of party manifestos display positive sentiment towards immigration. The single exception is Aontú, whose manifesto sentiment score is negative (-0.16), indicating that Aontú’s immigration-related manifesto content contains a higher frequency of negatively coded words than positively coded ones. This finding is consistent with Hypothesis H2, which predicted that conservative parties would express more negative sentiment toward immigration relative to more left-leaning parties.

Table 1 also highlights the divide in sentiment towards immigration between speeches and manifestos. All parties in the sample displayed higher positive sentiment levels towards immigration-related issues in their manifestos relative to their speeches. For instance, Fine Gael showed a decline from +0.347 in manifestos to +0.200 in speeches, while the Green Party dropped from +0.323 to +0.252.

The sharpest drops in sentiment occurred for People Before Profit (from +0.105 in manifestos to -0.296 in speeches), and Independents 4 Change (from +0.213 to -0.156), suggesting that the immigration-related speech rhetoric for these parties is significantly more negative than what is presented in their manifestos.

These findings broadly support Hypothesis H1, which proposed that manifestos would express more positive sentiment towards immigration, as they are crafted as strategic and voter-oriented communications, relative to the more reactive and emotional tone regularly found in parliamentary debate.

Changes in Sentiment Over Time

Manifesto Sentiment

Table 2 and Figure 1 present changes in sentiment towards immigration across party manifestos between 2020 and 2024. This comparison offers insight into whether parties shifted their positions on immigration in response to increasing public concern over rising immigration levels in Ireland during this period.

Table 2: Mean Manifesto Sentiment Scores (Message Positivity) by Party in 2020 and 2024

Party	2020	2024	Percentage Change
Aontú	0.072	-0.104	-244.2
Fianna Fáil	0.235	0.317	34.5
Fine Gael	0.311	0.383	23.2
Green Party	0.321	0.325	1.4
Labour Party	0.249	0.308	23.5
People Before Profit	0.207	0.002	-99.2
Sinn Féin	0.217	0.245	12.8
Social Democrats	0.243	0.268	10.4

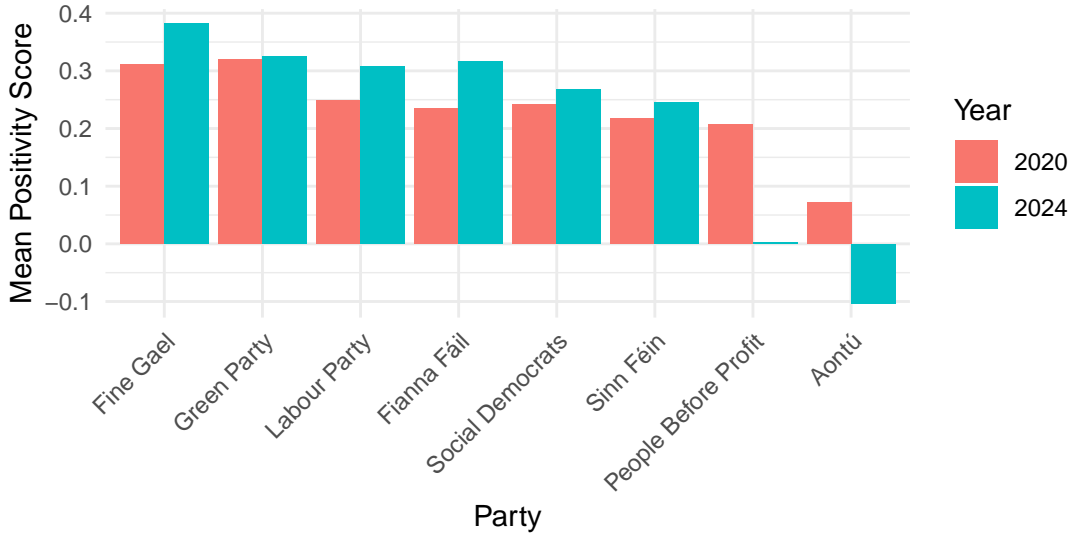


Figure 1: Manifesto Sentiment Scores by Party (2020 vs 2024)

Contrary to expectations of a general backlash, six out of the eight parties² exhibited more positive sentiment toward immigration in their 2024 manifestos compared to 2020. The two exceptions are Aontú and People Before Profit, who both displayed significant declines in sentiment between the two years. Aontú’s sentiment dropped from +0.072 in 2020 to -0.104 in 2024, representing a 244% decrease, and shifting from positive to negative overall. People Before Profit’s sentiment also fell considerably, declining 99% from its 2020 level of +0.207 to +0.002 in 2024. These sharp declines are explored further on in this section, as they may reflect two separate issues. Broadly, the declines may represent ideological shifts, or they may also be indicative of the limitations of sentiment-based classification in capturing nuance.

In comparison, the changes in immigration-related sentiment were relatively low for the other parties in the sample, ranging between a 1.4% increase in positive sentiment for the Green Party, to a 34.5% increase for Fianna Fáil. These results suggest that, for most parties, manifestos became slightly more positive or remained stable in tone, despite mounting public debate and controversy surrounding immigration between 2020 and 2024.

²Independents 4 Change were excluded as they did not have a 2020 manifesto

Speech Sentiment

Table 3 shows how mean sentiment towards immigration evolved in Dáil Éireann speeches between 2020 and 2024.

Table 3: Mean Immigration Speech Sentiment (Message Positivity) by Party and Year

Party	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Fianna Fáil	0.203	0.199	0.188	0.188	0.166
Fine Gael	0.207	0.186	0.206	0.187	0.215
Green Party	0.241	0.268	0.238	0.244	0.274
Independent	0.061	0.041	0.077	0.030	-0.035
Independents 4 Change	0.094	0.071	0.014	-0.165	-0.511
Labour Party	0.120	0.092	0.178	0.047	0.032
People Before Profit	-0.193	-0.186	-0.357	-0.371	-0.301
Sinn Féin	0.029	0.035	0.045	-0.025	-0.007
Social Democrats	0.045	0.107	0.001	-0.025	-0.005

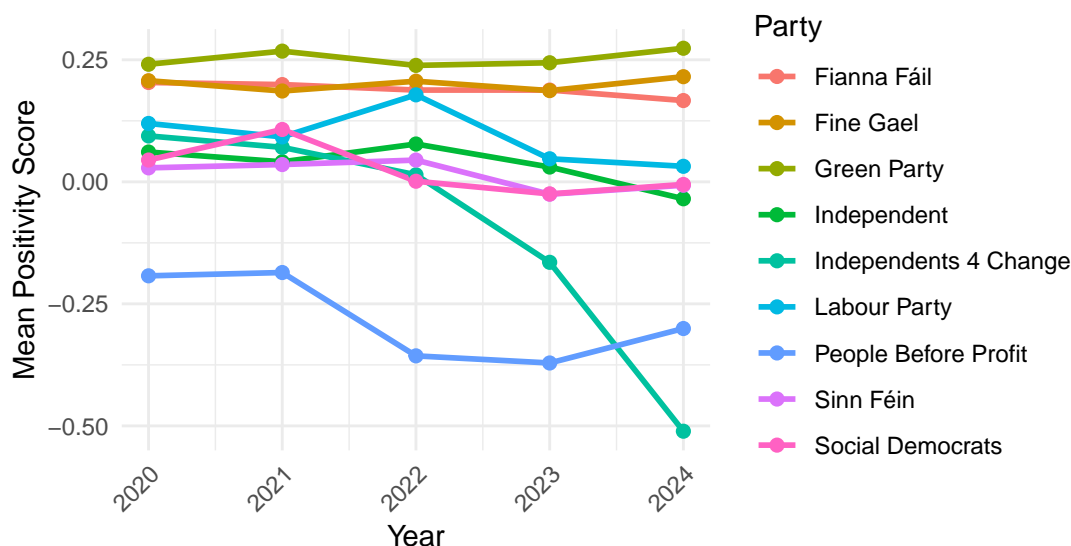


Figure 2: Speech Sentiment Scores by Party Over Time

Unlike the more consistently positive tone seen in manifesto texts, speech sentiment reveals a more reactive shift to the changing political landscape. While sentiment in 2020 was positive for seven out of the eight parties³, this tone deteriorated over time. By 2023, half of the parties had adopted a net negative sentiment toward immigration, and by 2024, this number had increased to five out of eight parties.

Numerically, the most extreme shift in speech sentiment occurred for Independents 4 Change, whose sentiment dropped from +0.094 in 2020 to -0.511 in 2024, a clear sign of changing rhetoric. People Before Profit also saw a steady decline in sentiment - despite starting from an already low level. In contrast, the Green Party demonstrated generally increasing support for immigration, ending with the most positive sentiment of all parties in 2024 (+0.274). Parties such as Sinn Féin, Labour, and the Social Democrats experienced smaller shifts but still trended toward negativity, with several switching from positive to negative sentiment across the period.

³Aontú is excluded due to a lack of speech data

Overall, these trends suggest a general shift toward more negative framing of immigration in parliamentary debates over time. Such changes may reflect parties’ increasing responsiveness to public backlash and political pressure surrounding immigration issues, particularly after the 2023 Dublin riots.

Ultimately, these findings appear to support hypothesis H3, which predicted that sentiment toward immigration would decline following the riots and broader political pressure on the issue. Furthermore, these findings may serve as an early indicator of broad-level rhetorical or ideological shifts that could be reflected in future manifesto texts. The results may indicate that speech sentiment acts as a “leading indicator” for formal party positions, suggesting that manifestos could eventually follow with a more critical tone on immigration over time.

It is important to note, however, that sentiment scores capture the overall tone of a text, which may fail to accurately capture an individual’s stance towards a particular topic. For example, a negative sentiment score does not always indicate anti-immigration views, as strong support for migrants can also be expressed in emotionally charged or negative language (Bestvater & Monroe, 2022).

This presents a significant limitation of using lexicon-based sentiment analysis and also provides insight into why publicly pro-immigration parties such as People Before Profit and Independents 4 Change consistently displayed negative sentiment scores across speeches.

For instance, in one speech criticising the EU migration and asylum pact, a People Before Profit speaker stated: “These externalisation policies have already led to migrants being abused in Tunisia and tortured in Libya.” While the speaker is clearly expressing concern for migrants and criticises anti-immigration policies, the presence of words like “abused” and “tortured” contribute to a negative sentiment classification. Thus, the presence of negative sentiment does not always equate to a negative position. This example indicates how important it is to interpret sentiment scores within their full textual and political context.

Cosine Similarity

To complement the sentiment analysis, cosine similarity was used to assess how similar immigration-related speech content is to each party’s corresponding, immigration-related, manifesto content. Cosine similarity measures the overlap in term usage between documents, providing a value between 0 (no similarity) and 1 (identical language use).

Table 4: Cosine Similarity Matrix between Speeches and Manifestos

Party	Similarity
Green Party	0.951
Fianna Fáil	0.944
Labour Party	0.935
Fine Gael	0.934
Independents 4 Change	0.926
Social Democrats	0.921
Sinn Féin	0.921
People Before Profit	0.911

Table 4 indicates that all parties show a high degree of similarity between speeches and manifestos in terms of how immigration is discussed (all above 90%). Results indicate that the Green Party shows the highest degree of similarity (0.951) between its manifesto and speeches, suggesting strong consistency in how immigration is discussed across platforms. This is followed by Fianna Fáil (0.944), Labour Party (0.935), and Fine Gael (0.934). At the lower end of the spectrum, People Before Profit demonstrates the least similarity (0.911), which may suggest a divergence in tone or framing between their official policy documents and more reactive speech contributions. The discrepancy here backs up the sentiment analysis findings which indicate that People Before Profit displayed positive sentiment towards immigration in their manifestos yet showed

significantly more negative sentiment in their Dáil speeches. This finding further highlights the differences in tone used by speakers in People Before Profit relative to the tone used in their manifestos.

Overall, these findings suggest that while most parties show a high degree of consistency in language use regarding immigration, small but meaningful differences exist. These differences confirm the findings in the previously discussed literature which indicated that there are generally discrepancies between language and sentiment in manifestos relative to the sentiment presented in speeches.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to investigate how sentiment towards immigration differs across Irish political parties, and whether that sentiment is consistent between formal party manifestos and everyday parliamentary speeches. Furthermore, it investigated whether sentiment towards immigration-related issues has changed over time, in light of growing public backlash in response to the sharp increase in immigrants into Ireland over the last few years. Using a dictionary-based sentiment analysis on immigration-related content from manifestos and Dáil speeches, the findings largely support the initial hypotheses but also point towards some unexpected results that suggest the need for further investigation.

The results broadly support Hypothesis H1, indicating that parties express significantly more positive sentiment toward immigration in their manifestos than in their speeches. This supports the idea that manifestos – crafted as strategic, voter-facing documents – tend to frame immigration in a more optimistic or controlled tone, while parliamentary speeches, being more reactive and emotionally charged, reveal greater negativity towards the subject. These findings highlight the linguistic, and potential ideological differences present between formal political platforms and real-time political discourse.

Hypothesis H2, which predicted that left-leaning parties would maintain more positive sentiment toward immigration, was not fully supported. Notably, People Before Profit, a far left and publicly pro-immigration party, consistently showed negative sentiment scores in their speech data, as well as a substantial decline in positive sentiment towards immigration between their 2020 and 2024 manifestos.

This unexpected result is suggestive of a broader limitation of using dictionary-based methods to classify positive versus negative sentiment in text. When analysed further, the reason for the consistently negative scores was found to be as a result of the use of more emotionally charged, negative language that was used to defend migrants and criticise anti-immigration policies – as opposed to being indicative of the actual ideology of the party speakers. This finding highlights a key limitation of dictionary-based sentiment analysis, particularly its inability to distinguish between emotional tone and political stance and emphasises the importance of analysing sentiment findings within their full textual and political context.

In line with Hypothesis H3, there is strong evidence to suggest that sentiment in speeches has declined over time, especially between 2023 and 2024 – coinciding with the Dublin riots and intensifying public concern over immigration throughout the country. This indicates that political rhetoric in speeches may be sensitive to external events and social pressures. Despite this, manifesto sentiment remained relatively stable – or even increased for most parties between 2020 and 2024 – suggesting that these rhetorical shifts in speeches may not yet reflect official policy changes. This raises the possibility that parliamentary speeches may act as leading indicators of future shifts in manifesto sentiment and tone.

Ultimately, the findings in this paper show clear differences in how sentiment towards immigration is expressed across different platforms and time periods. While the general hypotheses hold, the nuances in the findings highlight the limitations of sentiment analysis and the importance of context-specific analysis when using these methods. Future research could explore combining dictionary-based methods with supervised machine learning (e.g. GloVe) to better distinguish between sentiment and stance. Furthermore, as Irish political parties release future manifestos, researchers may revisit these analyses to determine whether the decreasing speech sentiment observed in this study predicts long-term ideological shifts, as observed by more negative sentiment in party manifestos over time.

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Appendix

Dictionary

- **General immigration terms:** *immigration, immigrant, immigrants, migrant, migrants, migration, foreign national and foreign nationals*
- **Identity and legal status:** *non-citizen, non-citizens, citizen and citizenship*
- **Refugees and protection:** *asylum, asylum seeker, asylum seekers, refugee, refugees, international protection, displacement, stateless, statelessness, resettlement and humanitarian protection*
- **Border control and enforcement:** *border, borders, border control, customs, visa, visas, deport, deported, deportation, illegal, undocumented, overstay, immigration officer, entry ban and removal order*
- **Integration and inclusion:** *integration, social cohesion, multicultural, language barrier, cultural barrier and adaptation*
- **Policy framing and public debate:** *immigration policy, immigration law, open borders, border security, economic migrant, immigration crisis, mass migration and flood of migrants*

Table 5: Table X: Differences between Sentiment Measures

Party	Laver Manifesto	Laver Speech	Rowe Manifesto	Rowe Speech
Fine Gael	0.5363318	0.3651462	1.2133193	0.7788814
Green Party	0.4784522	0.4227193	1.0419965	0.9508084
Labour Party	0.3893083	0.2281916	0.8254230	0.4694549
Fianna Fáil	0.3862568	0.3381037	0.8213153	0.7446827
Social Democrats	0.3447380	0.1175906	0.7194001	0.2111074
Sinn Féin	0.3018171	0.1453153	0.6234339	0.2928052
Independents 4 Change	0.2718894	-0.0130623	0.5578058	-0.0337789
People Before Profit	0.1317687	-0.0847727	0.2697744	-0.2155081
Aontú	-0.0083084	NA	-0.0167417	NA
Independent	NA	0.1425329	NA	0.3119653

$$\text{Laver Sentiment Formula} = \frac{\text{positive} - \text{negative}}{\text{positive} + \text{negative}}, \quad \text{Lowe Sentiment Formula} = \log \left(\frac{\text{positive}}{\text{negative}} \right)$$

Code Repository

All code used in this project is available here:

<https://github.com/dheneck/QTAFinalPaperCode>